

“Something to be proud of”

Taking an enterprising approach to meals on wheels



Simon Shaw CF

Churchill Fellowship report

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a pebble in the pond

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In memory of Barbara and Richard Greenwood, Rosemary Halford, Jean and Stuart Shaw, my grandparents and great aunt, whose love and support have shaped me in ways I am still coming to appreciate.

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About the author



As children my brother and I would occasionally accompany our gran on her meals on wheels rounds. I have one particularly strong memory of being sent by Granny to take a homemade treat to one of her regular clients. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this woman was suspicious of two nervous boys she had never seen before. She refused to take the biscuits and we left upset that we'd failed. Granny came back from her own delivery and, not one to give up, took us back to try again. This time things went differently; her familiar face changed everything.

While the many meals and wheels services have rightly changed since then, the value of good nutrition, regular human contact and connection with the local community and support has not. So, I wanted to use my Fellowship to explore how meals on wheels services can be sustained and enhanced for the future, to not only provide decent meals, but also to play a role in maintaining people's wellbeing and connection with their local community.

I have had a number of policy, campaigns and project delivery roles in the third and public sector, with a long-term interest in disability and ageing, and more recently the intersection with food and nutrition. My Fellowship presented me with a unique opportunity to explore these issues which I hope will lead to increasing knowledge and positive developments in the UK.

Simon Shaw CF

London, March 2020

Executive summary

There are an estimated 1.3 million malnourished older people in the UK, the majority of whom live in the community. Yet meals provision has been an area ripe for cuts. Support around food often falls into the same trap as other preventative interventions: acknowledged as a sensible idea that would save money in the long-term, but seen as ‘not fundable’ due to pressure on the annual budget. In recent years meals on wheels services have been neglected or terminated in many parts of the UK.

However, evidence shows that only through a range of options can we meet the range of needs and preferences of older people, particularly the oldest citizens, who are the most likely to face physical and other barriers to eating well. Meals on wheels, shared meals such as lunch clubs or intergenerational meals, support with food shopping and preparing meals at home, as well as screening for malnutrition risk and advising on maximising nutrition should all be part of this multi-faceted response.

I visited five cities during my Fellowship research: Paris and Metz in France, Milan in Italy and Seoul and Gwangju in South Korea. I visited commissioners, providers and recipients of meals on wheels services, but also others delivering complementary services or support or working on related policy or research. I saw how meals on wheels provision is part of a wider response to both supporting older and disabled people alongside social care support, shopping assistance, research, as well initiatives to promote sustainable and healthy diets.

My findings highlight the importance of four key areas:

- Having ambition and seeing good meals on wheels services as a ‘badge of honour’ for a local area
- Believing in the preventative value of meals on wheels services, in terms of nutrition, inclusion and wellbeing
- Taking an enterprising approach, with services able to take reasonable risk to expand their reach and outcomes
- Getting organised, so that there is a joined-up movement to protect and enhance services.

My recommendations are grouped into four key areas of action:

- Ensuring there is a funding and policy environment which allows services to survive and thrive, as well as to be able to take reasonable risks to develop and sustain their provision
- Adopting a shared ‘recipe for success’ across services
- Committing to share experiences and challenges and to build the case for support together
- Fostering innovation through competitions, or similar ‘challenge’ initiatives, to develop solutions to shared challenges.

1. Introduction

1.1 Malnutrition in the UK

There are an estimated 1.3 million malnourished older people in the UK, the majority of whom live in the community. This situation can be driven by physical and cognitive difficulties around accessing and preparing, chewing and swallowing food. There are also motivational barriers to preparing food for one; social isolation and loneliness are a key factor in this; over 2.2 million people over 75 live alone.¹

What is less understood are the individual financial pressures around older people's food. While pensioner poverty in the UK has reduced for many older people, this is not the case for all² and there is evidence that the cost of food and/or preparing meals is partially driving poor nutrition among some older people, along with other factors such as lack of motivation or appetite. Indeed, three million people over the age of 60 have reported skipping meals to cut back on food costs.³ Over one-third of people aged over 60 are worried about the cost of living and 27 per cent are worried about the cost of food.⁴ Furthermore, those from lower income households are more likely to experience ill-health or disability in older age and therefore more likely to require support, including with shopping, cooking or receiving meals that help them stay well-nourished.

There are also concerns from those working with older people that public messaging around healthy eating, while very much needed to reduce obesity or salt consumption for some, can be mis-applied by older people, their families and those who support them. In many cases an older person at risk of malnutrition or undernutrition would benefit from calorie dense/ higher protein or higher fat foods such as full fat milk or yoghurt or high calorie snacks and smaller, more frequent meals, yet public messaging for a more general audience can mean older people feel they should avoid the food types and habits they need.

This situation can also lead to a vicious circle: lack of nourishment can increase frailty, which in turn makes people less able to provide nourishing food for themselves. Alongside the human impact of malnutrition, the cost of older people's malnutrition to the public purse is well-documented; it accounts for nearly £20bn of health and social care spending in England alone,⁵ due example to falls, hospital readmissions.

Unfortunately, the current legislation and associated funding is failing to provide a sufficient framework. For example, in England, the Care Act 2014 and its statutory guidance call on councils to prioritise wellbeing, prevention and reducing loneliness, moving away from a crisis management approach. Needs related to eating, drinking and meal preparation are identified in the assessment criteria.

But the good intentions of the Care Act are currently unfulfilled; a number of key factors have reduced the importance given to addressing food and drinks needs, including through meals and other food-related support. These include a major shortfall in local authority funding meaning support is available only for those with high level or crisis needs. Meals or food provision are not a statutory requirement for councils, and out-dated and negative attitudes

mean that some local decision makers and professionals do not see the potential for modern effective meals service. In many areas the quality and reach of services have also been allowed to decline, sometimes resulting in a vicious cycle of lack of demand and high per head costs.

Meals provision has been an area ripe for cuts and support around food falls into the same trap as other preventative interventions: acknowledged as a sensible idea that would save money in the long-term, but seen as 'not fundable' due to pressure on the annual budget. In recent years meals on wheels services have been neglected or terminated in many parts of the UK. In 2014, meals on wheels services were provided by two thirds of top tier authorities, but by 2018 this had declined to less than half (42%) of councils (APSE, 2018). And many local authorities and other funders have cut back or ended their support for lunch clubs.

Besides funding, there are a myriad of other challenges which services in the UK face which can impact negatively on their bottom line or ability to maintain or expand the service. This could be a lack of parking permits for providers, meaning that delivery staff can spend precious time finding a parking spot or fines being made against providers. Providers can also face planning barriers to starting up or expanding their kitchen, particularly in cases where appropriate kitchen space is in short supply or costs are prohibitive.

There is often little awareness or scrutiny of the impact of cuts or financial pressures on these services, with those affected having little voice to oppose the cuts. Equally, there is a variable knowledge of the alternative models for providing services, including social enterprises.

1.2 Effective support for older people

Evidence shows that only through a range of options can we meet the range of needs and preferences of older people, particularly the oldest citizens, who are the most likely to face physical and other barriers to eating well. To ensure older people's access to food we must address the multiple barriers related to affordability, availability, poor health and lack of motivation or appetite. There are many positive solutions that offer multiple social and health benefits. Meals on wheels, shared meals such as lunch clubs or intergenerational meals, support with food shopping and preparing meals at home, as well as screening for malnutrition risk and advising on maximising nutrition should all be part of this multi-faceted response.⁶ This can also help to overcome isolation and provide opportunities for service providers to check in with people on their other needs.

The average cost of a two-course meals on wheels lunch in the UK is £3.60.⁷ The cost-benefit of meal provision versus either a hospital stay or a move into a full-time care setting seems clear. But support around food falls into the same trap as other preventative interventions: acknowledged as a sensible idea that would save money in the long-term, but seen as 'not fundable' due to pressure on the annual budget. Another trap is that the costs generally transfer from councils (the meals provider) to the NHS (the hospital provider), with little mechanism to join up the thinking and budgeting to plan services in the most humane, preventative and cost-effective way overall.

Fortunately, there are several providers bucking the decline in food support for older people. Some are sustaining, and in some cases, growing their services, through modernising their offer

and diversifying their financial model, for example by offering supported employment or apprenticeships to make it easier for cost-effective food enterprises to flourish. Importantly, there is no one model for success; at Sustain we have highlighted six of the diverse examples from around the UK.⁸ Modern meals on wheels services from around the UK provide examples of the recognition of the multiple barriers to older people's access to food, and practical steps that can be taken to ensure that older people do not fall into food poverty and malnourishment. Yet even where these are working well, services are still vulnerable to funding shifts and policy change. It has become very difficult to convince some decision makers to retain a service or even harder to re-introduce a service when it has already been cut.

1.3 My Churchill Fellowship

I visited five cities during my trip: Paris and Metz in France, Milan in Italy and Seoul and Gwangju in South Korea. I visited commissioners, providers and recipients of meals on wheels services, but also others delivering complementary services or support or working on related policy or research. It was so insightful to explore how meals on wheels provision is part of a wider response to both supporting older and disabled people alongside social care support, shopping assistance, research, as well initiatives to promote sustainable and healthy diets. My key questions for my trip were:

1. What is the impact of coordinated place-based plans to understand and meet older people's needs around food?
2. What is the potential of social enterprise, or other enterprising approaches to meals on wheels delivery? And what support can councils and other public sector bodies provide?
3. How can services reach the right balance between ambitions related to quality, reach, responsiveness to individual preferences, ability to take risks and innovate, keeping within budget and ensuring value for money?
4. Can services be part of a genuinely preventative approach?
5. What are the best ways to champion support for older people's access to food?

2. Summary of my visits

Unless stated otherwise, please note the figures used in these summaries was correct at the time of my research in late 2019.

2.1 Paris, France

In Paris responsibility for food strategy and services is split across a number of local government agencies and approximately 3.7 million meals a year are provided by different services. There has been long-term support for food assistance, including for older people, from different administrations. Services have been delivered through different partners over time. Currently, the Mairie de Paris is responsible for Paris' overall strategy for sustainable and healthy food. The **Ville de Paris** commissions the city's meals on wheels service on 4-year contracts, as well as the network of *restaurants émeraudes*



Delivery bike in Paris © Saveurs & Vie

(community restaurants) where about 2,400 older people have lunch or collect a takeaway lunch for €3-5. The **Centre d'action sociale Ville de Paris** (CASVP) runs number of services across Paris' arrondissements including *restaurants solidaires* (community cafeterias) where approximately 2,200 people on a low income have lunch.

Approximately 1,800 - 2,000 meals are delivered every weekday by about 50 bike couriers with refrigerated trailers (and electric vehicles in Montmartre). Each bike delivers 30-35 meals each. Delivery staff are employed by the Ville de Paris and collect meals from **Saveurs & Vie** each day. Saveurs & Vie has the primary contract to create meals for the meals on wheels service and has 19 meals suppliers. Clients can order breakfast, lunch and an evening meal. Lunch charges for clients are currently €9.50, with some clients entitled to a reduction.

Delivery staff use an app to answer a number of welfare questions and the responses can be sent directly to social workers and family members. This uses a traffic light system, with red indicating that action needs to be taken.

The service is open to all older people over 65, as well as people who are registered as disabled. Clients pay different amounts according to income and need. The most recent survey of clients for the service identified that 80% of clients at a given time are longer term users, 20% exit the service (for a range of reasons) and 20% are newer clients.

2.2 Metz, France

Amapa, part of the medical and social care Doctegestio group, runs a meals on wheels services to older people and others experiencing ill health or disability, as well as families. Amapa also runs care homes for older people with a range of needs. As of early 2020, Amapa's services are available in 26 local government areas in France, or one quarter of the country. DG Hotpot, another part of the Doctegestio group, provides the catering and meals for these Amapa's meals on wheels services and care homes.

When Amapa first took over the meals on wheels service in Metz in 1996, the service was delivering approximately 15 hot meals a day, delivered daily. The food was prepared at different sites and the service was making a loss. In order to assess people's needs and develop a model which could reach a greater number of people, Amapa investigated of malnutrition in older people in the area. As a result of the inquiry, the service moved to delivery of chilled meals to be re-heated in clients' homes. The service would now be able to deliver to a much larger area, would no longer be required to make daily deliveries and would only need 2 vehicles. Lunch is priced at approximately €10, with people able to claim for deductions. The meals on wheels service is now fully integrated into meal preparation at Amapa's Las Acacias nursing home.

There were several challenges with the transition to chilled meal service. These included some existing customers not wanting chilled meals and some people with dementia eating multiple meals in one sitting. However, there are some significant innovations to improve the service. The meals are served in attractive and recyclable packaging in which customers can reheat the food safely in a microwave. Amapa introduced soup as part of the lunch offer, as this was something that competitors were not offering.



Meal preparation at Las Acacias care home © Amapa



Meals ready for delivery © Amapa

Since 2013 the service also offers an evening meal for those customers already receiving lunch. The number of lunches has been relatively stable in the last few years, but the number of evening meals being ordered as well is steadily increasing – rising to 740 per month at the time of the visit. Amapa sees this growth in evening meal order as a win-win for clients and the service. Dinner can be delivered at the same time as lunch so customers only pay one delivery fee and Amapa can increase its productivity.

The service now delivers more than 4,000 meals on wheels a month, to approximately 230 people. Also, the service has recently reached an agreement with Metz council on public subsidy for some customers' meals. The subsidy is

approximately 50% for those on a very low income and approximately 20% for those on a low income. People must apply to social services to be assessed for these reductions.

2.3 Milan, Italy

Milan Food Policy is the council's office shaping the city's approach to sustainable and healthy food. There are a range of organisations and agencies assessing and meeting the needs of older people in the city. Milano Ristorazione is a social enterprise 99% owned by the council. It makes meals on wheels alongside meals for Milan's state schools, care homes and hostels. The Food Social Sensor Network (FOOD NET) a project of the Università degli studi di Milano Bicocca is researching older people's eating habits with a view to influencing public policy, interventions and industry. Solidando is a charity which runs a social supermarket in central Milan. A significant proportion of its customers are older people. *Due mani in più* (An extra pair of hands) is a collaboration between the supermarket Coop Lombardia and the charity Caritas which offers a shopping service. While the service is offered to people of all ages, 99% of the users are older people. People ring the service with their orders and a project worker delivers it, or in some cases the user shops in person, but the worker delivers it to them. Unlike online shopping services, workers can help people to put their shopping away and can also conduct a welfare check on users.

In Milan, a combination of local government, social enterprise and third sector organisations deliver the meals on wheels service. **Milano Ristorazione** prepare the meals which are collected from kitchens around the city. Contracts to deliver meals are split across a consortium of third sector organisations covering different zones. **Sociosfera Onlus** is one of the third sector organisations contracted by the council to deliver meals. They deliver hot or cold meals Monday to Friday and Friday deliveries can include meals for the weekend as well.



Meals being plated up at a Milano Ristorazione kitchen
© Milano Ristorazione

In total approximately 800 people receive meals on wheels in the city every day. Costs for clients vary according to need, with some receiving meals at no cost. Depending on what Sociosfera Onlus is funded to offer in each part of the city, the meals on wheels service can link to other services such as care or other household support.

2.4 South Korea

In South Korea, there is a large network of senior welfare centres which offer services to older people in their areas, funded by local government. These welfare centres offer a wide range of activities and support across a wide range of areas including health, welfare, education, sport and gardening. Welfare centres will usually offer lunch and some also deliver meals to older people in the community.

Both Seoul and Gwangju are part of the WHO's Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities. Seoul programme brings together government and non-governmental organisations to develop and deliver initiatives to make Seoul an age-friendly city as part of the WHO age-friendly programme.

2.5 Seoul, South Korea

The **Eunpyeong Senior Welfare Center** in North West Seoul offers a wide range of activities and lunch. The centre is currently one of two sites piloting an enhanced meals on wheels service, funded by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. The Seoul Welfare Foundation oversees and evaluates the meals on wheels pilot. An increase in the proportion of older people living alone and experiencing nutritional problems has placed further attention on this issue.

The pilot had increased the price of the meals by a modest 1,000 won (c.70p), taking the price from 3,500 won (c. £2.20) to 4,500 won (c. £2.90) to improve the overall quality of meals and offer different menus for people, particularly for those with certain health conditions. Approximately 90 people receive meals on wheels a day and about 600 eat lunch at the welfare centre over multiple sittings. Those receiving meals are identified as unable



A meal delivery © Eunpyeong Senior Welfare Center

to reach the centre due to mobility issues and/or their distance from the centre. Meals are cooked in the kitchen in the morning of delivery and placed in reusable metal dishes. Used dishes are collected when the next day's meal is delivered and returned to the centre.



I also visited two of the other services providing support to older people in the city. **Food Smiles** delivers food (including rice, noodles, eggs and store cupboard ingredients) on a monthly basis to approximately 100 older single people in some parts of the city. The **Food Market** is a social supermarket which has a significant number of older customers who can be referred by social services to shop there once a month.

Some elements of a regular Food Smiles delivery © Simon Shaw

2.6 Gwangju, South Korea

The **Hanam Welfare Center** offers lunch to about 130 older people Monday to Saturday and dinner to roughly 80 people Monday-Friday. People pay 3,000 won (c. £2) for lunch and 1,500 won (c. £1). The centre also delivers 'side dishes' to older people, who are expected to cook their own rice at home. The centre is located in a more deprived part of the city and focuses on those older people facing more significant challenges. The centre receives funding from the council, with some

of this going towards some of the cost of the meals. The centre also offers cooking classes and supports irregular events for people to eat together at the centre or in people's home.



*Simon Shaw and Mr Park, Director of the Hanam Welfare Center
© Richard T. Park*



*Staff eating in advance of lunch being served at Bit Goeul
Senior Welfare Center © Simon Shaw*

The **Bit Goeul Senior Welfare Center** in the south of the city was the largest setting I visited. The centre offers a very wide range of activities to a wide range of older people. Roughly 1,700 older people eat lunch there every day in 3 shifts. The activities and lunch are free for people in the basic social security allowance and this is at most 10% of people attending the centre. The centre doesn't offer a meals delivery service; the idea is that older people who are unable to get to this centre have their needs met by local centres.

3. Findings

I have brought together my reflections on the services and organisations I visited under four key areas:

1. Having ambition
2. Believing in prevention
3. Taking an enterprising approach
4. Getting organised

3.1 Having ambition

While there are of course examples from the UK, one of the things which struck me the most during my travels was the level of ambition for meals on wheels services among commissioners and other public sector professionals, not just third-sector providers. Indeed, for some, having a high quality and widely used meals on wheels service was seen as a something to be proud of.

"A good service is like a badge of honour."

In Seoul in South Korea, I was hit by a wave of positive energy as I entered the senior welfare centre where meals on wheels, a lunch club and a wide range of activities from ping pong to calligraphy to maths were offered – people, including older people themselves volunteering or working in the centre, were so proud to be offering these services to their community.

"The most important thing is for the meal to be good. If it's not tasty, people won't eat it."

This level of ambition was also evident in aspirations around food quality and the scale that services should be operating at, given the known levels of poor nutrition and/or social isolation. In all three of the countries I visited, the people I met were very clear to emphasise the importance of providing nutritious, appetising and well-presented meals.

I heard how the focus on maintaining the high quality of meals is core to the service. One commissioner described food as sometimes being 'people's last pleasure- acknowledging a certain sadness but also recognising the value and importance of providing good, appetising meals.

Amapa told me about a number of opportunities they provide for individuals and their families to feedback on and influence the food offered. Individual comments and informal feedback are taken seriously. Amapa conduct regular surveys of residents and meals on wheels customers and food committees in care homes made up of residents, family members and care staff make suggestions on menus. The kitchen tries to respond to these suggestions, but staff are also transparent with residents and families when practical or regulatory constraints make it difficult to take on a proposal.

Some service put in particular effort to make sure that meals are attractive to people from different income levels. Indeed, for services in Paris and Metz this mixed customer base is an important part of their business model; better-off people pay more for their meals, helping to sustain the service for all. In Milan Milano Ristorazione, as well as making hot, cold and refrigerated meals, make and freeze their own frozen products such as meat balls and fish balls and lasagne; this allows them to offer a wider range of dishes.

All the services I visited have found their own way to negotiate challenges around preparing tasty and nutritious meals at scale and presenting meals in an appetising way, while also allowing for the practicalities of production and delivery, keeping to budgets and ensuring meals are affordable to users. Despite these challenges, services are seen as essential and something to be proud of. There were clear red lines in terms of ensuring that quality and attractiveness of meals was not disproportionately compromised by budget or practicalities. Ultimately if the meal isn't good enough, this was felt to undermine the entire rationale for the service.

3.2 Believing in prevention

In many of the places I visited, the value of meals on wheels for prevention of other, often more costly, needs was taken as a given by commissioners. This was not just in terms of nutritional value, but also in terms of ensuring people can stay in their own homes, human contact and regular welfare checks. People acknowledged that home delivery visits are usually quick, but argued that even brief regular checks can play a part in monitoring people's wellbeing, ensure they are getting the support they need and contribute to reducing isolation.

“It's not just about the food...food influences how people act and interact with other people.”

In Milan, when people come into contact with social services, access to food is one of the first things social services will think about. The council is convinced of clear benefits of providing meals as the alternative would be providing people with care support to make meals would be much less efficient. The meals service is valued by the council as something modest, but tangible, which they are able to offer to older people in the city.

In Milan staff follow a fairly standard, but effective, checking procedure, completing a form each day to report anything they had noticed. In Paris staff use an app to answer a number of welfare questions and the responses can be sent directly to social workers and family members. Whereas staff from the Hanam Welfare Centre in Gwangju check whether clients have been eating their kimchi (fermented cabbage side dish). This simple check should not be a substitute for formal malnutrition screening, but as kimchi is eaten with most meals in Korea, the service uses this as a complementary and reliable indicator of whether and how much someone is eating.

In Hanam, Gwangju I heard how important it was to ask what support people would like in a thorough way. For example, people who have difficulty preparing meals, as well as other daily

tasks, can often say that they would like to move into care at first asking. However, when it is explained that they would be offered support if they stayed at home, people may well say they prefer to stay at home.

It is profoundly sad that for some people the person delivering a meal may be the only person they speak to that day. Indeed, in Korea there is a particular sadness to eating alone and I was told of cases where people can be found crying when eating alone. However, in all the places I visited it was clear how this visit from a meals on wheels service was part of a joined-up effort to keep people connected and well-nourished, alongside other support such as home care, shared meals, malnutrition screening and befriending services. So, in these places meals on wheels was playing a crucial role in preventing escalation of needs, ensuring a quick response where people's needs change and encouraging people to take up other opportunities such as shared meals.

Meals can also play a crucial role in resilience planning for periods of extreme weather. In Milan, an adapted meal and daily checks are a key part of the city's plans for periods of high or low temperatures. The meals on wheels service is opened up to additional people during these periods and families refer older relatives to receive the service for a temporary period. There has been growing uptake for this over the years since it has been running, with referrals coming in over the course of the hot/ cold period. This part of the service is now well-known, so many referrals are now made at the start of the hot or cold periods, when respectively up to 400 and 200 extra meals are delivered each day. This provides salient lessons for the UK, showing how an existing service can be harnessed to reach more people in times of increased need.

In Seoul Food Smiles takes a rather more long-term approach to prevention. The programme was established to provide food to single older people, many of whom are single women who had been single mothers. Being a single parent had meant they had a much lower chance of accessing education and (well-paid) employment which for many had ultimately led to them living in poverty in older age. Food Smiles therefore decided to work with young single mothers, providing them with a range of support and assistance to access childcare, education and employment, with the aim of avoiding the poverty their older counterparts' experience.

3.3 Taking an enterprising approach

The services I visited are delivered by different combinations of public sector, charity, social enterprise and for-profit businesses. Across these different sectors I was struck by an enterprising approach to services, whatever type of organisations were involved. This enterprising approach features in different ways.

3.3.1 Responding to demand

Local authorities in the UK are making decisions to cut non-statutory services such as meals on wheels provision, pointing to funding cuts as the main reason for this. Many councils are now explicitly acknowledging that they are having to discontinue preventative services which may well present better value; the limited funding available means they can only support those with higher needs.

However, I do think there are some examples where decisions regarding food-related support are made without sufficient analysis and understanding. I have had a number of conversations with council officers or councillors in the UK where they explain that services are only used by a small number of people, are not good quality and expensive to run, so the best option they say is to close the service, rather than try for improvement or reshaping. In most cases, it is unclear that there has been any detailed assessment of how this situation has come about and what options there might be to assess need and then meet this need in a new way. Of course we should be open to a robust analysis finding that there is no demand for support around food and/or it is impossible to deliver an appropriate service at an affordable price, but given the scale of malnutrition in the UK and the diverse ways to meet needs around food, I believe that it would be highly surprising to reach such a conclusion. The experiences of Amapa in Metz, where a declining service has been revived, provides a particularly pertinent example.

3.3.2 Making sure meals are a selling point and building a trusted brand

I heard how an enterprising approach can be applied specifically to how meals are created and priced. For example, in Seoul, the Eunpyeong Senior Welfare Center pilot had increased the price of the meals by a modest amount to improve the overall quality of meals and offer different menus for people with health conditions. The centre reported positive feedback from users, including that the price increase was worth it in terms of the improvement in meals and choice of options. In Paris, rather than just accepting what the market currently offers, commissioners and nutritionists design the specific meals they would like to offer and then ask organisations to tender to provide these meals. Commissioners identified the market gap in providing vegetarian meals and played a role in establishing a provider for these meals. The ingredients for meals also contribute towards the city's ambitions on increasing use of sustainable food.

The 14 services I visited built trust in its service in different ways. In Eunpyeong Senior Welfare Center, the director of the centre helps to serve meals, fostering a sense of pride, as well as being accessible for any feedback. Amapa embarked on a major promotion campaign, placing advertising in many key locations and baguette paper bags. In the more established services, delivery vehicles provide information about the service, not just the brand name.

3.3.3 Harnessing the power of procurement

Meals on wheels services can also be part of a proactive approach to public procurement to develop a more sustainable food supply chain and support local producers. Many people are keen to support more sustainable agriculture and their local economies. Meals on wheels services can play an active role in ensuring that older people can still 'do the right thing'.

In Paris publicly-funded food services including meals on wheels use MSC-certified fish and organic bread, as well as some organic fruit and vegetables are served. In Milan, Milano Ristorazione produces meals on wheels alongside meals for schools, care homes and other services. Producing meals at such a scale not only provides efficiencies, without compromising quality, and gives it the buying power to include local and organic produce in meals in an affordable way. While this occurs behind the scenes rather than between people, it nevertheless also demonstrates a level of intergenerational service provision. Milano

Ristorazione is part of a new programme to diversify farming around the city, encouraging farmers to diversify their production from rice and corn. Milano Ristorazione has committed to purchasing a certain proportion of producers' new diversified output, giving producers some level of confidence in making changes.

3.3.4 Seizing opportunities for collaboration and increasing productivity

Building partnerships across the public, third and private sectors was an important element to many services' business models. While at first the operating model in Milan may appear complex with the council holding separate contracts for meals preparation and distribution by multiple organisations, it was clear how the different partners were playing to their strengths and maximising efficiencies. The meals are created alongside meals for other settings and local delivery partners are already embedded in their communities and able to offer complementary services and support.

I also heard of other examples of more 'outside of the box' approaches, such as La Poste (France's mail service) piloting meals delivery. La Poste are pursuing this opportunity as a way of maximising the value of a trusted person already visiting households on a daily basis both in terms of providing a wider range of services for people and increasing productivity for their own organisation.

3.3.5 Boosting the local economy

I also explored the workforce for the different meals on wheels services which used different combinations of full-time or part-time staff, supported employment, apprenticeships and volunteers. In Milan, delivery staff are generally parents wanting to fit around school-times, artists and performers needing part-time work and some who face barriers to employment. In Eunpyeong Senior Welfare Center in Seoul, the service is partly staffed by older people on a government-sponsored programme for unemployed older people (unemployment among the 50+ group is a particular issue in South Korea).

3.3.6 Providing a conducive policy and funding environment

Organisations can obviously only take more enterprising, and admittedly sometimes riskier, decisions when the 'market conditions' support this. A strong social care policy system and availability of reliable public funding and support are of course two elements of this. But political support, clear and efficient referral processes, joined-up services across the public, community and sometimes private sector, tax and other incentives, opportunities to link in with employment, apprenticeship and training schemes were all given as examples of meaningful support to help services thrive.

Local government were actively involved in supporting the services I visited in different ways and to variable extents. This appeared to be genuinely about allowing services to provide stability to customers and clients, as well as to develop, invest and innovate.

At the time of my visit to Milan, the council was currently seeking bids for new 3-year contracts to deliver meals. It is up to bidders to decide what fee they ask for up to a limit set out in the bid. Importantly, the council will score proposals in a way which focuses on quality, with 10% of the scoring given to cost; this is relatively low compared to other council contracts offered in Milan. The contract length is three years and there in due course there may be the option to extend it by another year. This is not necessarily standard for contracts tendered by the

council, but gives organisations the stability to invest in staff and vehicles. Sociosfera Onlus have never had to make a meals on wheels staff member redundant due to funding issues. In Seoul, funding from the Mayor was crucial for the service to be able to pilot a new approach to provision. In Paris a significant budget for food assistance has been supported by multiple administrations, fostering stability and investment.

However, it is important to add that services in Paris and Milan in particular saw themselves as being fairly exceptional for their respective countries. Local government is not providing similar support – whether financial or otherwise – for services in many other parts of France and Italy and services are limited or non-existent.

3.4 Getting organised

Whether in the UK or the other countries I visited, it is clear that services survive and thrive where key individuals champion and develop them. There are people all over the UK who are concerned to address malnutrition among older people and the decline of meals on wheels and other food-related support. This includes politicians, council officers, health professions, third sector, social enterprises and private sector organisations, academics and researchers, alongside older people and their families. There is a myriad of charitably-funded projects, public sector initiatives and social enterprises and others that are really effectively supporting older people to access food in different ways. There is a real and urgent need to capture learning, assess impact and scale up success to build the case for ongoing statutory support.

We are only likely to see a reverse in cuts to meals on wheels if we get really organised. So I am thinking about the ways we might work together, alongside existing initiatives such as Meals on Wheels Week, Malnutrition Awareness Week and the #MalnutritionMonday social media campaign, to celebrate, protect, enhance and restore services, using our collective, but ultimately finite, resources to attract attention from national and local politicians, policy-makers and practitioners in the most effective and sustainable way. There is also a need for more evidence of the effectiveness and the meaning of services to older people and their families. I hope to work with others towards a situation where services can thrive; every area should have access to a decent, reliable meals on wheels service and that this should be a cause for celebration for older people, their families, those running and championing services and society as a whole.

4. Conclusions

My visits and meetings reinforced thinking both around what we know can help a service to survive and thrive, as well as the challenges and tensions services face. Services are only going to achieve their maximum potential where there is a combination of dynamic, creative leaders and staff, supportive and well-funded local authorities, as well as high quality and good value food sourcing, preparation, presentation and delivery.

Some of the shared challenges include navigating the tensions between quality and efficiency, the variable nature of local authority support and myths and assumptions held by professionals, older people and those around them, about ageing and what a good diet looks like for an older person.

My trip reinforced the need for home delivery of meals to be part of a wider response, including shared meals and using food to connect people. My trip also made me really think again about the assumptions there are about meals on wheels and older people's access to food. I think it's essential that we continue to question how and why decisions are being made and the limitations – both practical and attitudinal - that we may have unnecessarily imposed around the scope, budget, quality, delivery mechanisms and potential of services.

I am deeply disturbed by the fact that budget limitations have meant that many meals on wheels services, lunch clubs and other food-related assistance in the UK no longer exist or are struggling to survive. This crisis in adult social care budgets must be addressed urgently.

However, I do think it is important to show what can be achieved in the current situation, with much lower public sector funding than there should be. I see this as a way of securing consistent and durable government support in the longer term. I fully recognise the challenges around this, but I know there are many passionate and committed people who are trying to maintain and develop services despite the very difficult circumstances.

We also need to dispel myths on what a meals on wheels service looks like to ensure they appeal to older people, families, professionals and commissioners. Food is so important to many of us as a need and pleasure in its own right, but also as a means to stay connected with others and our community. People need to know that meals on wheels can be part a modern 21st century response.

Government, local government, health services, funders, business support organisations and others should do all they can to support services to survive and thrive. In the next section, I make recommendations for actions which I believe can be taken with immediate effect and others which will require some time to enact, but I still believe that these can be progressed within a year.

5. Recommendations

I have developed a set of recommendations which I hope provide practical and realistic steps to reverse the decline in meals on wheels provision and place these services on a firm footing alongside other food-related support for older people.

5.1 Ensuring there is a funding and policy environment which allows services to survive and thrive, as well as to be able to take reasonable risks to develop and sustain their provision

Governments should ensure that social care funding increases to provide adequate funding for preventative services, including meals on wheels provision. In England, the Government's forthcoming plans for adult social care must include the necessary increase in funding to ensure access to high quality, preventative provision, including meals on wheels. Alongside an overall increase in the social care budget, there may also be value in exploring a specific funding stream focused on reducing malnutrition in older people. This could be made possible through combined preventative funding from health and social care budgets. Increased government support for meals on wheels services would also mean they can be harnessed in times of increased need as part of local areas' resilience plans.

Commissioners that services can thrive and take an enterprising approach. This should apply whether services are run directly by councils, provided under contract to councils or delivered independently of councils. Financial and strategic decisions should provide stability and security for services to survive in their current context, but also to invest in their future and develop an ambitious agenda in terms of their reach and the quality of meals provided – in short to be more enterprising. Councils' ability to support services should extend well beyond finance; for example, using planning decisions to support start-up of expansion of provision or providing parking permits.

Councils, GPs, housing associations, advice and older people's organisations and others with contact with older people should ensure access to food is a core part of any assessment and offer of support, including maximising referrals to meals on wheels services. In the case of councils and other appropriate agencies this should include ensuring that older people are being referred as being in need to ensure that the meals are VAT-exempt.

Governments and the LGA, WLGA, COSLA and NILGA should ensure that all relevant councillors and senior officers have access to robust methodologies for assessing the needs of the older population and are able to review potential responses to need, including UK and international examples of different models for delivering sustainable meals on wheels services. This could include sharing resources, but also holding events and providing suggested methodologies for assessing needs and making decision about potential responses. These tools should prove particularly useful in the context of limited funding and making the case for increases in funding.

National level strategies and programmes across the UK, such as the forthcoming National Food Strategy for England, adult social care or prevention strategies, should prioritise reducing malnutrition among older people. This should include a set of actions to address the multi-faceted causes of malnutrition and ensure that effective responses, such as meals on wheels, are on a sustainable policy and financial footing. This may require strengthening provisions in relevant health, social care and safeguarding legislation, statutory guidance and assessment criteria.

5.2 Adopting a shared ‘recipe for success’

Services, providers, commissioners and partners could adopt a shared ‘recipe for success’ to help meals on wheels survive and thrive across the UK and a shared commitment to share our experiences of taking an enterprising approach to older people and food.

‘Recipe for success’ to ensure older people’s access to food

1. Take a robust approach to assessing need in an area and have an open mind about how to respond to it in a sustainable way.
2. Promote meals on wheels as part of a place-based response to meet the food needs of older people, alongside social care.
3. Ensure the service and any associated organisation or partner has a good reputation and is seen as a trusted brand by older people, their families and professionals.
4. Have a very clear idea of customers’ needs and preferences from day 1 of receiving the service. This includes their dietary requirements, personal preferences, location and any issues which affect their ability to re-heat or eat the food.
5. Provide high quality food prepared by a skilled chef and catering team
6. Offer a discrete and efficient delivery service and develop trusting relationships between delivery staff and customers.
7. Genuinely listen and respond to customers’ feedback.
8. Seize every opportunity for meals on wheels services to be part of efforts to support the local economy and employment and provide good food jobs, with reasonable pay and conditions, training and opportunities for quality part-time jobs.

5.3 Committing to share experiences and challenges and to build the case for support together

National, regional and local government and their partners should support events to bring key actors together to foster and coordinate place-based support for older people to access food. This could include conferences, workshops, hackathons or other ways to bring people within a geographically area to maintain and develop coordinated services.

Organisation and individuals should come together as a network focused on taking an enterprising approach to meals on wheels delivery. This could include existing services, emerging projects and those who may like to develop a project in the future, as well as funders, social investors, policy makers and others. This 'Enterprising Food for Older People Network' could work well at a national or regional level.

National associations, researchers and individual meals on wheels services and partners should develop a shared methodology for tracking the impact, challenges and lessons learnt of services across the UK. This would complement the existing APSE/ NACC biennial research into the extent of council-funded services and price of meals.

5.3 Fostering innovation

Social investment organisations and business development organisations should have a dedicated programme to support meals on wheels provision. This should include support for existing services to develop an enterprising approach to provision as well as start-up support for new services, including conducting feasibility studies and piloting new models of provision.

There are also several challenges faced by services where national or international competitions, or similar 'challenge' initiatives, could be a useful way to develop innovative solutions. These competitions could include the development of reusable containers that meet services' practical needs in terms of production, delivery and cost, present food in an appetising way and are sustainably produced and an app or other easy to use technology to monitor people's welfare, the impact of meals and any feedback from older people and their families.

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