



# A Healthier Me Impact Report 2021

## Contents

Background.....	2
What happened.....	2
Image 1. May's Monthly Impact Survey.....	3
The pack.....	4
Qualitative Findings from Surveys.....	6
External Factors.....	6
Covid 19.....	6
Involvement of the wider community.....	7
Ways in which the project met its objectives.....	8
Unanticipated benefits.....	9
Issues, criticisms and suggestions.....	9
Anticipated Project Outcomes that would warrant further investigation.....	9
Conclusion and recommendations.....	10
Appendix 1 – Project overview.....	11



## Background

People with a learning disability are twice as likely to become obese and five times more likely to be morbidly obese when compared to people without a learning disability.

Public Health England have and continue to conduct research into the effects of obesity on recovering from COVID-19. The data showed that obese people are significantly more likely to become seriously ill and be admitted to intensive care with COVID-19 compared to those with a healthy BMI (Body Mass Index).

Mencap's healthy eating pilot project 'A Healthier Me' developed after requests from stakeholders who wanted to integrate nutrition as part of their Round The World Challenge (RTWC) offer.

£50,957 of internal funding secured and used in two parts. The first is a pot that Network Partners could bid into, designing projects that would help the people they support with making healthier choices when it comes to their food. The second part of the funding has been put towards the creation of a [resource pack](#).

## What happened

After 26 expressions of interest from Network Partners, Mencap allocated funding to 13 of the projects ranging from cook along live sessions, healthy eating workshops, growing your own, allotments to working with nutritionists (more information about each project can be found in [Appendix 1](#)). Network Partners were given the flexibility to set their own programmes and deliver against their goals, with each project running between January–June 2021. The Network Partners funded for A Healthier Me are:



- Bexley Mencap
- Carlisle Mencap
- Colchester Gateway Clubs
- Heart of England Mencap
- Hertsmere Mencap
- Kingston Mencap
- Mencap Liverpool and Sefton
- Midland Mencap
- Mid Surrey Mencap
- New Forest Mencap
- Nottingham Mencap
- Pennine Mencap
- Yatton House Society

The funded Network Partners had the opportunity to be part of a working group that met virtually each month to discuss updates, challenges and contribute to the creation of the 'A Healthier Me pack'. Each working group meeting focussed on being led and driven by the Network Partners on the call, facilitated by Mencap. To monitor the progress of projects, Network Partners were required to complete a monthly survey through Microsoft Forms ([Image 1](#)) and the findings from these surveys shaped many of the working group conversations.

While A Healthier Me is a new project for Mencap and the Network Partners, the offer is designed to run in conjunction with their existing work and resources. Many of the projects stated either in their proposal or during their delivery, that A Healthier Me worked with projects such as RTWC, Let's Get Digital and the Gateway Award as well as internal pieces of work they might have been running.

Following the 6 months of the pilot projects, **384** people are reported to have engaged in A Healthier Me, this includes people with a learning disability, staff and volunteers of Network



Partners and some supporters, carers or family members of direct participants. You can read the impact of A Healthier Me in the [Qualitative Findings from Surveys](#).

Image 1. May's Monthly Impact Survey.

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\* Required

1. Group Name \*

2. Number of people taking part in A Healthier Me. Please include the number of people who have joined or left the project. \*

3. Number of people without a learning disability taking part? Please include anyone who has entered or dropped out of the project to date \*

4. What progress have you made towards your project's set out goals? \*

5. How is the project going? Have you faced any challenges and how have you overcome these? \*

6. Have you got any stories or quotes from the impact A Healthier Me is having on your group? If not, do you think this might be? \*

## The pack

Each Network Partner shared resources they were using or have found useful with the working group and pooled their expertise to support the creation of the A Healthier Me resource pack. Samples from the resource pack can be found in the images below.

### Information booklet

### Carbohydrates

(3-4 portions a day)

**Carbohydrates** are one of the main sources of energy for our body. They should make up a third of what we eat each day.

**Some examples of carbohydrates and portion sizes are:**

- 2 cupped hands of cooked pasta and rice
- 2 medium slices of bread
- Mashed or baked potatoes the size of your fist.
- 4 egg sized boiled potatoes or 16-20 oven chips.
- 3 handfuls of cereal or 1 1/2 handfuls of dried porridge oats.

### Fruit and vegetables

(5 portions a day)

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of **vitamins, minerals and fibre**.

**Vitamins and minerals** are nutrients your body needs in small amounts to work properly and stay healthy. Vitamins and minerals help us:

- grow
- see well
- form bones, muscles, skin and organs
- battle infections and prevent us from becoming ill.

**Fibre** is a different type of carbohydrate which helps us:

- feel fuller
- digest and process food
- stop us getting constipation.

**We should eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This can be called "getting your 5 a day".**

### Activities

## Carbohydrates, dairy, fats and proteins

What food groups do these pictures belong to?

**Write your answers under each picture.**

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## Qualitative Findings from Surveys

These findings are taken from the surveys completed by staff members and volunteers facilitating the A Healthier Me programme between March and June 2021. Each Network Partner had received a grant from RMS in order to carry out this work. The majority of Network Partners had finished their work on A Healthier Me at the time of the final survey.

The anticipated outcomes of the Healthier Me project were:

- The project will pilot test how healthy eating can be brought into individuals lives testing whether healthy eating can be linked into other projects nationally such as Round the World Challenge as part of a healthy lifestyle.
- New friendships and relationships for participants with a learning disability
- Reducing stigma and discrimination towards people with a learning disability
- Improved physical wellbeing (weight management) for people with a learning disability
- Improved mental wellbeing (confidence & self-esteem) for people with a learning disability
- Decreased social isolation for people with a learning disability
- Increased health for people with a learning disability
- Improved well-being for people with a learning disability
- Improved skills for people with a learning disability
- People with a learning disability develop transferable skills through A Healthier Me
- Network Partners are able to meet the health needs of people with a learning disability
- Network Partners, individuals, staff and supporters have improved understanding; insight and skills
- Improved physical health & wellbeing for people with a learning disability
- Understand what people with a learning disability need and want with living a healthier lifestyle
- People with a learning disability feel more engaged and independent.

## External Factors

### Covid 19

Perhaps unsurprisingly the majority of the organisations who took part in the pilot referenced Covid-19 as being a significant influence on their ability to deliver the programme to adults with a learning disability. On 6 January 2021 England entered its third national lockdown. A 'Stay at Home' order remained in place until 29 March. However, this is a vast simplification of the level of disruption caused by Covid 19 for adults with a learning disability and their supporters.

Some Network partners reported that as a result of the lockdown people they supported were experiencing an increase in mental health issues. Network Partners also reported service users de-skilling during lockdown and requiring additional support as a result. In some cases, this caused disruption to project delivery in terms of sessions taking longer than they might otherwise do and people requiring more support than they might have done pre-Covid.

**'Our 5 employees are having to deal with a lot of issues concerning mental health, loss of skills and getting everyone back on track to be able to cope.'**

Some Network Partners reported that people moving from online provision to onsite provision was a significant disruption to project delivery. This was because the numbers allowed online and the numbers allowed onsite in a Covid secure environment differed and because some people opted to go back to their pre-Covid activities as soon as they were allowed, leaving the project.

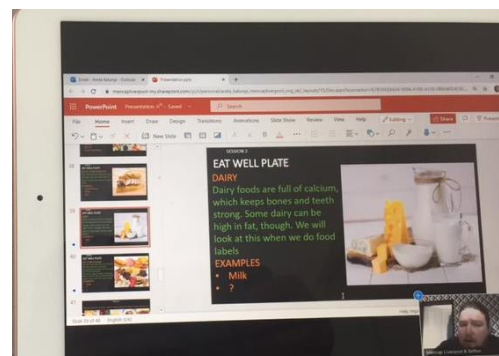
**'Given the number of remote participants now taking part around our area, we need to re-evaluate our kitchen facilities in order to give the option for a sizeable proportion to take part in person, while still retaining the sizeable number of people who have expressed that they would prefer to continue to join us for these sessions from home via Facebook. With the online exercise sessions, attendance**



**has suddenly dropped because we have started taking bookings for people to attend in-person guided exercise sessions in our premises again’.**

Delivering the project online was also challenging for some groups. Groups reported that it was harder to make the sessions interactive and engaging online and therefore meaningful for people with a learning disability, particularly those with PMLD. They also reported that technical issues made delivery difficult. However, learning from others was that delivering remotely worked for them and that Zoom was a convenient platform.

**‘Our day service users are mainly people with severe learning disabilities and some with added dementia. This cohort is much better in a face to face/ hands on approach.’**



**‘Zoom works well and the attendance level was really high’.**

A final issue, particularly reported by the smaller Network Partners was the impact of staffing issues and furlough as a result of Covid 19. In some cases, the impact was that the project started later than anticipated and took longer to deliver.

**‘Staff are starting to return from furlough so we have just begun to look at what the course could entail.’**

#### **Involvement of the wider community**

A further critical factor to the success of the project seemed to be the involvement (or lack of involvement) of the wider community. Groups reported that support workers and families not choosing to engage with the project meant that people with a learning disability were therefore unable to make the dietary changes they might have liked to, due to others controlling meal preparation and shopping. Other groups reported that those living with supportive family members were more likely to make positive changes than those living alone with less support. A further piece of feedback was that other providers were providing cakes and biscuits as a reward for undertaking certain activities undermining the messages about healthy eating. Even the wider community could have an impact, with examples given of shop keepers giving free unhealthy food to an adult with a learning disability. Conversely, there were also accounts of how ‘A Healthier Me’ was having a positive impact on the wider community as people shared what they had learnt about healthier choices.

**‘Staff not staying is a barrier as in some houses they do the shopping and the cooking and don't always involve our members, it would be great if they would join in and reinforce the message.’**

**‘Outside sources feel that giving our members rewards of cakes and sweets is ok...People who have a family member in their life are more likely to have a better diet whether they live at home or not.’**

**‘A highlight is that we have a married couple who both have a number of complex disabilities where both of them now take part in the cookalong sessions along with their support worker, and have now begun cooking/eating together with their vulnerable elderly neighbours who they are in a bubble with. This is a really good example of a ripple effect.’**

In addition to this, involving professionals was difficult, with groups reporting how busy LD nurses were, but conversely how positive the impact of other professionals had been on the course.

**‘We have offered 1:1 sessions for several individual members with the nutritionist and these have been very useful in identifying specific challenges people face and ideas on how to overcome these.’**

**‘Involving LD nurses proved challenging as they are all incredibly busy!’**



### Ways in which the project met its objectives

Network Partners referenced how well the project had fitted in with their existing work. They referred to Mencap projects such as Round the World Challenge, the Tackling Inequalities Fund and the Gateway Award. They also referenced their own programmes, including gardening projects.



**‘As a charity we have learnt how the project can be joined up with other projects i.e. physical and mental health so the actual title of ‘A Healthier Me’ will be used for future projects where we can incorporate all aspects of health including diet under one umbrella.’**

The Network Partners reported improved physical wellbeing consistently. Largely this was through ‘small changes’ to diet and lifestyle, for example swapping a fizzy drink for water or dropping from 7 packets of crisps eaten per week to one. This might be linked to the point above about the importance of the wider community – where large changes to diet and lifestyle were not possible, smaller changes were. Weight loss was mentioned, with several participants noting that they had lost weight.

**‘I now eat brown and white pasta together and I don't notice any difference.’**

**‘I lost one pound this week.’**

**I never knew exercise could be so much fun!’**

Network partners also discussed in detail people using their increased knowledge and skills to make healthier choices. For example, using the ‘traffic light’ system on food packaging while at the supermarket.

**‘I know what healthy drinks to choose when I go shopping now.’**

**‘Some members have said that “they now know exactly what food group they are eating when having dinner.’**

The majority of the sessions were reported as being well attended, it could reasonably be inferred from this, (particularly given the wider context of lockdown) that the project had provided a social opportunity and therefore reduced social isolation for adults with a learning disability.

Several Network Partners referenced the building of new skills, either in cookery, gardening or around making healthy choices. While not explicitly referenced, it might also be possible to assume that participants in online groups also grew in digital knowledge throughout the course. All of these skills are arguably transferable.

**‘We also use the Teams calls to incorporate gardening skills and to show those who are still isolating around the garden and show them the different things we are growing’.**

Some Network Partners mentioned an increase in facilitators’ knowledge around healthy eating, they also consistently spoke highly of the working group and how it had allowed them to share ideas and knowledge with other providers. They appreciated the opportunity to feed in to the creation of resources, but in some cases wished they had been available sooner.

**‘Looking through the materials regarding food and health has been really informative for myself. I'm actually finding out a lot of useful basic information that will help me day to day when making food choices!’**

**‘I found it (the working group) useful and the sharing of ideas helped with planning. Due to each group having access to different facilities it was interesting to see what each group could do i.e. access to a garden, an allotment, etc.’**





**'I feel we spent a lot of time discussing the booklet which I felt a more productive way was when it was emailed to me and I could look at it with my staff team for more input.'**

The project supplied a large amount of useful data about what people with a learning disability need in order to live healthier lifestyles. A key part of this appears to be consistent messaging from all those involved in supporting people with a learning disability, simple tips and the encouragement to make small but meaningful changes.

### Unanticipated benefits

An unanticipated benefit appears to have been widening the range of foods some participants were prepared to eat. Network Partners referenced people trying new fruit and vegetables and finding they liked them and being more prepared to taste foods that they had either cooked or grown themselves.

**'I didn't like trying new food before but seeing my boyfriend and friends try them, helped me.'**

**'We've had feedback that people are exercising more, drinking water instead of sugary drinks and eating more fruit also trying different vegetables.'**

### Issues, criticisms and suggestions

Network partners communicated that they considered the project a success. Some smaller organisations communicated that they felt a great deal was expected in terms of time for a relatively small amount of money. There was also feedback that it was harder for smaller organisations with a low number of staff to recover from lockdown and to deliver the project. Some Network partners liked the opportunity to contribute to the creation of resources, while others suggested that they would have liked the resources to be available at the beginning of the project.

**'We feel the amount of input and contributions we are being asked to make for our grant money is way too much for a small local charity... Had we known about the amount of input required of us we would have reconsidered our application.'**

**'It was great to have an input on how the activity cards were designed and it helped with designing our own cook books.'**

Some Network Partners communicated the difficulty of sharing messages about healthy lifestyles with an audience who had profound and multiple learning disabilities. Others had difficulties with the range of abilities within their groups.

**'Challenges include being able to tailor content to suit each member of groups level of understanding without them becoming bored.'**

### Anticipated Project Outcomes that would warrant further investigation

Using this data set alone it hasn't been possible to prove whether the Healthy Lifestyles project led to increased friendships for people with a learning disability or whether the scheme reduced stigma and discrimination, or improved mental health and wellbeing. Some of this data may be available through other participant feedback.

Network Partners talked passionately about growing veg in community gardens and creating healthy eating cookbooks. However, worthy as these activities are in their own right, it was unclear from Network Partner feedback exactly how they were contributing to enabling participants to make long term changes to their lifestyle or diet.

For example, the gardening projects allowed participants to cook and taste new vegetables, provided therapeutic benefits and much needed routine for some participants. However, it was unclear how this would impact people's eating or wellbeing outside of their day service.



The groups who produced cookbooks mentioned people with a learning disability trying a single recipe from the cookbook or using the cookbook in their supported living house. It wasn't clear whether this was a one-off, or a significant change in diet.

It might be helpful in the future to use the working group to agree some specific outcomes for community gardens and cookbook creation.

### Conclusion and recommendations

This has been a successful pilot project that led to increased knowledge and small but very significant changes in diet and lifestyle for participants. It was generally well received by Network Partners who appreciated the collegiate approach and the way in which the project fitted in with existing work.

This is a project that is extremely adaptable and that it is possible to run on and offline. The fact that the pilot was successful despite significant disruptions caused by Covid 19 suggests it can be up-scaled and run successfully in the future.

More research is required about the impact of certain aspects of the project, specifically the horticulture and creation of cookbooks and whether these impacted people's dietary choices. This could be undertaken using creative methods or specific questions for Network Partners in another iteration of the project.

The project outcomes were ambitious may need refining slightly in the light of what it is possible to measure with Network Partners given practical time and budget constraints.

If the project were to be expanded, it might be valuable to add a component specifically tailored towards parents and carers and support workers discussing their role as advocates and supporters of healthy eating. Adapting the models used for engaging parents and carers in some of Mencap's other projects might warrant investigation.

### Top 3 recommended actions

1. Further research the impact of horticulture and cookbook projects on people's choices.
2. Work with parents, carers and support workers on their role and influence on eating healthily.
3. Refine the outcomes of the project to ensure they can be measured



## Appendix 1 – Project overview

Group Name	Healthy Eating Project
<b>Bexley Mencap</b>	<p>Supported small groups and individuals who would like to be healthier to identify ways that they could do this and support them to access groups and sessions.</p> <p>Integrated the Healthier Me programme into all current activities and the nutrition course will be offered to all of members.</p>
<b>Mid Surrey Mencap</b>	<p>Have produced a home cooked meal at the day service for all members and now expand this service into healthy eating cookery lessons.</p> <p>Members have participated in 2 weekly sessions via zoom planning, cooking and sharing a healthy meal, whilst learning new skills to carry out in their own homes.</p>
<b>Kingston Mencap</b>	<p>Developed a workshop course with a nutritionist supporting the group with eating healthily and offering one to one support, primarily meeting on Zoom. Some of the budget has been used to purchase different fruits and vegetables that can be included in healthy meals and snacks.</p> <p>One area to develop is getting more support staff involved and aware that they can help to support healthy choices.</p>
<b>Mencap Liverpool &amp; Sefton</b>	<p>Delivered a 12 hour healthy eating course over zoom, delivering sessions on eat well plate, food labels, exercise, shopping and budgeting, among others. We aimed for it to be educational, but fun, interactive and immersive, and felt this has been achieved.</p> <p>The next goal to achieve is to deliver cooking sessions face to face.</p>
<b>Hertsmere Mencap</b>	<p>Since September, a weekly 90-minute cookery class has taken place over 12 weeks at a local community venue with kitchen facilities in Borehamwood. It has been our intention that this programme will encourage people to use fresh ingredients and realise that healthy eating can be affordable and delicious.</p>
<b>Colchester Gateway Club</b>	<p>A Healthier Me linked into the Wellness Support Group and how to stay healthy by making healthier choices. The project has also linked into the Gateway Award and supporting people in their own homes with healthy recipes. The project has also been incorporated in the Keeping Active sessions linking healthy eating to exercise.</p> <p>With the success of the project A Healthier Me, the healthy eating programme is expanding into another area of North East Essex.</p>
<b>Yatton House</b>	<p>Developed a horticulture enterprise and created a market garden with an allotment plot across from the facility, using land for vegetable plots. Used funding to purchase a polytunnel to support a plot to plate project (growing, using vegetables and eating these). Hoping to open the café using produce that has been grown.</p> <p>Linked A Healthier Me with RTWC and the Lets Get Digital campaign to reach out as a catalyst to more members during covid, as well as supplying members with 'Grow Together' packs for home use.</p>



<p><b>Pennine Mencap</b></p>	<p>Expanded the 'Cook Along Live' project and have engaged a solid core group of service users in independently cooking healthy meals by following weekly cook along videos, and while there has been reduced engagement with online workouts there is now an established small core group of service users attending weekly gym sessions at Pennine Mencap (2 female, 9 male).</p>
<p><b>Carlisle Mencap</b></p>	<p>The project encouraged eating healthily by working with members both adults, and children to create recipes which will attract them to eat a more healthy diet than they will now eat. Started growing vegetables with the local wildlife trust and people are showing interest in eating what they grow.</p> <p>A short animated film created by members shows the history of how food was grown, harvested, prepared, cooked and what a healthy option is. This film has been created and shared on the A Healthier Me Webpage.</p>
<p><b>Nottingham Mencap</b></p>	<p>The healthy eating groups have been learning about food types, fat and sugar content, protein, and portion sizes. They will choose the meals that will be served (after consulting with all students) and art group members design and produce the daily menus.</p> <p>A small cohort of members were tasked with sourcing ingredients and learning to cook the food so they can re-create the meals at home. In addition, 3 exercise groups across the week with an accredited fitness trainer were run. Where possible these were held externally. The groups examined the link between activity and food and learn the concept of calorie control and looked at special diets (for those for example who may be diabetic, suffer allergies/intolerance or may be vegetarian).</p>
<p><b>Heart of England Mencap</b></p>	<p>Created a 'Healthier Me' group throughout the services, which delivers information, activities and recipes via a range of methods. A recipe book and activities have been co-produced by the Health and Wellbeing Champions and published.</p> <p>Some of the funding contributed to allocating some of the garden for growing fruit and vegetables. This has encouraged members to learn new skills in how to grow their plants, fruit and vegetables</p>
<p><b>Midland Mencap</b></p>	<p>A 3-part course, lasting 2 hours each covering various health and food related topics were delivered to members. This course included some structured learning and preparing healthy food.</p> <p>The funding also went towards creating accessible resources which members have been involved in co-designing, including resources for food shopping, food prepping, creating breakfast, lunch and dinner recipes (including traditional recipes from all the different cultures members are part of), alcohol and safe food storage.</p>
<p><b>New Forest Mencap</b></p>	<p>Delivered 1 hour online sessions about topics such as "what is a balanced diet" "importance of food and sleep" and single sessions on "fats", "sugars", etc. We are pleased that we have engaged with (for us) a large number of people and that they attend regularly. Pleased that there is evidence that people are thinking more about what they eat and are trying new ideas.</p>