Preventing malnutrition in later life

The role of community food projects

By Dr Lisa Wilson
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Age Concern England and Help the Aged have joined together to form Age UK, a single charity dedicated to improving the lives of older people.
About the Author

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Caroline Walker Trust

The Caroline Walker Trust (CWT) is a charity which promotes public health through good food, established in 1988 following the death of the influential nutritional campaigner Caroline Walker. CWT works on specific projects that aim to provide clear guidance and recommendations about how vulnerable population groups can be encouraged to eat well. CWT is an expert and independent body that obtains its funding through grants, donations and consultancy work and is a recognised source of expertise on public health nutrition across the lifespan. Our recommendations and practical guidelines have been incorporated into national and local policy and guidance and we are unique in providing clear, evidence based resources in a format that can be accessed by a wide audience.

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with older people</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with project co-ordinators</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key messages from this research</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escorted Shopping Service – Age Concern Norwich</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Horizons Centre – Community Café, Kensington</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton Lunch Club – Age Concern Oxon, Barton Neighbourhood Centre, Oxfordshire</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food co-op – Age Concern Greenwich &amp; Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net neighbours – Internet shopping service, Age Concern, York</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Concern Croydon – Eat Well, Keep Well project</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denton Centre – Newcastle-upon-Tyne</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Nutrition plays a vital role in health and well being, preventing ill health and ensuring optimum physical and mental health. Malnutrition means literally poor or bad nutrition and may be in the form of a lack of vitamins and minerals which support day to day body function or in terms of a lack of energy leading to weight loss and ill health. With the current focus on tackling obesity, less attention has been paid to the issue of malnutrition and its impact on the population.

Research has found that malnourished individuals are less likely to recover from illness or injury, more susceptible to infection, experience increased ill health and have an increased risk of mortality. In addition they have longer stays in hospital and are more likely to be readmitted.

Whilst malnutrition among older people in hospitals and care homes has been well documented, there has been less research among those living in their own homes. It is estimated that up to 40% of people are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition on admission to hospital and research suggests people at risk become caught in a cycle which perpetuates illness and increases the long term risk of ill health and infection (BAPEN, 2007).

The risk of malnutrition among older people living in their own homes is of particular concern as general awareness of the issue is poor (Elia, 2009). Unfortunately the myth continues that it is normal to become thin with age. This lack of knowledge and understanding means that malnutrition is both under recognised and undertreated as whilst treatment guidelines exist, they are not widely applied in practice.

One of the challenges is that there may be a number of reasons why an individual experiences poor health through a nutritionally inadequate diet (Caroline Walker Trust, 2004). These may be related to income, mental or emotional health, perceptions of the ageing process or social exclusion. For those on low incomes often the only flexible part of the budget when bills have been paid is that left over for food. A survey by the Beth Johnson Foundation (2002) found strong relationships between money, motivation and food access on diet and nutritional status. When money was tight, many people cut back on food or bought cheaper food even if it wasn’t the healthiest.

Research has found that those who experience the greatest difficulties in food shopping are considered to be at the greatest nutritional risk (Herne, 1995; McKie, 1999, Wilson et al, 2004). This can particularly be the case for older men, many of whom may not know how to cook and for those who have had a recent change in life circumstances (Holmes et al, 2008).
A number of factors have been shown to impact on people’s ability to reach food shops and choose healthy, affordable food. These may be due to a change in life circumstance (e.g. a lower income or loss of social interaction following retirement), decreasing mobility and ill health or an underlying disadvantage made more apparent by the ageing process. Other factors include lack of access to transport or support structures and social networks. Due to this potential combination of factors older people are more likely to experience problems accessing food than other groups (Herne, 1995; Lilley, 1998; Hare et al, 1999) and some may require support as their circumstances change.

Not all older people living in their own homes will experience difficulties with access to food and among those that do, not all will be at risk of malnutrition. However, research suggests that the wide range of factors preventing older people from accessing healthy, affordable food of their choice can be a major contributing factor to the risk of malnutrition in older people.

Factors including affordability, difficulties reaching food shops, dependency, lack of cooking skills, apathy, depression and ill health have been identified by older people as preventing them from leading a healthy lifestyle and are linked to an increased risk of malnutrition (Wilson et al, 2004; European Nutrition for Health Alliance et al 2006). A lack of access to a car or mobility problems that prevent the use of public transport can be severely limiting for older people and lead to an increasing isolation, lack of choice and nutrition problems. (Centre for Policy on Ageing, 2002; Audit Commission, 2004; Age Concern, 2006)

Research has found that older people rely on social support networks of home help, friends and relatives to access food and stay independent (Piacentini, 2001, Wilson et al, 2004) and that these are vital for mental and physical well being. For those older people with strong social networks, accessibility problems can be partially overcome through friends or relatives, but can also lead to feelings of reliance and a loss of independence.

Several methods of tackling food access in older people have been suggested. Increasing access to Information Technology has been heralded as the solution to many of the issues, but research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2005) suggests that whilst the possibilities undoubtedly exist, a lack of access to computers, interactive televisions or knowledge of how to use the internet limits the development of these types of services for older people. More importantly these shopping methods lack the social interaction so vital to many older people.

Community food projects are in a good position to tackle these issues through lunch clubs, shopping activities, transport provision, social activities, cooking classes or food co-ops and many projects are effective in not only ensuring good health and access to food for older people, but also providing a social environment and addressing over all well being. There remains little exploration however of how these can be developed and made more widely available.
Aim

The aim of this project is to examine how community food projects support older people to access food and the impact this has on nutritional risk. The project aims to highlight good practice in this area which others may find useful in developing services elsewhere.
Methods

This report presents interviews and case studies with a number of successful community food projects currently working with older people across England. The case studies given at the end of this report outline some of the most successful projects working to address food access in older people. Projects were identified through the Food Access Network database at Sustain and the Fit as a Fiddle database held by Age Concern England, with the aim of demonstrating the range of activities available to support older people to access healthy, affordable food. The projects taking part in the research were based in both rural and urban areas and aimed to reflect the views of a representative sample of older people living in England today.

In-depth one to one interviews were carried out with the co-ordinators of these projects. Interviews with the project co-ordinators aimed to determine the reasons for establishing the project, the successes and challenges of food access projects and their aims for the future.

Interviews with older people were conducted with older people attending the project on the day of the visit or set up by project co-ordinators. A total of fifty one people (men = 13, women = 38) all aged over 65 agreed to be interviewed from across the five projects visited with an average of 8 from each project. The age of those interviewed ranged from 65 to 90 years and the sample had a variety of health and mobility needs.

Older people were interviewed to ascertain their opinions on the role of the project in supporting them to access healthy, affordable food and to provide them with greater choice and independence with regards to food. Interviewees were asked about their experience of using the service and how it impacts on their lives. Older people were asked why they chose to use the project, what difference it had made to their life, what they thought they would do without the project and what they thought about food and its role in good health.

Interview took place in the following projects between January and March 2009:

1. Food co-op at Age Concern centre, Greenwich
2. Escorted shopping service to Tesco Extra – Age Concern Norwich
3. Lunch club at Barton Neighbourhood Centre – Age Concern Oxford
4. Community Café at New Horizons Centre – Kensington (London)
5. Net Neighbours, internet shopping service – Age Concern York

A full description of the services is given via the case studies at the end of this report.
Findings

Interviews with older people

The projects visited for this research are representative of those which aim to tackle food access among older people and provide services based on the needs of local people and available funding. Community food projects have developed differently according to the area where they are based and show some of the options that people interested in developing these types of projects could consider for their area. Detailed information on each of the projects can be found in the case studies at the end of this document.

At each of the projects visited older people who used the service were asked why they chose to use the project, what difference it had made to their life, what they thought they would do without the project and what they thought about food and its role in good health.

Responses from all 51 respondents interviewed were then drawn together in themes around access, value of the project and nutritional risk, which emerged during analysis. The responses below present the themes that were common to all projects and do not focus on the type of food access project. Instead they reflect older people’s comments about the value of food access projects and how they affect risk of malnutrition regardless of the type of project.

Importance of food in good health

Most older people interviewed identified the link between eating a balanced diet and good health, with fruit and vegetables being mentioned specifically as important for maintaining good health. Health for many was linked to remaining active, being able to get out and staying healthy as they got older, but it was also important to eat ‘what you fancied’ and continue to enjoy food.

‘Absolutely! It keeps body and soul together.’

‘Yes, to keep and maintain a good body weight and avoid obesity.’

‘You need to eat lots of fruit and vegetables and a good meal every day. It keeps you healthy doesn’t it?’

‘It’s good to have fruit and vegetables and fresh things, but I generally eat what I fancy.’
However, some responses indicated a lack of interest in food despite an awareness of what was healthy.

‘Well, I mean if you’re going to bother to eat you may as well have something worth having ain’t yer?’

Reasons for joining the project

Reasons given for joining the projects were as varied as the individuals themselves, but some key themes emerged around a desire to get out and feel a part of the community. Some people were referred to services initially by social services and had stayed because they liked it, others had thought that they had reached a point where they wanted to get out and try something new.

‘I got some information through my door and when I spoke to my social worker, they recommended I give it a try.’

‘A friend recommended the classes, the café is a bonus!’

One key factor for people visiting centres or lunch clubs was the benefit of being able to eat out and not having to cook.

‘Well, it saves you cooking for just yourself all the time.’

‘I try not to cook any day, I used to cook all my meals when my wife was alive and I quite liked it, but I’ve lost interest since my wife died. So, I go out instead.’

Some people reported visiting several projects on different days of the week as a way of getting out of the house, meeting others and avoiding cooking at home alone.

‘I come down here Mondays and Wednesdays, I go to the reform church on Tuesdays then Baptist church on Thursday, all depends on what’s on so, but I always go somewhere.’
Respondents who received support with shopping emphasised the importance of the project helping them. The opportunity for a drink and a chat with the others after shopping trips was welcomed, but it was access to the big out of town superstore and support from volunteers to do their shopping that they felt was most needed.

‘I can’t walk far or carry things and one of the others recommended it to me as a way of getting my shopping.’

‘It is one of the only services that helps you carry the shopping right into your kitchen, I couldn’t use it otherwise as I couldn’t carry it in.’

Value of the project

The value of the projects to the older people that used them was immediately apparent during interviews. For some it was about control and choice when shopping or getting to a hot meal regularly, for others the social aspects and opportunities to meet new people offered new and valuable experiences as well as a feeling of being part of the community.

‘For meeting people, it saves me cooking every day; I can sit and have lunch with my friends and catch up.’

‘Yes, I depend on it as I can’t get to the supermarket. It also gives me human contact as I’m on my own a lot; it’s nice to talk to someone.’

‘It gives me control over my diet.’

‘I’m picked up from home and brought shopping, I have a break and my groceries are taken right into my house. With public transport I’d have to walk half a mile from the bus stop with all my shopping which I just can’t do. This means I can buy what I want.’
What difference has the project made to your life?

When asked what difference the project had made to their life, people reported the positive changes in their well being as well as being able to get out of the house.

‘It has made me more determined to keep myself fit and healthy.’

‘It’s sociable as well as reasonably priced and good to get out of the house.’

‘It’s very important to have an older men’s club as all the people here and that we meet are older women and it’s nice to meet other men and make friends.’

‘It gives me independence and takes the worry away of how I’m going to cope.’

‘It stops me worrying; I’m diet conscious and like healthy food. It gives me back my choice and independence, the people are really good.’

Many of the stories were positive and demonstrated how projects continued to support people through changes in their life circumstances leading to opportunity rather than isolation. People reported feeling more confident, making new friends and being less isolated.

‘It has made me confident and given me new interests.’

‘It’s the bright point of my week, getting me out of the house. I can choose my own food.’

‘It’s the freedom to choose things and have some control over what I get; that and meeting up with everyone and getting out, I don’t know what I’d do otherwise.’

‘Oh, a world of difference. It means I don’t have to rely on family and I can stay independent.’

‘I come here to see my mates, when my wife died they were building the centre and I decided to come and see what was going on, now I’m doing things I never thought I would do.’
What else would you like to see the project do?

The majority of older people interviewed were more than happy with projects and didn’t ask for any changes. However, several took the opportunity to suggest ideas for new projects. Transport remained a key issue as people faced increasing difficulty reaching centres. Volunteers were mentioned as being particularly important to keeping projects going.

‘I’d like more transport to get me here. On a good day I can walk, but I had to get a taxi today [due to weather] and the cost soon adds up.’

‘More volunteers would be good; as if they packed up I wouldn’t be able to come.’

Other people were looking for more information around healthy eating and more involvement in food projects.

‘Cooking and nutrition workshops. Theme days such as Chinese, Indian or Spanish etc. Get an allotment, so we could have our own garden. Its good exercise and we get veg, perfect!’

‘More teaching and talking around food.’

Finally some older people were also looking for outings, trips and opportunities to get together in organised groups.

‘Have organised groups to meet and have a meal together.’

‘The men’s group used to be cheaper as it was subsidised and we got three courses, so you paid what you could afford that week. Not it’s more expensive and we only get two courses. Quite a few people have stopped coming.’

‘It would be nice to have shopping trips or a few more things at the stall like milk or eggs, tins or something.’
Nutrition and risk of malnutrition

A number of responses given during interviews suggested that even for those receiving services, many remained vulnerable. Responses often mentioned issues or experiences that previous research has found to be risk factors for malnutrition including social isolation, transport and mobility problems, lack of access to shops and a lack of appetite or ability to cook. The older people interviewed as a part of this research were receiving services, ensuring they had regular meals, food or shopping services and so at least had someone to check on them regularly.

‘If you’re on your own, well you live on your own, you don’t see anyone you know locally or very rarely and it’s a long day really.’

‘Well you’d have to have meals bought in really. But I’d have nothing else; I don’t go out from one Wednesday to another.’

Older people were asked what they would do without the project and their answers emphasised a real sense of isolation many older people feel. Some older people mentioned that without the project their isolation would increase through their lack of support networks and limited transport options.

‘I don’t know how I’d manage, my son lives in Oxford so I’m completely on my own.’

‘I’d be lost really, it means so much to have somewhere to meet new people and the staff are lovely.’

‘There are no buses up my way, they only run every 40 mins and come nowhere near here. I’ve got a son with a car, but I don’t want to ask him, he’s got his own life to lead.’

‘I would have to use taxis to get home which are expensive. Free bus passes are good, but not if you have to carry shopping.’

Other people reported real concerns in how they would buy food, cook and stay independent.

‘I think I’d have to ask social services [to buy my shopping], but they charge £16 an hour so I don’t know how I’d manage to pay for food as well.’

‘I would have to do all my own cooking… I wouldn’t eat so well as I can’t be bothered.’
‘I have no-one else to help me so it’s very important.’

‘It’s very important; I couldn’t get out to the shop as I struggle to walk.’

Several respondents also mentioned that their family lived some distance away so could not provide the support networks that others have.

‘It allows me to do all the shopping when otherwise I’d have to walk and only get 2-3 items each time. I have no family here to help me and it is very important to me. Even if I had access to a computer I’d hate to do this online shopping, you can’t see what you’re buying.’

‘I like choosing my own fruit and veg [at the food co-op], the rest of my shopping is done by a neighbour, but I still like to choose something. My family are too far away to help.’

Comments about lack of appetite and interest in food were also common

‘Well I don’t eat much as I’m not hungry. I take so many tablets and I could easily go a whole day without eating.’

‘I don’t find food appetising full stop. Not now.’

‘I used to really enjoy my food, but not now, getting older.’

Several older people mentioned cooking specifically during interviews. Cooking was increasingly a problem for those who could not stand for long periods, lift pans or manage packets and tins. For many a general lack of interest in food and ‘not being bothered’ with it was also often mentioned. Whilst most people recognised that food was important to their health, many indicated that they didn’t pay much attention and without services would eat less in terms of both quantity and variety.

‘The most I’ll cook is maybe sardines on toast or something like that, but I always have some stuff at home.’

‘I used to do a lot of cooking. I have three sons who ate a lot! But um, in the evening I am very lazy, I’ll have soup, I can’t be bothered to cook.’

‘Cooking for one, there’s just no interest in it is there?’
Interviews with project co-ordinators

A major part of this research was recognising the role that project co-ordinators have to play in supporting both the continuation of projects and services, but also the older people who use them. Project co-ordinators of the five projects were interviewed to determine how the projects were run and the key issues affecting their ability to provide the service. Issues such as funding, transport, staffing, and how best to support older people to eat well were discussed.

All the projects involved in this research were established because of an expressed need by the local older population. All co-ordinators emphasised the importance of consulting with older people before starting up new services. Co-ordinators had also learnt from experience that successful projects should involve the people who will use them right from the planning stages. Whilst project ideas are transferable, organisers stated that it was vital that the projects they ran ‘suited’ their local community.

‘I can’t say enough how vitally important these types of food projects are, for physical healthy and well being, but also for mental health and support from networks and friends.’ (Co-ordinator of day centre, Greenwich)

Inclusion, access and food

All project co-ordinators had a good understanding of the nutritional needs of older people through training and information, several were qualified in nutrition or had a health background, however just getting food and a decent meal to users was both the biggest challenge and the highest priority.

‘People have problems physically carrying things and getting them into the house. They have problems holding larger cans, unscrewing jars and opening packets.’ (Co-ordinator of Net neighbours, York)

Co-ordinators of services supporting people in their homes reported a real concern about the ability of many older people to shop and the poor access many of them had to food in their own homes. The internet shopping service was invaluable to those who were housebound.
The most important thing that co-ordinators running lunch clubs or social activities reported was the links to food and support for the older people in their projects and that these support networks and friendships are increasingly important as people get older and are less able to manage for themselves. Many older people visiting the projects did not have the support of family members nearby and therefore other members, staff and volunteers offer the support that traditionally given by family members. These supportive networks include help with shopping and food preparation if they are unwell or need some help collecting their pension.

‘A lot of people who come to the centre live alone and so have meals-on-wheels or frozen food and probably only get a fresh hot meal from centres such as this, so the project is important to ensure they are eating properly as well as for company, although most would say that company is the main reason they attend.’ (Co-ordinator, lunch club, Oxford)

Increasing access to services and companionship was key for many projects who also involved food as a way of encouraging older people to eat healthily. The New Horizons centre does regular monitoring to ensure they are meeting the needs of users. One recent survey of 84 members found that 82% said they had improved their confidence since joining the centre and 65% reported an increase in their healthy eating habits. This type of survey was vital to demonstrate the effectiveness of the project and continue to receive funding from partners.

Whilst the project co-ordinators reported a large number of their users remaining active and healthy and having a good appetite, some also reported concern about malnutrition for some of their service users. This was particularly the case for projects supporting more vulnerable older people and those over 80. Organisers reported that they regularly saw people who had lost their appetite, had lost the ability to cook for themselves, had become isolated by location or lack of contact or were simply unable to reach shops.

‘We work with isolated and vulnerable older people, who don’t always have anyone else to help. We go into great detail to find out exactly what they [older users] need in terms of food they can manage. We can give them so much more choice and can help make their money go further.’

Co-ordinators reported being aware of older people who they knew did not eat well, but being limited by the contact time they had with clients to ensure that they were given greater holistic support.
Transport and user groups

All the projects interviewed worked with older people living in the local area (usually within 10-15 miles or within a specified area). None of the projects interviewed involved people from care homes or those with dementia. It is not unusual for lunch clubs in particular to offer space to older people from care homes, especially if those clubs offer a cultural aspect that the home may not be able to; the lack of people with dementia attending was purely due to a lack of resources available to care for those with particular needs. Most projects lacked the staff and training to support those with dementia, but could refer people with dementia to other projects in the area catering specifically for their needs.

The project organisers for all the projects interviewed as part of this study highlighted the difficulties they faced around transporting older people to services.

‘I have a long running argument over the cost of transport; it should be free for all! Social services are trying to get people to pay if they need door to door transport. I’d argue that as public transport is free for older people, users should not be penalised for not being able to use it.’

Transport issues highlighted included a lack of funds to secure a new vehicle or insufficient capacity in the transport available to make the project fully accessible to all members.

‘We have the ongoing problems of the cost of running our 12 year old vehicle and we have a real need for new vehicles which would provide greater accessibility, cheaper running costs and increased reliability.’

Future plans

One thing all the project coordinators visited expressed in common was a desire for change; to improve services for their users, to increase the number of people they could support and to offer more tailored support as the current client group aged.

‘As our users get older it is difficult to continue to support them as their needs change. They would never be told they could not be involved, but the support that volunteers provide is hampered by health and safety issues and in some cases the need for trained carers.’

Expansion of services was constrained by a lack of funding or resources. However, all projects were actively seeking funding and had ideas to develop their services in the future with an ongoing commitment to continue to support the older people in their area.
‘We’d like to tackle include food safety, specific health issues, outreach and the delivery of local meals via the cafe for those unable to get in every day.’

‘I’d like to see enough funding to run stalls at other centres or in local sheltered housing and to do a box scheme to deliver to people’s homes.’

The difficulty faced by many projects is that of long term survival through securing funding and demonstrating a need for continued support for vulnerable older people. Survival of projects relies heavily on securing funding and the commitment of paid staff and volunteers who often take on additional roles and form strong relationships with the older people they work with.

‘It can be difficult to justify the needs of this group of older people and the cost effectiveness of the project in the face of modern and cheaper alternative services such as internet shopping, but this group like to meet as much as to shop.’

Several project co-ordinators were older people themselves and had begun their association with the service as a volunteer, often taking on the role of co-ordinator to ensure the continuation of the service. Older coordinators expressed concern about how the project would go on after they retired.

‘I’m an older person myself! So I’m not sure what will happen when I can’t manage this any more, I’ll go on as long as I can, but I know I can’t go on forever.’
Summary

This research has highlighted some key barriers which affect older people in accessing food. It has also demonstrated a high level of support for community food projects from service users and service providers provided access to food, information about eating well, companionship and regular meals to the local community.

Older people using the services specifically mentioned risk factors for malnutrition that have been highlighted elsewhere. These included; a lack of family nearby, lack of appetite and interest in food, living alone, lack of access to shops and transport, immobility and health problems which prevented them from getting out. The older people interviewed as part of this study represent a small snapshot of older people engaged with services, but the level of potential risk appeared high, which suggests that there may be a large number of older people at nutritional risk in the community in most areas of the UK.

Older people were clear that without community services they would struggle to eat well. Those without an appetite were eating at lunch clubs and community cafés, those who couldn’t get out were having community meals and shopping services and the community food projects provided support networks which would otherwise not have existed.

It is almost certain, from the responses given, that in several cases malnutrition and isolation are being prevented solely by the service the projects provide. It is deeply concerning to consider what might happen if these people did not have the support, innovation and commitment that their local projects provide. Failing to support the work community food projects contribute to ensure the well being of older people is to fail to support older people themselves.

The research demonstrates the need for greater investment and support for community food projects specifically designed to meet the needs of older people and the importance of a review of older people’s services and food access needs in each local authority.
Key messages from this research

1. Community food projects provide vital support to vulnerable older people around eating well. Funding of these third sector projects should be seen as a priority by local authorities.

2. Users of community food projects should be fully consulted when services are initiated or developed.

3. Appetite and eating well are strongly linked to social interaction and projects which include both are most successful.

4. Older people, volunteers and community food workers need access to simple, consistent information about the importance of healthy eating and the risks of malnutrition.

5. Project co-ordinators and volunteers need to be supported with training where necessary.

6. It is vital to continue to develop services which address the range and changing needs of older people.

7. Access to food, food shopping and regular meals must be included as a key part of the essence of care for older people.

8. The development of the personalisation agenda must allow for older people to access services which provide them with food shopping and enough food to ensure they can eat when hungry and food is always available; just supplying a hot/frozen meal once a day is not enough.

9. Food and nutrition do not exist in isolation from other influences on health and well being and access to food and nutritional health needs to be fully integrated into care packages and risk assessments made on vulnerable older people

10. Food is a multidisciplinary issue and needs to be understood as such by policy makers, social services, health professionals and GPs among others.
Case studies

There are many examples of community projects which successfully address at least some of the food access issues experienced by older people in their area. An overview of the projects visited for this research as well as details of some additional outstanding projects, is given below. The key issue for all of these projects is that the services they provide result from a need for older people to be provided with support around food and food shopping. Each case study includes ‘advice’ from the project co-ordinators for those considering setting up a community food project and some of the key challenges faced by the project. For those considering developing new projects, these case studies provide ideas for development and also demonstrate the wide range of projects which can be organised, even with limited funding making a huge difference for older people, supporting them to eat well and access food.

Escorted Shopping Service – Age Concern Norwich

Run by Age Concern Norwich, this service provides transport and volunteer escorts for older people who wish to visit a supermarket. The 8 seater mini bus takes older people from the local area to the Tesco Extra store on the outskirts of Norwich on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis depending on their requirements. Sixty five older people use the service each month. The Tesco has a cafe where older people meet after their shopping, to have a drink and a chat while they wait for the rest of the group. Other facilities at the store include access to household goods, clothes, electronics, a hairdresser, pharmacist and travel agent.

Advice from the project co-ordinator: To run this type of project it’s vital to have a decent vehicle and funds to maintain it. A supply of volunteers is also essential and role the play should not be underestimated.

Challenges: The biggest challenge is affording the purchase and upkeep of transport and ensuring that there are enough trained drivers as volunteers.

Contact: Tel. 01603 496333

New Horizons Centre – Community Café, Kensington

New Horizons, a consortium of three charities (Open Age-Lead Partner, Sixty Plus and the Guinness Trust) is a modern, lively, convivial multi activity centre for people aged 50 and over – promoting independence and active lifestyles, providing new interests and challenges, supporting health and well being and encouraging fun and enjoyment. The initiative is supported by Kensington and Chelsea Primary Care Trust, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the Big Lottery and various other charitable trusts.
In addition to providing a range of activities, New Horizons works in partnership to provide other services for older people such as complementary therapies, health screening, information, advocacy and outreach (over 50 weekly). A community café on site is run by the Camden Society providing healthy snacks and lunches. The Society works with trainees with learning disabilities supporting them into paid employment.

The Centre runs a fruit and vegetable co-op (with plans to include dry goods in the future) and a cook and taste course. It is open daily Mon-Fri 9.30-4.00 and people register to become members in order to use the facilities. This is free and there are currently over 900 members. Each class/activity costs between £1.25 and £1.75 for members. Marketing is done via the membership and the membership of the partner organisations leading to a mailing/contact list of over 4000 people as well as through mail drops to GPs, dentists, libraries, sheltered housing, press releases and publications of other voluntary and statutory organisations.

The project focuses on positive images of ageing and is about what people can do, not what they can’t and is run as a community drop-in centre with classes and activities.

Advice from project co-ordinator: Where possible work in informal partnerships. Getting other organisations involved gives the centre and the project support, stability and a common purpose leading to a more sustainable project.

Challenges: There is never enough funding, but other challenges include getting GPs involved in the centre and accessing older people who might benefit from the services.

Future work: Plans for the future, if funding can be secured include healthy eating talks for those with long terms conditions, food safety sessions and outreach including local meal delivery for those who can’t reach the café.

Contact: Tel. 020 7590 8970

Barton Lunch Club – Age Concern Oxon, Barton Neighbourhood Centre, Oxfordshire

Age Concern runs a lunch club at Barton Neighbourhood Centre on the outskirts of Oxford City, once a week, on Mondays between 11 am and 2 pm. The Centre is currently attended by about 17 people although they have capacity for 24. The project started over 20 years ago through a liaison with the local school where older people would go and have their lunch. Following this the Neighbourhood Centre was built and the Club moved there with frozen meals provided by social services. The centre now has a community café and meals are cooked on the premises fresh each week. Visitors come from their
own homes and sheltered housing. Lunch costs £3.50 and includes transport to the Neighbourhood Centre where the lunch is held if needed.

Volunteers fulfil a number of roles including co-ordinating visits, popping out to the shop for small provisions for the members and organising the raffle and lottery. The lottery money goes towards outings and events for the group and the raffle prizes are donated by the older people attending who then get a chance to win what everyone has contributed, usually food.

The Club is advertised through an ongoing ad in the local free paper and flyers to local shops and throughout the neighbourhood centre. A lot of people who come to the Centre live alone and so have meals on wheels or frozen food and probably only get a fresh hot meal from centres such as this so service is important to ensure they are eating properly as well as for company, although most would say that company is the main reason they attend.

**Advice from project co-ordinator:** Before starting a project, make sure that there is a need for it locally. What works in one area won’t necessarily work everywhere. It’s also important to maintain a sense of humour!

**Future work:** The project aims to keep going, keep having fun and getting new members.

**Contact:** Tel. 01235 849400

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**Food co-op – Age Concern Greenwich & Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency**

Age Concern Greenwich runs a fruit and vegetable (co-op) stall between Wednesday and Friday at their day centre in Eltham. The stall provides fresh fruit and vegetables sourced through the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency (GCDA) who supported the group in establishing their project. GCDA provide support and advice to groups wanting to establish food co-ops across the borough, including a needs assessment and location advice. They then deliver fruit and vegetables to the stalls each week; in the case of Age Concern, they provide the fruit and vegetable wholesale, allowing them to select what they need and be invoiced for the goods.

The stall relies on volunteers to run it as day centre staff are unable to dedicate regular time, and it needs to be run by the same people each day to ensure continuity of orders and because money is exchanging hands. Currently, the project is supported two days a week through a local labour and business initiative (GLLaB) that works in partnership with local organisations to maximise job opportunities for local people. The six-month placement is proving to be very successful with the GLLaB worker gaining experience and training, and the project itself running more efficiently and tightly as a result of the
continuity that the worker brings. There is a small mark up on all produce as the project needs to make a small profit to remain sustainable.

The day centre regularly buys produce to create healthy desserts, e.g. fruit salad, apple crumble, stewed plums. Produce is also used for a cooking project ‘Souper Troupers’ which was established with a £380 grant from the Co-operative Membership Community Fund. The group cook and prepare soups and bread, which they can then take home for a meal. The project supplies flasks for those who want to take it home hot. ‘Souper Troupers’ provides a stimulating environment that encourages those who don’t cook to get interested again and it facilitates the formation of new groups with a different mix of people, who go on to form new friendships. Intergenerational work has been a feature of the project with local school children attending the day centre to cook with the clients. The Youth Inclusion Programme are coming back to plant some food in the garden which they will use for the lunches and soup group.

Advice from the project co-ordinator: Before doing anything else involve the older people who you want to use the service to find out if it is what they need. Then as the project evolves, keep going back to ask new questions and review the project as its about the people it is set up for and what they think matters most.

Challenges: Having someone to run the stall and getting the right person is key, and also getting the order right so as to minimise wastage and cover expenditure. These shouldn’t stop someone from getting started though!

Future work: The service is not advertised outside of the centre for security purposes but there are plans to expand. The project already provides fruit and vegetables to a ‘satellite’ day centre run once a week at a sheltered housing complex. They are also looking into running box schemes or expanding into other centres.

The project has been so successful that the former centre manager, who now runs a large centre in Bromley, has taken the idea and secured funds to establish a co-op there.

Contact: Tel. 020 8294 3013

Net neighbours – Internet shopping service,
Age Concern, York

The Net Neighbours scheme has been running for about 5 years in York City and the surrounding area. It grew from a hospital support project which provided shopping services to older people being discharged from hospital. The scheme managers noticed that after the 6 week referral period, some older people were still unable to shop for themselves. Although some people buy in Wiltshire Farm or other hot food services, there is no council run community meals and people still needed food for other meals
and household goods and were reliant on one meal a day without support to get this other food. As a result the Net Neighbours scheme was established and is supported by Age Concern York. Net Neighbours allows older people to take advantage of internet shopping, even without their own computer.

A staff member or volunteer phones the older person on a preset day and takes their ‘shopping list’ based on information provided on what can be bought online.

The volunteer then places the order with the supermarket who delivers the shopping to the older person’s home. Payment is made either through the project bank account (if staff) or by credit card (if volunteer).

On receiving the shopping the older person calls the volunteer back with a total cost from the bill received and posts a cheque for this amount to Net Neighbours.

The project currently has over 70 members (membership is necessary to set up the account, but is free) with two part-time staff and approximately 15 volunteers. The telephone befriending aspect of the service has been a huge success and complements the shopping scheme. Regular telephone contact has been found to relieve isolation, ensure referrals to other services and identify abuse. The value of the project to all is demonstrated by staff and volunteers who have stayed in touch with the older people even when one of the parties have moved away.

Advice from the project co-ordinator: Start small. Contact a sheltered housing or local centre and take on about 6 people for about a month to make sure the scheme works. Although the scheme is simple it is vital to keep on top of it, two hours every day is better than ten hours once a week.

Challenges: The biggest challenge is staying on top of the system and making sure someone is available to check up on the older people or answer queries such as delivery drivers contacting them to say no-one is answering or confusion over ordering.

Future work: Net Neighbours would like to provide a home service for those with short term memory loss or with poor hearing or eyesight meaning they are unable to use the lists provided. It would also support people in the short term who may be ill.

Contact: Tel. 01904 726191
Other community food projects

Age Concern Croydon – Eat Well, Keep Well project

Age Concern Croydon runs a project aimed at increasing awareness of malnutrition in older people. The project works with older people to help them understand nutrition and that it is not normal to become thinner with age. It provides ideas for meals and snacks, refers people to lunch clubs or assisted shopping schemes and provides one to one support for older people who have a poor appetite through a volunteer scheme. Volunteers are trained in providing advice and referrals and the scheme now has a waiting list.

The project has had success in working with the local hot meals provider to ensure that food delivered is both accessible and palatable. Drivers plate up food in the older persons kitchen using their crockery and cutlery. They also make sure there is a glass of water with the meal. As a result older people have reported that the meals are now more appealing and they are eating more.

Contact: Tel. 020 8680 5450 ext. 218

Denton Centre – Newcastle-upon-Tyne

This Centre in North West Newcastle offers a wide variety of services to the whole community. This is based around a lunch club, gardening project and healthy living classes.

The Centre has had great success in developing intergenerational projects which aim to nurture a sense of community and increase trust and communication between generations. A lunch club for older people on Tuesdays (which costs £2.00) has involved a generational aspect by encouraging young people to come in and cook for the older people during the school holidays. They also wash dishes, serve the food and chat to the older people. This has greatly improved relationships between older and younger people in the area and has reduced the fear of crime reported by some older people. The young people’s cooking is supervised by a member of staff from the PCT Healthy Living Scheme and it provides information on healthy eating to both old and young.

The project was set up to combat loneliness and develop friendships and support networks for older people. As well as the lunch club the Centre organises activities and outings for older people throughout the year. Isolation has been found to be a major problem for older people; thirty percent of the lunch club members are over 80 and the lunch club is the only day they go out. Members have expressed difficulties reaching shops due to the long walk to the shopping centre.
The gardening project involves access to a vegetable garden next door to the centre where the young people tend to older people’s plots free of charge, mostly in the summer holidays. Regular healthy living sessions are held (usually during school holidays) for all age groups. The project has been running for three years.

Advice from the project co-ordinator: It is vital to adapt the service to what people want and carry out regular consultation. Denton has evolved based on what members say they need. Transport is a key factor in helping people with limited mobility to attend.

Challenges: Funding is extremely hard to get for older people’s groups, many funders view lunch clubs as purely social activities and this is not always the case. Users can improve confidence and health and well being through regular access to healthy, hot meals. Whilst the contribution of members covers the basic cost of the actual lunches it does not cover staff, transport or additional activities.

Future work: The project would like to support older people to eat healthily and prevent the need to cut back on food to pay fuel bills as many do at present. It would also be a bonus to provide discounted food to members and work with local suppliers if they were willing.

Contact: Tel. 0191 264 7566
References


Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England, registered office address 207–221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267. Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI, Age Cymru.