



THE OPENHOUSE CO-RESEARCH PROJECT

Exploring how cooking for others can reduce youth loneliness

THE
YOUTHSCAPE
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH

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The team would like to thank: the young people who agreed to be interviewed; parents; all the young people at Wednesday drop-in; Paul the chef; the Co-op foundation and the other projects who told us about how they were doing their research.



HI, AND WELCOME TO OUR REPORT.

This is a summary of the activities and findings of the #OpenHouse Research Project.

We are a group of ten young people and three Youthscape staff who explored the links between youth loneliness and youth social action by researching the way that learning to cook can impact young people. Although this report has mostly been written by the staff, we have gone on this journey together. We met on four Saturdays to develop our plans, interview other young people, analyse the data and plan how to share it.

On day one, we did an exercise where each of us had to pick two words that we thought described us. We then put them all up on the board, so that we could all see the strengths we were bringing to this new research team. We are:

hard-working, artistic, helpful, kind, funny, chatty, trustworthy, curious, creative, good friends, logical, observant, good listeners, understanding, flexible, friendly, honest and persevering.

We haven't used our real names in the report (apart from the staff) so we thought we would also share a small fact about ourselves, so you can still get an idea of what we're like.

Krys – I have a gold medal in gymnastics

Hayley – I am a proud supporter of LGBTQA+ communities

Shahid – I like cooking, and I play cricket and football for the school team

Ellie – I have two trophies for dance

Ocean – I was born on Christmas Day

Katie – I do competitive swimming

Aliya – I'm a theatre kid - I've done performances in school

Jon – I was on the cover of a magazine when I was four

Isobel – My cousin is in a band and they've just released their second EP

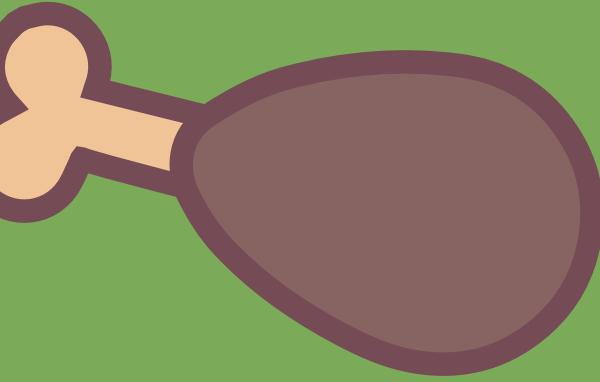
Zafar – I'm triple jointed, I can bend the tops of my fingers back

Gemma – My grandad was a movie actor

Lucie – When I was a teenager I lived in a shed at the bottom of the garden

Gry – I once crashed a motorbike in Thailand

We hope you enjoy reading!



SUMMARY OF OUR LEARNING

On cooking, youth loneliness and youth social action through our experiences of #OpenHouse

#OpenHouse helped young people develop the skills and confidence to cook a greater range of food. While many of them were using these new skills at home, others experienced challenges that meant they had not been able to cook as much as they would have liked.

Most young people told us that #OpenHouse had helped them feel more connected. Meeting new people, creating something as a team and sharing their experiences all helped young people feel less lonely. Some interviewees told us about their confidence to talk to people at school or in other contexts as a result.

We also learned that overcoming loneliness is not simple or quick. Relationships are dynamic – they shift and change, and not everyone found new friendships or confidence.

Most interviewees felt that cooking together more generally could help young people make new connections and reduce loneliness. Beyond being a shared activity, cooking and eating together creates a specific kind of context for conversation. Nevertheless, we need to understand the different reasons someone might feel lonely, and recognise that not everyone is ready or willing to talk about how they feel.

Young people felt that cooking the banquet was a meaningful form of social action that benefitted the guests, but they benefitted themselves more directly. For some, meeting new adults was intimidating, and they preferred to serve through cooking rather than making conversation.

There is scope for us to create more opportunities for young people to cook for others and use their skills. But even if the banquet remains a one-off event, some interviewees argued that it could have ongoing influence through creating lasting memories or inspiring others to similar kinds of service.

The three areas where young people suggested we could improve #OpenHouse were: greater support to reflect on their experience/emotions and to practice new skills; creating contexts for ongoing connections and support, and involving young people in decisions about what to cook.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Youthscape

Youthscape is a youth work charity that has been supporting teenagers for 25 years. Most of this work happens in Luton, where we run emotional well-being programmes through group work and mentoring in schools, as well as a range of after-school projects. From photography to football, from art to cooking – our town centre hub hosts young people every day. Our staff and volunteers run a daily drop-in that welcomes young people from years 7-13 from across the town.

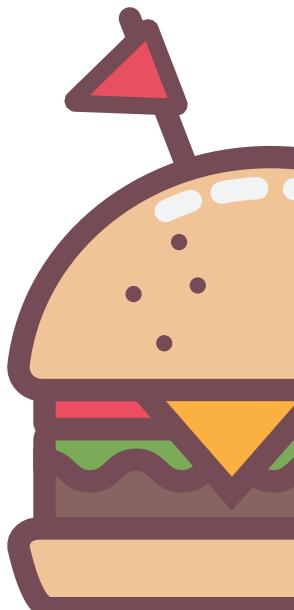
#OpenHouse

In 2017, Youthscape began to run **#OpenHouse**, a project designed to give young people the tools, trust and confidence to deal with feelings of isolation in their lives. Over eight weeks a group of 11-15 year olds learn to cook under the supervision of a professional chef, and work with our team to explore how to manage and understand loneliness. After being taken to a restaurant themselves, the programme concludes with each group cooking and serving a three-

course meal - 'the banquet' - to another group in the local community. While **#OpenHouse** is not a solution to loneliness, the aim is for each group to experience connection and hospitality and be empowered to share that with others.

The programme was developed on the basis of research showing that participation in shared activities and communities is a key way to counter social isolation. At Youthscape we believe that preparing and sharing a meal can be a profound tool for the connection and belonging that many young people lack. Research from the University of Oxford shows that the more often people eat with others, the more likely they are to feel happy and satisfied with their lives.¹

Eating meals together is also part of our team culture. The Youthscape team eat breakfast together every Monday morning, and on two nights a week we cook a healthy dinner for the young people who come to our evening drop-in. Since moving to our new building in 2016 we have provided 4,369 of these hot, two-course meals for young people in our community.



¹. Dunbar, R.I.M. (2017) *Breaking Bread: the Functions of Social Eating. Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*. 3: 198. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40750-017-0061-4>

THE RESEARCH

#OpenHouse is generously supported by the #iwill fund; a joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and match funded by the Co-op Foundation. The #iwill Fund brings together a group of organisations who all contribute funding to embed meaningful social action into the lives of young people, to make a positive difference in their communities as well as develop their own skills and knowledge.

In April 2019 Youthscape were awarded additional funding from the Co-op Foundation to run a research project with young people, exploring the links between youth loneliness and youth social action. Given the nature of **#OpenHouse** and the role of food in our local youth work, we wanted to focus our enquiry on cooking as a form of social action, and how this might relate to loneliness. While we believe that making and eating meals can facilitate connection, we are aware that **#OpenHouse** is a short-term programme and therefore wanted to explore its impact, potential and how it could be developed.



A co-research project

Co-research means that young people are participants in the research process, not just the focus of enquiry. There are lots of different ways this can be expressed: from deciding what to explore or designing research tools, to data analysis and dissemination. We wanted our co-researchers' contribution to be meaningful and transparent, so we spent time on our first day together working out what areas of the project they had some control over, and which would be led by the team, or the funders (see Table 1).

We wanted to train the team in a range of research skills, including active listening, developing questions and coding data, and were expecting them to bring their energy and talents to the project. So, we also rewarded our co-researchers with vouchers for high-street shops, in recognition of the time they gave to our work together.

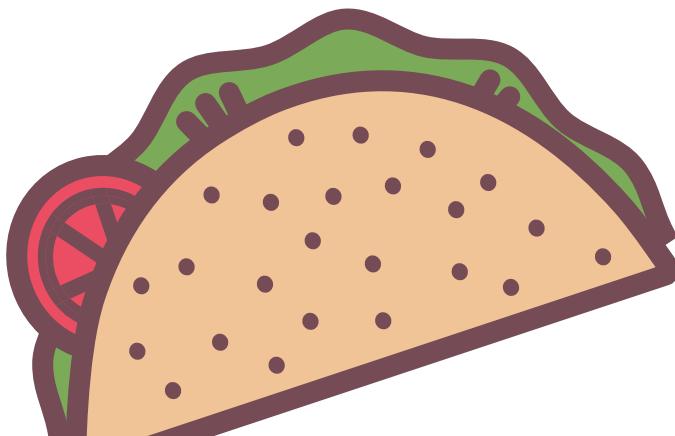


Table 1: Who does what?

THE CO-RESEARCHERS WILL	THE YOUTHSCAPE TEAM WILL	THE CO-OP FOUNDATION WILL
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• learn about the project• share and discuss their thoughts about youth loneliness and social action• work out some options for what we could research, and how• collect research data• review the initial analysis from their own perspective• decide how we share the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• run the overall project (set dates, communicate with everyone, manage the money)• listen to what the co-researchers say• make the final decision on what we research and how we do it• design the detail of the research project• lead on analysing the information we collect and writing any reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• decide what we are going to research (i.e. the links between youth loneliness and social action)• decide how much money we have to spend• tell us when we need to finish the project by

Our approach

We sent letters out to a group of the 51 young people who had taken part in **#OpenHouse** who we felt would benefit from being involved, and would be able to contribute to a research project of this kind. Detailed information was sent to parents and young people about the project, and what it would mean to take part. In response, 10 young people and their parents filled out the application and consent form. Our project followed key ethical principles in doing research with young people, including voluntary engagement, informed consent, transparency in communication and seeking to act in the best interests of the child. We did not know what our research methodology would be at the beginning, so had to apply these principles to the project as decisions were made. For example, once we decided to interview other young people who had done **#OpenHouse**, we sent an information sheet to parents and young people, and gained written consent from both before any interviews began. We have also protected the identity of participants by changing all the young people's names.

The work unfolded over four Saturdays between June and November, each day a mixture of team-building, eating together, training, research activities and fun. Table 2 will give you an idea of what we covered. Instead of a longer section on our research methodology you will find five boxes throughout the report that each shine a spotlight on a different aspect of what it meant to do co-research in practice.

Table 2: Our activities

Day one June	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning about the #OpenHouse Research Project• Training session on curiosity and asking questions• Cooking fajitas for lunch• Discussing 'youth social action' and 'youth loneliness'• Playing sardines• Deciding on our research question• Thinking about ways to do the research, and choosing one• Eating ice-creams (it was really hot)• Identifying our strengths as a team
Day two September	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looking back over day one• Training session on how to do research interviews• Practising what we had learned - including active listening• Testing out and re-writing our interview questions• Making pizzas for lunch• Doing group interviews with 10 young people who came to join us• Taking part in/managing some creative research activities
Drop in visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit to the Youthscape Wednesday night dinner
Day three October	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviewing day two• Training in analysing interviews• Reviewing and discussing initial findings from the interviews• Discussing and deciding how to share the research (a video)• Going to Laser Tag• Eating Nandos
Day four November	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading through our video script• Filming our sections of the '23 Questions' video• Planning the launch event, designing invitations etc.• Making spicy parsnip soup for lunch• A final game of Laser Tag

DOING RESEARCH - SPOTLIGHT 1

Working out our methodology

By the end of day one we had discussed definitions of youth loneliness and youth social action and had identified a range of questions we had about these concepts. We landed our discussion by thinking about the **#OpenHouse** banquet as an example of youth social action that could address youth loneliness, and agreed that our core questions were:

Does learning to cook and then cooking for others help young people feel more connected and less lonely?

If so, how?

After sharing some of our own thoughts on that question, we discussed some of the different ways we could answer it. There were lots of good ideas, and the discussion helped us work through the pros and cons of different approaches and the kinds of data they might provide. These are just some of the ideas we had about how to conduct our co-research project.

Go into school assemblies to find young people who feel lonely, and invite them to complete an anonymous survey about whether cooking for others would help them.

Find other programmes or contexts where young people are cooking for others, and ask them to make video diaries that share their experiences about whether this helps them feel more connected.

Talk to other community groups that involve cooking as social action (e.g. Luton lunch clubs) and ask about how this addresses loneliness.

*Interview parents about whether they think **#OpenHouse** helped their children feel more connected and less lonely.*

*Ask the other young people who have done **#OpenHouse** whether cooking for others helped them feel more connected.*

After some discussion we took a vote on the different options and agreed that interviewing other **#OpenHouse** graduates would be most helpful and straightforward for answering our research question.





FINDINGS

The findings reported here are based on transcripts of interviews with 20 young people who had been through #Open House: the 10 co-researchers and 10 other young participants. They were all aged between 11-16. The interviews were conducted by our co-researchers, audio-recorded, transcribed and then analysed by the Youthscape Centre for Research, with some support from the young people themselves.

In this section of the report we will discuss how #OpenHouse and cooking more generally can help young people feel more connected and less lonely, before thinking about what it means to view cooking as a kind of social action.



LEARNING TO COOK

#OpenHouse helped young people develop the skills and confidence to cook a greater range of food. While many of them were using these new skills at home, others experienced challenges that meant they had not been able to cook as much as they would have liked.

We started off by asking about young people's experiences of cooking before and after they completed #OpenHouse. Some had already been cooking for themselves and others before the project, explaining that they had learned these skills online or through school primarily. Pasta was a common staple, as well as cheese toasties (with or without cheese apparently).

The majority of those we interviewed described cooking a greater and more adventurous range of dishes since taking part. Eton Mess and cake were popular with the group, but it was halloumi salad that emerged as the clear favourite.

From spaghetti to meringues, from soup to cauliflower cheese - it was clear that the experience had created a lot more confidence in the kitchen. Ellie explained, "Yeah, I've cooked many foods, it's been really such an adventure because I used to be, pick something out the freezer and just cook it." For Ocean, making chips had become a part of everyday life: "We did chips from scratch, like peeling potatoes and stuff and I was like, 'Oh, didn't realise I could do this', now I'm doing that all the time, literally when the chips run out, always making my own chips."

A few of our interviewees had even re-created the three-course meal they served at the banquet.



Aliyah

"I did halloumi, I think it was halloumi cheese salad, then I did spaghetti bolognese, then I did Eton Mess after that. And then I did another one for my Grandma and my Grandad, and that was like a soup for starters or a salad or like they could come and choose what they wanted, salad wise. And then I did a roast dinner, kind of, but I had some help from my Mum for the roast dinner, for like chicken and that and then I did a cake at the end."

However not everyone had carried on cooking, and some had experienced disasters worthy of recording.

Shaihid

"Have you cooked any food for yourself at home since being part of #OpenHouse?"

Zafar

"Yeah, egg on toast."

Shaihd

"How did it go?"

Zafar

"It was terrible and you can see it on my YouTube channel."

For a few young people, there was a desire to cook, but there were various reasons why it wasn't possible or easy. Although Nadia told us she loved the halloumi salad, she had made too many servings when she'd tried it at home – and no one in her family liked it. Isobel wanted to try the recipes at home, but the ingredients and tools weren't readily available.

Isobel

"I haven't, but like we keep saying about it so we can go and get the stuff, but we haven't actually got anything yet."

Interviewer:

"Why do you think that is?"

Isobel

"Because we don't cook, so we don't have much like food food, for cooking from scratch, we don't have anything like that. Well, we make spaghetti bolognese sometimes but that's kind of it for the cooking. So yeah, and we don't live near a big supermarket, and we don't have a car, so it doesn't help."



DOING RESEARCH - SPOTLIGHT 2

Learning to ask questions

"I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious"

Albert Einstein

One of our first exercises on day one focused on asking questions. Our overall focus had been decided for us, so it was important to help the group develop their own curiosity about these ideas of loneliness and social action. To begin to practice curiosity, we pulled a random object from the office shelf - a small glass vase filled with layers of coloured sand - and sat around it in a circle. Everyone had to ask a question of the object, and we kept going until we had exhausted our questioning. We had some great questions. How is glass made? Why is it here? Who does it belong to? We decided to stop when Jon asked 'What would happen if I smashed this against the wall?'

After doing a number of rounds, we reviewed some key tips on how to develop critical curiosity, including how to respectfully disagree with people and climbing the 'why ladder', where each answer stimulates a new question. The exercise was a great warm-up for an afternoon session where we asked the co-researchers to ask a similar number of questions about youth loneliness and youth social action, using the triggers: 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'why' and 'how'. This is a selection of the questions.

Loneliness

- Why is it that more young people feel lonely?
- What triggers loneliness?
- How much time can we spend alone before we feel lonely?
- Why is it so hard to talk about?
- What allows you to heal?
- How should I help?
- When do children feel lonely?

Social action

- How do we know it actually helps?
- Where would you most likely join movements of social action in your community?
- Who runs it?
- What would encourage you to take part in social action?
- Why do some people not take part if they are able to?
- How effective do you feel social action is in your community to open up conversations about uncomfortable things?
- Should we all take part?

THE IMPACT OF OPEN HOUSE

Most young people told us that #OpenHouse had helped them feel more connected. Meeting new people, creating something as a team and sharing your experiences all helped young people feel less lonely. Some interviewees told us about their confidence to talk to people at school or in other contexts as a result.

We also learned that overcoming loneliness is not simple or quick. Relationships are dynamic – they shift and change, and not everyone found new friendships or confidence.

We asked a range of questions about what it was like to do **#OpenHouse**, whether it helped young people feel more connected and if so what it was about the programme that was helpful. This data was coded four separate times; first by the Youthscape team, and then by three groups of co-researchers. Each time we agreed that the majority of young people interviewed reported that taking part in **#OpenHouse** did help them feel more connected. There were 28 different moments during the interviews where young people expressed that **#OpenHouse** had helped them in this way, compared with five times where young people said 'no', and four that were coded 'somewhat'.²

Our interviewees described this in different ways: the value of having people to reach out to, meeting new people, being able to talk through your experiences and being part of a team.

"Yeah, it made me feel less lonely 'cause like I got to meet new people. I got to start talking more, which I didn't do at school much."

(Ellie)

"I think it's easy for me to meet new people but it's harder for me to, I guess, to keep them interested in me if that makes sense. So it's good to talk about our other experiences and see if we can relate to each other."

(Henry)

"However long you're there, you get to forget whatever it is that's kind of getting you down over the week. And whatever problems you do want to talk about it's okay if you do, but if you don't it's kind of - it's fine. Then you can put that aside and just enjoy yourself. And you don't feel as heavy as you did before you came in."

(Krys)

Ocean reflected on how that journey unfolded, recalling that in the first session "no-one was really talking too much", but by the time they'd cooked a three-course meal together "you felt you could talk to them because you spent so much time together learning new things." For a couple of interviewees, the support and advice from the youth workers had been particularly helpful in feeling more connected to others.

For others, being more connected was about the 'knock-on' impact of becoming more confident in school and other situations, where it became easier to talk to people and manage relationships. Hayley told us that after coming on the course she felt more able to talk to teachers she didn't know, and even local shopkeepers. Earlier in the day she had enthusiastically greeted one of the other boys in the group when he arrived, and she reflected that she would not have done that a year ago.

"It really impacted me because I never really used to talk to people first thing, but I got to know people and I started talking with them."

(Ellie)

"I learned that usually, if I put myself out there, more good will come out of it than bad, if that makes sense."

(Henry)

While many answers were straightforwardly positive, some young interviewees began to reflect critically on the limits of this idea of feeling 'more connected', including the reality that just like loneliness, connection is selective, subjective and dynamic. So, while Katie said she did make friends, she also felt that she didn't connect "properly" with people at the banquet, or "fully become like BFFs with everybody".³ For Isobel, positive change wasn't static. She had made new friends, but since the course some of them were no longer talking with each other. Nadia, who has autism, struggled with the interview setting and ended up writing her answers to the questions out instead. To the question 'Did **#OpenHouse** make you feel connected' she wrote the following.

"Not sure. I did have a fun time but I still have no friends except for my family and my problem (autism) isn't solved. I can't go out with my family to events (weddings and stuff) but it did give me opportunity to try and socialise better even though I couldn't succeed I hope I could try again."

Her honesty and resilience are a reminder of just how hard this business of reaching out can be for many young people, and of the courage needed to take even small steps toward connection.

² These 36 references were captured across interviews with 20 young people, so that some young people reflected on the question a number of times.

³ Best Friends Forever

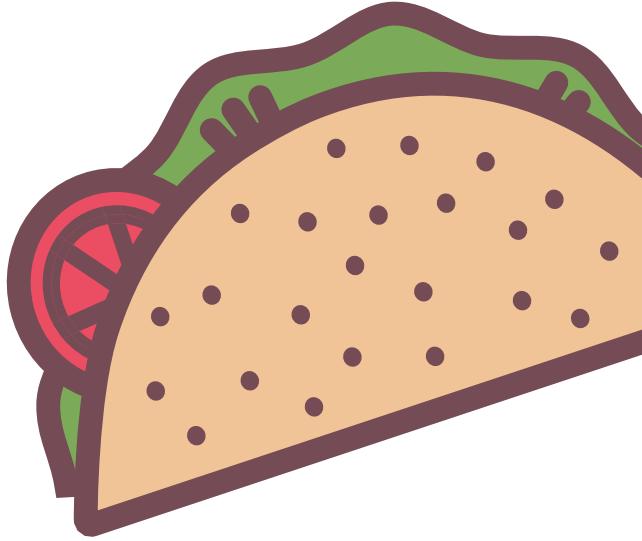
DOING RESEARCH - SPOTLIGHT 3

Practising interviewing

On day two we spent a session looking at the interview questions that had been drafted by the Youthscape team. Piloting questions by trying them out was a really important part of the process and helped us get rid of some unclear or unhelpful questions. The group split into three, with one of the Youthscape staff joining each group. We made sure that everyone had a chance to be both the interviewer and the interviewee, stopping as we went to reflect on how it felt to ask and answer questions, and whether the questions made sense.

We discussed how best to show someone you are listening to them, ways to ask follow-up questions without getting distracted from the topic, and the best 'tone' for asking questions. This was the first time the group had interviewed anyone, and they did a great job. Because we had spent some extended time together already we were mostly at ease with each other in this context. As a result, we found that the answers given during our practice interviews were some of the best data we collected.





DROP IN DINNER

Understanding the role of meals in Youthscape's work

In between day two and day three a couple of us visited one of the Wednesday night dinners that happen at the drop-in, on the lower ground floor of the Youthscape building. Although this wasn't the focus of our research, observing the drop-in dinner and asking some questions helped us understand more about the value of eating together for the young people who attended, and why this is part of Youthscape's work.

After explaining why we were there we invited the 16 young people who had come to the meal, to get out their phones and visit a live poll webpage we had created. We then showed questions on the large screen in the dining room and looked at everybody's answers in real time.

We learned some interesting things! Three quarters of the group came to dinner once a week or more, and they voted our youth worker Matt as the best chef. The food got an average rating of 3.8/5 and although people said they came for different reasons, 'free food' was top of the list.

We asked everyone where they would normally eat, and only three of the 16 said they would eat around a table. Most (11) told us they would eat in front of the TV, and two would normally eat in their room. When we asked who they would normally eat with, seven said 'with some of my family', four said 'by myself', three said 'with friends' and two said 'with everyone in my family'.

We invited everyone to fill out a card telling us the best and worst things about the drop-in dinner. A few people missed specific friends who were now too old for the group or didn't always get on with everyone else who came. When it came to the best things about drop in dinner, ten people wrote about the food. Five highlighted the importance of seeing friends and getting the chance to talk to people and four people mentioned specific youth workers.

"Everyone gets treated the same and food is good quality."

"Get to see my friends and free food."

"People are nice to be with and talk with at dinner."

We sat down for dinner and had some conversations about food and eating together. We talked about the difference between the drop-in meals and the school canteen, and Billy told us that at school there were areas of the dining hall where he couldn't sit. Another young man Marvin said, "Yeah, I can't sit with the popular kids, near the ramp." "It's different coming to Youthscape because of [the youthworker]. He listens." said James. Hannah had been coming to the meals for a long time and told us that it has been really good for her to make new friends. One boy in the group had never been to the drop in before but had met some friends in a coffee shop that afternoon, who invited him. We asked him if it was what he expected. He said he had been to youth clubs before and they did have food, but never around a table.

In this short visit we got a sense that eating together could be significant: for friendship, acceptance, eating well and sitting around a table to have conversation.

OVERCOMING LONELINESS THROUGH COOKING FOR OTHERS

Most young people felt that cooking together more generally could help young people make new connections and reduce loneliness. Beyond being a shared activity, cooking and eating together creates a specific kind of context for conversation. Nevertheless, we need to understand the different reasons someone might feel lonely and recognise that not everyone is ready or willing to talk about how they feel.

After thinking specifically about #OpenHouse we then stepped back and asked young people whether they thought learning to cook and cooking with others more generally could help others feel more connected, and why. The majority of our young people said yes, having an activity that you are doing together can build your confidence, help you make friends and create a sense of team. When you are focusing on something, like food you can facilitate conversation and new relationships.

"Most people on the planet like food, they enjoy food, they like talking about it and giving them an opportunity to cook food together, being taught how to do stuff, being asked questions is basically getting you to communicate in a way."

(Katie)

A number of young people reflected that being able to meet and talk to others who might have similar thoughts, feelings and experiences to you was really helpful. For example, Isobel suggested that shy and quiet young people can create quite deep connections with one another.

"The people who are quiet have the loudest voices kind of - because when you're quiet, you can have so much inside that when it all comes out, you're quite, not loud as in you're shouting, you're quite loud in emotions and stuff...it could help young people feel less lonely because then if they do open up, then they could relate to someone else quite deeply and emotionally."

(Isobel)

This suggests that the impact of cooking together is as much about the group as the specific activity, but some interviewees did think about how food in particular can create connection. This included making friends by cooking for people, using food as a conversation starter and meeting new people at a meal table.

"Sometimes when you're working in a group to cook food, okay you talk about how you're going to make the food in a team, sometimes it's making the food and then sitting down to eat the food with everyone else that you sit and have a deep conversation about it, so that's why cooking can help."

(Krys)

"Yeah, I think cooking in general is like a life skill that you need to have and it is a conversation starter, like 'What do you cook? I like to cook this'. It's kind of, it gives you something else to be, like you feel more rounded as a person."

(Ocean)

There were two young people who said that cooking for others doesn't make you feel more connected. One had found it hard to talk to the guests at the banquet and felt that this wasn't a good context for building new relationships with guests, and another noted (rightly) that cooking with others doesn't necessarily mean you form a bond with them.

Then there were those who felt that the answer would depend on a number of other factors. A few young people said that loneliness can be the result of a range of circumstances, not all of which are impacted by being part of #OpenHouse. The implication they drew out was that if you know why someone is feeling lonely, it will be easier to help them. They might feel afraid of being judged if they speak, or they might be struggling at home. As we discussed loneliness, Isobel commented that cooking together



may or may not help, and this would depend on how 'deep-rooted' the problem was and whether young people were struggling with their mental health.

"If you take a first look at it without actually talking to the person - or if you talk to the person they might not let on what is actually going on. So you might think 'Oh maybe they're just lonely', and try and help that. But it's a lot more complicated than that."

(Isobel)

Finally, the value of a program like **#OpenHouse** also rests on each individual's readiness and choice to engage with it, or not:

"It all depends on whether you're willing to talk about it or you're ready to talk about it 'cause if you're not ready to talk about it then in a way you can't."

(Aliyah)

DOING RESEARCH - SPOTLIGHT 4

Analysing interview data

After day two our data was transcribed and analysed thematically by the Youthscape team using coding software NVivo. So, on day three we trained the team on the difference between qualitative and quantitative research and how to code qualitative data. We looked over transcripts and learned about how data is anonymised using pseudonyms in a final report.

In one exercise, everyone was given a section of an interview transcript and had to use highlighters to code the data, drawing out what seemed important to them in light of our research question. When we went around the room it was clear that people had highlighted different things – giving us the chance to reflect on subjectivity and the significance of individual interpretation.

We were also given the task of creating 'sub codes' from all the interview sections where young people had commented on whether they found **#OpenHouse** helpful, and why. After further sorting these comments we had to explain why we separated them in this way. Nearly everyone had chosen some variant of 'yes' 'no' and 'sort of', and all of the groups had many more comments under their 'yes' code, than the others.

As we began to reflect on what this might tell us, we ended up having a conversation about how you know whether people are giving you true answers – in other words research validity. Some of our co-researchers suggested that we couldn't necessarily trust that young people were being honest when they said 'yes' and emphasised the importance of taking time to build rapport and trust before asking questions. This was based on their observation of a few young people who provided one-word answers and looked very shy. The co-researchers concluded that they did not feel comfortable enough to open up, and this would have limited the value of the interviews.

COOKING FOR OTHERS AS SOCIAL ACTION

Young people felt that cooking the banquet was a meaningful form of social action that benefitted the guests, but they experienced the benefits themselves more directly. For some, meeting new adults was intimidating, and they preferred to serve through cooking rather than making conversation.

There is scope for us to create more opportunities for young people to cook for others and use their skills. But even if the banquet remains a one-off event, some interviewees argued that it could have ongoing influence through creating lasting memories or inspiring others to similar kinds of service.

So far we have seen that learning to cook together can facilitate connection. This section considers whether and how it is a kind of social action. In developing **#OpenHouse**, we placed food at the heart of our approach to addressing youth loneliness. But our hope was that in receiving hospitality, eating together and becoming part of a team young people would also be equipped to use those skills for the benefit of others. We certainly heard that some young people had gone on to cook for friends and family, but the main focus of youth social action within **#OpenHouse** was the banquet.

We are just finishing our sixth cycle of running **#OpenHouse**, and so far 74 young people have put on six banquets, cooking for approximately 60 guests + team. Guests have included parents, volunteers within the local community and individuals supported by the British Red Cross and identified as socially isolated through their ‘community connectors’ scheme. The research project gave us the opportunity to hear from those who participated in the programme, about how they experienced the banquet, and more generally what they thought about cooking for others as a form of social action.

The banquet

Our interviewees had different ideas about how the banquet benefitted those who came, and therefore functioned as social action. These included: providing adults with the chance to meet new people (including teenagers); feeding the guests; helping the lonely feel part of something; and providing a free meal to those who might be struggling financially.

There was general consensus that feeding people was intrinsically positive, and that ‘home cooked’ food, that had been prepared by young people could particularly make people feel happy. Others surmised that if their guests were tired of cooking, felt lonely or had been bereaved, then coming to the banquet would be valuable.

*“Food makes people happy.”
(Hayley)*

*“I don’t know whether blessed is the right word but they might feel lucky to actually get the chance to sit down and eat with someone, that they might never know and they might become best friends with or something.”
(Krys)*

While some young people acknowledged that they didn’t know for sure whether or not the banquet helped those who attended, there was much more confidence that it helped those who did the cooking. A number of those interviewed described the sense of satisfaction and pride they felt, having produced a three-course meal for a large room full of people. They had to use all the skills they had been taught and work together as a team.

*“There’s one thing cooking for yourself and then there’s another thing cooking for a lot of people because you’ve got to do it so many times more, and you’ve got to have the timing right and everything.”
(Aliya)*



"On the banquet night, just having to get up early, starting to prepare, we were all rushing around. It was just watching how everyone reacted, interacted with each other. Compared to the first session we had, it was very much us working as a team. It was like we got to know each other and this is what we're going to bring out to people, and it was kind of very satisfying, to know that we'd helped people and given them joy."

(Ocean)

However, our interviewees had different experiences of interacting with the guests at the banquet. Many found the idea of meeting new people too awkward and preferred to stay in the kitchen and focus on the cooking. That was the case for Hannah who explained that "I don't really talk to adults that much except for the adults I know, so it was kinda awkward and the people around me were telling me to talk to them but I didn't." One or two plucked up the courage to start some conversations and found it a positive experience. Henry told us that he "kind of decided, I'm just going to put myself out, go to a table and speak to them" and found that "I kind of did it so quickly that I got to know them before the shock went in, that I've just spoken to someone I haven't known!"

In general though these interviews suggest that the most meaningful connections and experiences were in the kitchen, as the team worked hard together to pull off a fantastic event. And in terms of helping to address loneliness, Isobel explained that for her...

"...the week to week sessions made more of an impact than the actual banquet, 'cause with the sessions you learn how to make the food but you also learn skills to cope with loneliness, like we learnt a different thing each week. So I think the stuff that we learnt in the sessions, probably gonna remember for longer and actually like take with you."

Is this a form of meaningful social action?

In 2018 The National Youth Social Action Survey found that six out of the ten young people surveyed had taken part in social action in the last 12 months but only four out of ten young people has taken part in 'meaningful' social action, defined as follows.

- Been involved in social action in the past 12 months
- Participated in social action at least every few months or taken part in a one-off activity lasting more than a day in the last 12 months
- Recognised a benefit to themselves and others and/or the environment because of their social action

Since the banquet was a one-off event that wouldn't formally count within the survey, we wanted to explore this idea with our interviewees, and think through both the benefits and limits of such events when it comes to social action. Where we explained the definition above, some young people wanted to re-claim the word meaningful.

"Even like just cooking, you're providing a service for people in which you're trying to achieve something and that's - whatever you do achieve - that is meaningful, like meaningful social action."

(Ellie)

In thinking about how cooking for others could become a more regular

activity, a couple of interviewees suggested that the banquet could be repeated, so that #OpenHouse happened every six months or so. Hannah also pointed out that it was possible to come to drop-in dinners and help out with the cooking there, as she had on occasion. Others felt that even if it was one-off, the banquet could still have a lasting impact because its influence could extend through time (memory) and personal networks (inspiration).

"It's like a lifetime thing because they're going to remember it, because someone has done something that nice for them...It's not a one-off event if you keep thinking about it. It's like a memory that you can keep re-living."

(Katie)

As well as creating memories, a few of our interviewees suggested that single events or individual examples of social action could inspire others to do something positive, having an unknown influence beyond the project, or as Krys described it, "starting a huge cycle of happiness and helpfulness." For Ellie, meals like the banquet can also hold the possibility of future friendship. If they "help them connect, and then it might lead onto a further conversation, might make friends or meet new people that you actually can relate to."

"If it helps them as much as it helps you, it's always gonna be like a chain, it's always gonna be something that comes out of this"

(Ocean)



DOING RESEARCH - SPOTLIGHT 5

What happens when you keep asking the same question?

As described in spotlight 4 (pg. 17), in general it was the co-researchers who reflected most deeply on the questions we were raising, which makes sense when you consider the time and investment they were giving to our enquiry. One of the benefits of this approach was that some of them had considered the same question multiple times in the course of our recorded discussions or interviews. In one case, Jon had thought about the question below four different times, giving a slightly different answer each time.

'Did Open House help you feel more connected to other people?'

1st answer

"Definitely not. It was quite an awkward experience, no-one really talked to each other that much."

2nd answer

"Well, back then, like I'll probably say definitely not. Since, like you know, I was kind of lonely way back then. But now, I would say sure, yeah, since like, I like talking to people here."

3rd answer

"I would say somewhat. Because although I got to meet new people, I only got to see them only one day a week...Because I'm only seeing people only one day a week, I don't really get to understand them as well."

4th answer

"Definitely, yes. Because although I see my friends five times a week, I don't get to see them on the weekend because we're busy and because I get to see you all at Youthscape, it was change for me, I get to see people that the weekend."

This shouldn't surprise us, because the way we make meaning of our lives changes over time and in light of new experience and information. Here, Jon's positive experience of the research project is beginning to reframe his initially ambivalent feelings about being part of the original **#OpenHouse** pilot. Each of Jon's answers reveals a different and valid aspect of his experience and serve as a helpful reminder that research interviews are always partial, and never the simple 'truth'.



IDEAS FOR DEVELOPING #OPENHOUSE

The three areas where young people suggested we could improve #OpenHouse were: greater support to reflect on their experience/emotions and to practice new skills; creating contexts for ongoing connections and support and involving young people in decisions about what to cook.

More ways to put new skills into practice

In one group interview with our co-researchers the conversation turned to the difference between discussing loneliness and being able to do something about it in your life. Krys suggested that there was scope to connect these discussions more directly to each individual's experience and provide opportunities to practice tools and skills that would help bring change.

"As much as we can learn it all day, it's not going to help us. But actually being able to do it and try out how you're doing it, what you need to work on, would be like so much more beneficial."

(Krys)

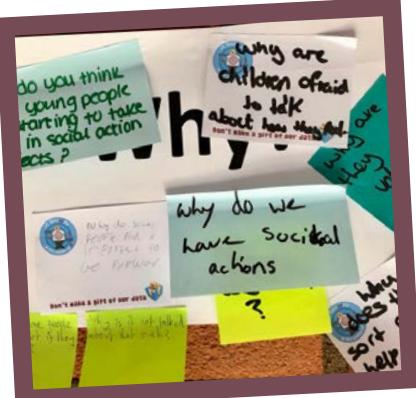
Ellie agreed, and reflected that it would be helpful to learn different strategies to manage feelings of loneliness. The group felt that new understanding does not automatically translate into an established skill or disposition, and that two things were key; the chance to try out skills, be observed and be given feedback and space to talk about and reflect on your own experiences. This would mean that instead of learning in a slightly abstract way, "you talk about the experience you've had with loneliness and then see how you could have changed it, to put that, to actually put it into practice." (Katie).

Ongoing support

Related to the first suggestion, a couple of young people described the value of creating more contexts where learning and relationships could continue to grow. One idea was to set up a support group, that could be established at the end of #OpenHouse and would focus more directly on talking about emotions and experiences. The second idea was to invite young people to engage in a range of different creative youth work projects after #OpenHouse was finished. While this would serve the same purpose the idea here was to continue to create fun activities that would facilitate community and friendship.

Thinking more about the food we cook

The final area for consideration related to food itself. Zafar highlighted the importance of making sure that all the food was tailored to a range of dietary requirements, including allergies, and Mohammed suggested that young people participating in #OpenHouse could be asked what they would like to cook. Although he didn't elaborate further, this feels like an important reflection, particularly in Luton where young people come from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Shahid told us that he liked to cook curries, and Nadia had told us that, while her family didn't like halloumi salad, she would like to learn to cook chapatis because that is all her brother eats, and she could then help her mum.





CONCLUSION

We received funding to research the links between youth loneliness and youth social action, and focused on cooking as we explored whether learning to cook and then cooking for others helps young people feel more connected and less lonely – and if so, how.

This was a small-scale project reporting on interviews with 20 young people, half of whom were part of our co-research team as well. While none of our findings can be generalised more widely, the process has generated some valuable learning that will feed into the development of our programmes and we hope will also inform wider conversations about youth social action, and the role of food in particular.

In designing **#OpenHouse**, the goal was to use cooking to build confidence, community and facilitate a journey of talking about and managing loneliness. By listening to those who have participated so far we have learned that cooking together can be a powerful tool. It creates a context to meet others who may be going through similar things to you and can help young people build their confidence and learn social skills that they will use in school and other contexts. By working as a team and applying what they had learned, these young people had provided a three-course meal for a large group of people – an achievement they could be proud of.

But it is also only one small piece of the puzzle. Our interviewees confirmed that young people can be facing many challenges and may need more time exploring their feelings and experiences and practising new social skills. While some made significant progress, others enjoyed the course but continued to struggle socially. This is to be expected. We know that projects like this need to be accompanied by other forms of ongoing support and that some young people always benefit more than others.

Finally, the banquet was a positive experience for many of our interviewees, even where they struggled to talk to guests. However, there is scope to develop it further as a form of social action, in terms of creating further opportunities to cook for others, and to think about how to link **#OpenHouse** with the other contexts where we eat together within Youthscape.

REFLECTIONS

DR LUCIE SHUKER

This was our first co-research project, and it was a great experience. We were all really impressed by the commitment our co-researchers brought to the process. They were honest, reflective, creative and lots of fun to work with. I hope they are proud of the way they have shaped the project, and informed our thinking about food, loneliness and social action.

We also learned a huge amount from the process itself.

Perhaps the clearest lesson was that the quality and depth of data you can collect increases dramatically as young people have more space to reflect, when they feel at ease, and when they have a sense of ownership and control over the process. This is something that the co-researchers themselves were clearly attuned to. We had prepared the rooms, our digital recorders, consent forms and interview schedules. But it was the young people who took the initiative to find ways to help their interviewees feel more comfortable: cushions on the seats, icebreakers and games before the interview began, and improvised questions when the conversation dried up. This has provoked me to reflect on the time we need to take to build relationships and rapport with young people when we do research with them.

Then there were some challenges that we can also learn from. We were as explicit as we could be about our

respective roles, but we also became aware that some of our co-researchers had appetite for greater involvement than we had time for. It was also a challenging task for young people, mostly aged 12-14, to grapple with linking concrete experiences of cooking with these more abstract concepts of youth loneliness and social action. They engaged really well, but it required us to be creative in facilitating that enquiry.

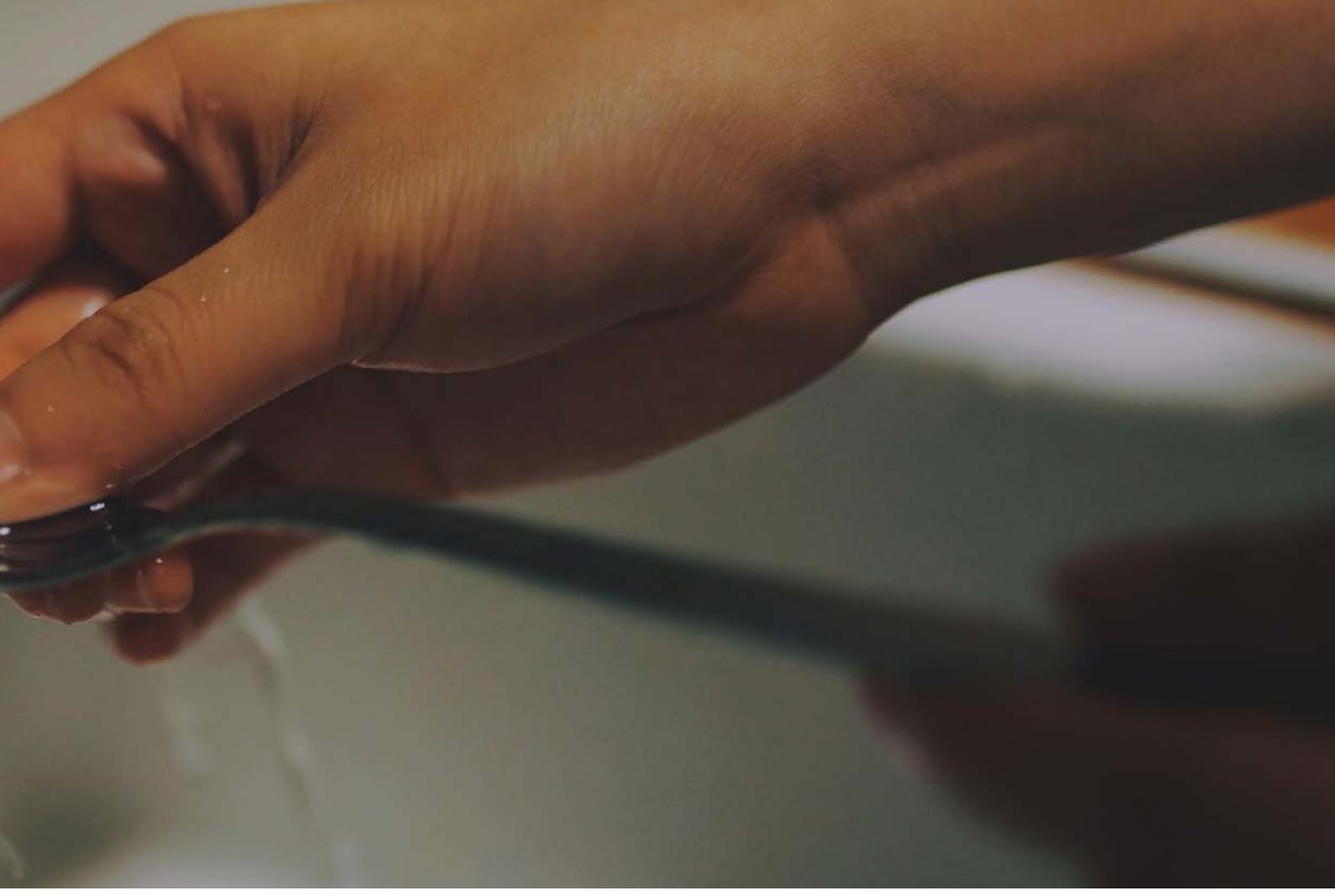
We learned that the design of co-research projects like this one don't fit neatly within our established processes for thinking through research ethics. Where we would usually have all our research questions and tools pre-approved by an ethics committee, this was an evolving project that was co-designed over six months. We followed a protocol that reflects the key principles of working ethically with young people, but the work has raised questions about how we can combine the external scrutiny an ethics committee provides, with the necessary improvisation of doing ethics in situ.

And what about the findings themselves?

There are a few key things I'm taking away from this project, particularly the different ways we think about and experience food. Food symbolises so much: the resources we do or don't have, how our families or communities use food, and what that means to us. Our co-researchers invited us to think more about young people's social and cultural background when deciding what food to cook. Going forward we will try to strike a better balance between foods that are culturally familiar and easy to cook at home, and those that are new and stretch young people's experience.

But food, loneliness and social action are also about money and resources.

Youthscape is based in Luton, a town where 46% of children live in poverty.⁴ The chances of a child reporting feeling lonely are nearly twice as high than reporting 'hardly ever or never' feeling lonely if they live in a



household below the relative poverty threshold.⁵ In 2018, a report by the Food Foundation found that the poorest fifth of families would have to set aside more than 40% of their total weekly income after housing costs to satisfy the government's nutritional guidelines.⁶ We also know that the most affluent young people are around 20% more likely to volunteer than their least well-off peers.⁷

In a paper on the socio-economic participation gap in volunteering, the Dartington Service Design Lab attributed part of this gap to definitions of social action that exclude young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They reference a qualitative study involving both participants and non-participants in youth social action which found that those not currently engaged in social action (by the common definition) defined the concept, "more in terms of aspects that are closer to their daily lives (such as helping family members with caring duties)," as opposed to "broader social issues such as climate change."⁸

This strikes a chord with us. Our co-researchers wanted to see their work creating the banquet as 'meaningful', despite it falling short of the official definition. And while we struggle to measure the impact of social action, they reminded us that acts of generosity can create lasting memories or inspire others, in ways that can't always be captured or predicted.

One of my reflections going forward is that we may need to look for more continuity, or at least parity of esteem, between everyday forms of mutual care within networks of family/friends and more formal volunteering activities. Cooking for others is one of these forms of mutual care. Feeding has a long association with forms of charity where those in need are the passive recipients of help. But cooking and eating together can also be a practice that brings people together from different backgrounds, that disrupts social inequality and creates a more common 'table' where it is less clear who is giving and who is receiving.

In an environment where so many of us struggle with cooking and eating well, there is something potentially empowering about equipping young people with the skills to cook for themselves and others; whether that is in the home or beyond. However we also know that circumstances or a lack of resources can make this much harder in some homes. We try to recognise this in a small way by giving each young person their own frying pan, tongs, cook-book, and a voucher to buy ingredients for a meal.

Finally, food also has a potentially unique power in creating connection. Some of this was highlighted in our project, but we would love to explore this relationship further. Our co-researchers helped us understand the need for ongoing contexts of support, so we will continue to create those spaces in the hope that more young people will find meaningful relationships and the reassurance that though they may feel lonely, they are not alone.

⁴ Centre for Research in Social Policy (2019) *Local indicators of child poverty, 2017/18*

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2018)

⁶ Food Foundation (2018) *Affordability of the UK's Eatwell Guide*

⁷ Ipsos MORI (2018), *National Youth Social Action Survey 2017*.

⁸ Dartington Service Design Lab (2019, p.9) *The Socio-Economic Participation Gap in Youth Social Action*.

APPENDIX ONE: OUR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1

Introduction

- Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed
- My name is and this is and
- We will be taking it in turns to ask the questions
- We will ask you a bit about food, cooking, **#OpenHouse** and whether helping other people can help us feel more connected.
- We're really interested in your honest thoughts and opinions, there are no right or wrong answers!
- If you want to stop or leave the room at any point, just let us know - that's absolutely fine
- You can take your time answering questions if you need to think about it, and you can pass on any questions you don't want to answer as well.

Section 2

Warm up questions about food

1. First, we wanted to ask a little bit about food! What's your favourite food?
2. Is there any food you really don't like? For example, have you ever had to spit something out because it was so disgusting?
3. Did you ever try school dinners? What were they like?

Section 3

#OpenHouse,

4. Who cooks food in your house?
5. Before you did **#OpenHouse**, had you ever cooked for yourself, or other people?
 - a. If yes, what did you cook, and how did you learn?
6. What was the best thing you cooked during **#OpenHouse**?
 - a. Why did you like that?
7. Have you cooked any food for yourself at home since being part of **#Openhouse**?
 - a. Tell us a bit more about that...What did you cook? How did it go? Would you do that again?

8. Have you cooked for anyone else since being part of **#OpenHouse**?

- a. Tell us a bit more about that...What did you cook? How did it go? Would you do that again?

Section 4

The banquet

At the end of **#OpenHouse**, everyone helps put on a banquet for a group of people. That banquet is a kind of 'youth social action', which is when young people take practical action to serve or help others, to create positive change for the community.

9. Do you think the banquet was a positive experience for the people who were invited?

- a. If so,, why?
- b. If not, why not?

10. Was cooking for the banquet a positive experience for you?

- a. If so, why?
- b. If not, why not?

Section 5

Feeling connected

It's really normal to feel a bit lonely at times, but research shows that many young people say they feel lonely a lot of the time. **#OpenHouse** is part of a group of projects across the country to try and help young people feel more connected, and less lonely.

11. Did **#Openhouse** help you feel more connected to other people and less lonely?

- a. Definitely
 - b. Yes
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. No
 - e. Definitely not
- Can you tell us why?

12. There are lots of different parts of **#OpenHouse**. Which of these do you think are the best for helping young people feel more connected and less lonely?

- a. Learning to cook for yourself and others
- b. Having advice from the youth-workers
- c. Talking through your experiences with other young people
- d. Meeting new people
- e. Putting on the banquet
- f. Getting used to Youthscape and coming to other events (like the drop in)
- g. Anything else?



13. How could **#OpenHouse** change so that it helps young people even more?

Section 6

Cooking for others and feeling connected

We mentioned that 'youth social action', is when young people take practical action to serve or help others, to create positive change for the community.

There are lots of different types of social action. For example,

- Being part of climate action protests
- Volunteering in a charity shop
- Doing fund-raising (e.g. cake sale, sponsored walk)

We're interested in how learning to cook for other people is a type of youth social action, in other words, what you did at the banquet for **#OpenHouse**.

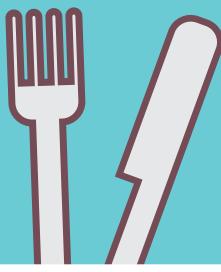
14. Do you think cooking for other people can create positive change?

- a. or the cook?
- b. for the people who eat the food?
- c. for anyone else?

15. Social action has the most benefit when young people take part in it over a longer time, but the **#OpenHouse** banquet is a one-off event.

How could we develop **#OpenHouse** so that cooking for others becomes something you do more than once?

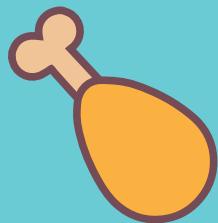




"It's given me a boost of confidence that I didn't know I had inside of me, and I've learned to cook more food than I already knew. It's broadened my spectrum of food and stuff, and I tried new things, met nice people, found out people who worked at my school and stuff."



"It's like people, young people trying to reach out, but they can't. When they come to #OpenHouse, there's someone they can reach out to and talk to."



"Just being able to talk to people I hadn't met before was great."



"I didn't realise like I could have conversations with people and actually felt like part of it and not like almost in my own world."

"Yeah, after #OpenHouse, it made me feel more connected to people because like before I was really lonely and had no friends but after I was more like, I could be more friends with other people."

"During #OpenHouse it opened my mind to think I can cook. Before I thought I couldn't cook that well, so now I cooked a cake!"

