



Celebrate Dorset Multicultural Lunches Evaluation Report

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Summary

Based on funding from Celebrate - Big Lottery Fund, Dorset Race Equality Council, together with various community partners, organised nine multicultural lunches during summer 2017. The main objective was to provide a series of community based events in locations across Dorset to provide opportunities for diverse groups and individuals to meet and to build friendships. The events were evaluated through participant observations and interviews.

The events were found to be very successful with participants engaging in a positive environment with benefits extending beyond the events. Analysis grouped a series of themes into three broad headings.

- **Organisation** - Venue choice is important. All worked well and different outcomes can be planned and achieved depending on location. Skilled volunteers and organisers facilitate the smooth running of events which benefit from local leadership. Promotion strategies were successful but have implications for who attends. Event welcome is important for new participants.
- **Participants and participation** – Diverse participants attended with family groups being important for some. The events provide an important space for women to socialise away from the home and repeat attendance was important to establishing friendships. Religious connections are evident in the event spaces and communities involved which have implications for some participant engagement.
- **Transformative elements** – Various elements help achieve positive outcomes. Food is an important element that brings people together and participants valued the opportunity to celebrate their heritage. The temporary transformation of spaces created a positive community atmosphere that challenges stereotypes. The opportunity to contribute food was highly valued as is the space to develop skills in English.

A sustained series of multicultural lunches would be beneficial as a celebratory platform to engage wider groups. Recommendations are made to enhance positive benefits.

1.0 Introduction

This review of the Celebrate Dorset Multicultural Lunches emerges from collaboration between Bournemouth University and Dorset Race Equality Council through the Refugee and Migrant Leisure Network (RMLN). RMLN connects Bournemouth University academics working within the Centre for Events, Leisure, Society and Culture with Dorset-based organisations working with refugees and migrants. RMLN aims to generate collaborative, community-led research to grow our knowledge of how leisure (including art, sport, culture and heritage) can contribute to refugee and migrant wellbeing.

The multicultural lunches arose through collaboration between Dorset Race Equality Council and Bournemouth Borough Council through its West Howe Community Development Officer and the Sustainable Food Partnership. Funding was provided by Celebrate – Big Lottery Fund. The concept involved community based organisations hiring or providing a space to host the lunch, inviting community participants from diverse cultural groups to provide food and inviting community members to attend. Events took place during summer 2017. Each event lasted two to three hours and the structure varied in different locations.

The events are analysed with respect to Dorset Race Equality Council's objectives for hosting the events and opportunities to develop the events for the future. Dorset Race Equality Council's main objective for the lunches was:

- To provide a series of community based events in locations across Dorset to provide opportunities for diverse groups and individuals to meet and to build friendships

In addition Dorset Race Equality Council was keen to explore:

- The extent to which the events meet the needs of the participants
- The wider benefits of the events
- Whether more regular events would enhance positive impacts
- Other types of events that would engage participants

2.0 Method

Data were collected through participant observations and interviews with participants.

Observations were conducted by four researchers at three of the nine multicultural lunches (see Table 1). The researchers attended the events as participants, but identified themselves as academic researchers in conversations. The participation therefore involved some covert observations (where participants are not aware researchers are present) and some overt observations (where participants understand researchers are present). Observations lasted around two hours which was generally for the duration of the event.

Interviews were undertaken with three event participants. Participants were recruited by researchers at the events and were conducted in the days following the event (see Table 2).

Table 1. Participant observations

Date	Location	Observers
1 st July 2017	Kinson , Bournemouth (St Andrew's Church Hall)	Researcher 1
2 nd July 2017	Weymouth (Chapel Hay Community Garden)	Researcher 2 and 3
13 th Aug 2017	West Howe , Bournemouth (Henry Brown Community Centre)	Researcher 4

Table 2. Participant profile

Pseudonym	Background	Events attended	Date of interview
Taavi	Egyptian male living in the UK since 2010. Moved to the UK with British partner and children. Lives in Boscombe, Bournemouth.	Kinson Boscombe	21 st July 2017
Tina	New Zealand female living in the UK for 6 years with a British partner. Connected to the events through her Church.	Kinson	25 th July 2017
Malak	Egyptian female living in the UK for 35 years with four children and five grandchildren. Lives in Dorchester.	Boscombe Weymouth Dorchester	31 st July 2017

4.0 Findings

Analysis of observations and interviews identified a number of themes that have been grouped into three broad headings: organisation; participants and participation; transformative elements. These form the framework for the findings.

4.1 Organisation

Organisation focuses predominantly on practical aspects related to venues, event structure, organisers and promotion, though each of these has implications for the social and emotional outcomes of the events.

4.1.1 Venues

Venues were selected in liaison with community partners in the Dorset region. They were diverse and included public open space as well as indoor community centres and were observed to accommodate up to 110 participants at the Weymouth event. All offered different opportunities and were successful in delivering the events in different ways. For example, Chapel Hay Community Garden in Weymouth provided a space that was open to the passing public. This enabled local people to join the event without prior invitation. The event piggy backed on an existing family centred event that takes place once a month. This appeared to engage more participants from the immediate locality than other events observed. Further, this space did not have formally organised seating. As Researcher 2 describes:

“No seating as such apart from a couple of benches. Some families had picnic blankets, but most just ate standing up. This made the event feel very informal and open.”

The event transformed the community garden for several hours, however, outdoor events are vulnerable to poor weather. It is also unclear how numbers might be managed should future events become more popular.

On the other hand, St Andrew’s Church Hall in Kinson provided an indoor location at the end of a lane where there is little passing traffic. Participants booked to attend the event. No one discovered the event on the day. While this does restrict participants to a pre-existing network, it gives organisers some control over numbers and capacity to manage an

appropriate amount of food. The space provided seating at 9 tables with space for up to 12 at each. This meant participants had to sit and interact with others leading to conversations over food. For example, Tina describes:

“you found yourself sort of sitting next to people that you didn’t know and conversing with them. And it was all over food.”

The Henry Brown Community Centre in West Howe provided an outdoor space adjacent to the community centre. Participants also booked to attend, but the location also opened up opportunities for passers-by to join in. This has benefits as Researcher 4 describes a conversation with a local man who appeared to have stumbled on the event.

Venue choice, location and layout are all significant decisions and it is evident that different outcomes may be planned and achieved.

4.1.2 Organisers and volunteers

Events were organised by a mixture of voluntary and public sector organisations, with different teams operating in each location. Support was provided by volunteers who provided food and were paid expenses. Volunteer participants were enthusiastic and committed to the events.

Organisers faced a number of challenges. For example, at the Kinson event it took a while for the volunteers providing food to arrive and organise themselves. The social aspects of the event took precedent on their arrival as they met friends and acquaintances from other events. While this is in itself a positive feature of the events, it was evident that this caused some anxiety for organisers. Tina describes her experiences of working with another participant that reveals the challenges of different cultural expectations:

“Um, um, working with xxxx has been a real experience because ... We tend to have things very nailed down, you know, in terms of, you’ve got an agenda, you work through the agenda, you know... I don’t know whether it’s Western thinking or whether it’s just, I don’t know what it is, but xxx is very fly by the night.”

Given some food was prepared at the venue, this challenge to sense of urgency caused some stress for organisers. Related to this, while participants booked in advance, they did this through various groups and there was some uncertainty about the numbers that would attend. Organisers were observed to be busy throughout the event and there was additional stress at the end as they distributed expenses to volunteers. Organisers were busy at later events, but these seemed more relaxed presumably based on earlier learning experiences.

The Weymouth event was led by a committed local volunteer organiser. The event was built on a pre-existing family event and was therefore organised in a different way. However, the organiser was also observed to be busy with organisational aspects.

Overall it was evident that positive experiences for participants were underpinned by the hard work of organisers who were working in a very fluid environment. This requires committed organisers and the diverse local leadership gave some local ownership to the events.

4.1.3 Event promotion

Events were promoted through an established network of community organisations, many aligned to religious institutions, and posters in the local area. Social media, especially Facebook pages, played an important role. The Kinson and West Howe events required participants to indicate attendance. The Kinson event was not promoted to passing local residents given its location at the end of a lane. However, the West Howe event positioned a welcome crew at the venue entrance and there was some scope for passers-by to join in. Conversely, the Weymouth event built on existing participants and, being in public open space, was visible and open to people passing the community garden.

There are advantages and disadvantages of these varied strategies. If participants indicate attendance in advance it helps organisers plan food requirements, however, this does limit opportunistic engagement by the local community. Furthermore, this strategy relies on established networks which can become self-limiting over time and reach out to those already engaged. The reliance on community organisations with religious affiliations may also exclude some. However, Taavi indicated that through these networks further word of mouth introduced new participants.

On balance, promotion strategies were appropriate to the venue capacities, though they raise issues about who participates and who does not which are discussed next.

4.1.4 Welcome

Participants largely join the events through pre-existing networks, however, it was evident that all events attracted new people and the sense of 'welcome' is important. The events at Kinson and West Howe both had a welcome desk and participants were asked to create their own name badge. A personal introduction to the event is important for new people. Tina described her anxiety about her first multicultural event and her personal concerns about causing offence to other cultures. This is likely to be heightened for participants who have recently arrived in the UK and for those who have had limited contact with other cultural groups. However, Tina goes on to explain how the events were non-judgemental.

At the Weymouth event, there was not an obvious welcome point and Researcher 2 was initially a little uncertain about her presence in the space

“I wasn't sure what to do as it looked like the event was in full swing and no one in particular greeting those who entered...I felt a bit out of place as this was obviously quite an intimate, family community event.”

This disappeared when she met a familiar face and felt formally welcomed to the event. An uncertain welcome will deter some participants and this is an important feature to maintain.

4.2 Participants and participation

The events attracted diverse participants with the Kinson event being described as “the most multicultural event I've attended” by several participants. Upwards of 15 different nationalities attended this event with local white British people representing roughly one third of participants. The Weymouth event attracted more local British participants given its public location. Several participation themes have been identified.

4.2.1 Family focused

Family groups dominated the event at Weymouth, though there were some individual participants. Children were seen to interact widely across cultural groups and represented a prop for parents to socialise. Providing activities for children was therefore important with Weymouth providing a bouncy castle and organising a piñata. At Kinson and West Howe families were also present, but less dominant. Individuals are welcome to attend the events, but as Tina explains, this would not be for some, particularly young single male migrants. Researcher 2 (see above) also identified herself as an outsider to the overtly family orientated gathering at Weymouth, however, this event was purposely built on an established family event so this was not surprising. Given the family focus these events will not suit all potential participants.

4.2.2 Gendered roles and opportunities

In general, female volunteers took responsibility for food preparation, though men were observed providing Mexican food and African drinks. The events attracted many families of Middle Eastern and African origin and women were often, but not always, accompanied by husbands. The events presented a safe space for women to socialise and meet other people, especially when there are few culturally appropriate opportunities for some women to socialise in other ways away from the home. In some instances, men engaged less in social activities often adopting to look at phones and remain quiet despite no evidence of language barriers. However, there was also evidence of men interacting together and Researcher 4 sat on a table with three men, Polish, Mexican and British, who shared stories of travel and culture.

4.2.3 Repeat attendance

Many participants knew other people and the events provided a space to renew acquaintances. There was some sense of a closed network of participants, however, interviews revealed that while participants were engaged in established local networks they met new people at these events. There was also some evidence from interviews that friendships were built at and then sustained beyond the events, though this is likely to emerge following repeat participation. The nature of the events leads to much 'small talk' among participants, rather than the depth of conversation required to establish friendships, however that is the nature of a short duration event where many different people are encountered. Overall, opportunities to repeat the experience are important to build the familiarity required to establish friendships.

4.2.4 Religious connections

Religious connections were evident at all events through venues and community groups involved. The religious communities had sought to embrace multiculturalism and there was a slight sense that events reached out to groups who were already engaged with diverse populations. The religious connections also present a potential barrier to some participants who may be alienated by 'church' connections. The participants interviewed (two Muslim and one Christian) all reflected on their religious groups presenting issues for some. For example Malak describes how:

“especially in the last few years we have very bad, erm, reputation of Islam and Muslim people and the way Middle Eastern community are treated and so forth... I am hoping one day that the Muslim people and Islam will have actually, the real value of the real meaning of Islam.”

4.3 Transformative elements

Various components of the events came together to achieve a variety of positive outcomes referred to here as transformative elements.

4.3.1 Food and other 'props'

Food is a 'prop' that provides the substance to bring people together. It is an inanimate object that enables people to ask questions that might otherwise seem intrusive. For instance, in meeting a refugee, participants might feel reluctant to enquire about their past, however, it is easy to ask about the food they have prepared, where it is from and how it is made. From this other conversations open up. Food has strong associations with memories of growing up, places you have lived or visited. It is also affective and sensory as people react to the taste, smell and appearance and verbalise their responses to others. We all need to eat to live and meals are a family event. As a human necessity it provides a shared understanding. While discussion of food was not essential for some, particularly some of the men accompanying their wives, everyone visibly enjoyed tasting the range of food. Therefore while food preparation and serving at an event presents some organisational challenges, it is a critical element.

Other props were also evident at the events. For instance, at Kinson a community group brought a large selection of Middle Eastern and African clothes for participants to try on. Children's activities also engaged adult groups in conversation as they helped out. These played a more minor, but nevertheless important role in facilitating interaction.

4.3.2 Celebrating heritage

Many participants valued the opportunity to celebrate their heritage not only through the food, but also through taking pride in wearing traditional clothes marking themselves out as different. This gave the events a sense of occasion. There was a joy in sharing traditional food and evident pleasure when it was all eaten. Volunteers bringing food also frequently brought traditional objects associated with the food related to serving or simple decoration. These also provided a platform for discussion. The volunteers providing food seemed very proud of their culture, which was very positive and uplifting. Potentially this provides a form of (unconscious) resistance to the tabloid press shaming of migrants and refugees.

Interviews reveal the importance to participants of making connections for their children to their heritage. Researcher 2 noted:

"It seemed important for the Chinese woman to ensure her children, who were born in England, could learn Chinese, explaining they speak Chinese at home. She said they can speak, but can't write or read the language."

Many participants were from mixed families with one British parent and there was concern about them losing touch with their non-British background.

Participants also took pleasure in celebrating other cultures. For example, at the Weymouth event, a British women and her granddaughter made Swedish savoury cakes. They were not Swedish, but had taken a holiday there. The granddaughter loved the culture of Sweden and wanted to go to university there. It gave an opportunity to share a family memory through food. British participants were also keen to share their regional heritage. A Scottish women Researcher 1 met at Kinson made a haggis for the later event at West Howe, while a British women brought soda bread which she makes for her Irish husband.

There can also be some uncertainty about celebrating heritage. Both Muslim participants interviewed expressed concerns about how their faith might be misrepresented in current times. The food events presented them with an opportunity to challenge this image. The traveller community, represented at the West Howe event, also have concerns and there can be a stigma for young people from this community who can seek to hide their heritage due to concerns about jobs and social status in other aspects of their life. The events provide a space to celebrate.

4.3.3 Positive atmosphere

The multicultural lunches temporarily transformed the event spaces and there was an overwhelming sense of positivity at the event. Even those who positioned themselves a little outside the event, for example, accompanying husbands, seemed to enjoy the food and atmosphere. That said, all participants came with a willingness to embrace a multicultural activity and it might be anticipated that this would be positive. Importantly the events do not embrace everyone. Many refugees are single young men who might not seek out an event like this. Tina suggested it is difficult for some to step out of their comfort zone and there are challenges of going to an event full of strangers. In moving forward this is something organisers need to reflect on in relation to the wider range of opportunities available.

Similarly, while the events provided a positive shared space, there was less scope for some to interact. For new arrivals to the UK there were language barriers and, though difference was celebrated, a sense of otherness marked out by the varied dress code adopted by different cultural groups on a warm summer's day. Researcher 3 observed that local people and refugees tended to socialise in two separate groups at the Weymouth event. However, the opportunity to share space and observe this 'otherness' is an important route to understanding.

4.3.4 Moving forward to wider benefits

As a series of self-contained events it is important the multicultural lunches lead to wider benefits. Interviews emphasise the role of events in building trust, shared values, understanding and tolerance while removing fear and prejudice. Repetition of the experience is needed to build a sense of community and sustain a lasting effect. The established networks provide a range of other events into which participants can tap, however, a sustained series of multicultural lunches would be beneficial as a celebratory platform to engage wider groups.

Taavi describes how the lunches enabled participants to see "you're not on your own". Though participants might not meet people from their country, they can see people from diverse regions and often met people with a shared language or culture. It was evident that established migrants sought to help new migrants and the lunches provided a bridge between the two. While the lunches cannot directly tackle deeper issues of social exclusion and the problems encountered in day to day life, they are a route to build social capital and associated opportunities over time.

A special feature of the lunches is inviting volunteers to prepare food from their culture. Some recent Syrian refugees were invited to contribute and this opportunity to give something back to the community was highly valued. Refugees will inevitably be in a position where they accept favours from the host community. This can be negative as people like to give as well as receive and seek a reciprocal balance. The multicultural lunches provided a

positive opportunity to give and it was clear that volunteers who provided food benefitted substantially.

Many recent migrants and refugees are well educated and seek opportunities to practice English. For women, in particular, these opportunities may be limited, so lunches provide an opportunity to try out English in a social setting. Some migrants were seen to struggle with English, but showed determination and a willingness to engage. The lunches therefore provide a vital opportunity for exposure to language while observing behaviour.

From a local population's perspective, the lunches challenge stereotypes. As Researcher 3 describes:

“Unlike my stereotype (shame on me), xxxx seemed very cheerful. She was bright and engaging... xxxx was wearing a fancy coat and sun glasses. When she took off the glasses for the picture, I noticed she was wearing a really nice make-up. Stylish lady.”

The stylish look of the Syrian refugees challenged her views and enabled her to recognise that this group is well educated and has not come from a situation of poverty.

4.3.5 Suggestions for the future

During the lunches and interviews participants were asked about ways to improve the events and ideas for other events. Music was the top suggestion as this is another way that people connect. Other ideas included hands on activities that could be done as a group like a beach clean and games for children derived from different cultures. Also, given the link to religious networks an interfaith event was suggested. Art might also be successfully deployed as a shared activity.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The multicultural food events are without doubt successful. They attract diverse cultural groups and provide a platform to build friendships. While meeting the needs of participants who attend, the lunches will not be for everyone and organisers need to be mindful of the range of other activities available to groups who might not feel comfortable in an overtly family orientated environment. There was evidence from participants that benefits extend beyond the immediate event experience, however, repeat attendance is needed to consolidate the positive outcomes. Lunches are a successful bridge to build collective and individual social capital.

In taking the lunch events forward the following are recommendations for organisers:

- Welcome is important when participants arrive at the event.
- Organisation is challenging working with different cultural groups with different norms and expectations. It is important to have a team supported by volunteers and to manage the expectations of volunteers providing food to enable a smoothly run event to agreed timescales.
- Repetition of lunches is important to build the desired benefits.
- Consider how promotion opportunities and networks might be extended to open up events to groups who might not consider a multicultural lunch. There are opportunities to involve more local British participants to challenge their stereotypes.

- Consider the groups not reached, particularly young migrant men who might be better served by other activities.
- Develop the opportunities for recent refugees to contribute by bringing food as this gives them a positive chance to return a gift to others.
- Consider planned activities at events, such as traditional games, that might facilitate more interaction between different groups, particularly where refugees seek to practice English.
- Links through religious organisation are important but may exclude some. Build links with other community organisations that capture different perspectives
- Educational elements are important, such as opportunities to learn English, but also to understand rights.