

More Than a Mealtime shared tables: Sharing and Enjoying Food Together

Summary

The More than a Mealtime Shared Tables project (shared tables) is delivered by Cross Gates Good Neighbours Scheme (CGGNS) and uses eating together as a way of making enjoyable connections to reduce isolation and improve wellbeing. It brings together independent single people to eat as a group at tables reserved at various local restaurants/pubs, with each table *hosted* by a volunteer. The activities take place at different venues and times, many during evenings and weekends. It is aimed at people who live alone or are bereaved but is open to all older people who live in Crossgates and would like some company. The need for the project was identified in a survey of 77 older people by CGGNS in which 78% said they only shared food with another person once a week (at the most).

Shared Tables is funded through the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds. TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. Overall, a total of 69 facilitated shared meals took place, attended by 53 older people (much larger than the initial project target of 20 people), with a total of 312 volunteer hours given.

Background

Research has shown that eating with others increases social bonding, community engagement, feelings of wellbeing, satisfaction with life and enhances a sense of contentedness, thus acting as a useful mechanism to help people bond with others (Dunbar 2017), or as Julier (2013) puts it *the shared table is a place of community. It unifies people.*

This case study considers the extent to which the shared tables project based in Crossgates has been effective at reducing socially isolated older people through eating with others. This is explored by examining the extent to which ‘**participants feel less socially isolated (and lonely)**’, and ‘**the extent to which they are actively involved in their communities**’ (which form two of the four target outcomes of the overall TTS programme).

As part of identifying the contribution of older people, it also looks at how Shared Tables encourages local businesses to offer more age friendly services, an ambition referred to by the Delivery Partner at the outset.

Methods

Information was collected through:

- Scrutiny of quarterly monitoring data, participant stories and marketing material shared with Time to Shine
- An in-depth interview with one member of Shared Tables during year one
- A focus group of nine participants and volunteers in Shared Tables in year two
- An additional focus group which included a volunteer and participant
- Interviews and questionnaires with two of the scheme organisers (one was interviewed once, another three times throughout the progress of the project)An interview with the scheme manager

Key Findings

Many participants had felt isolated due to transitional events

Participants reported that they had become isolated as a result of bereavement, loss of friends resulting from retirement and from moving house. They spoke of *feeling separate, alone, empty and isolated*. This created feelings of *sadness, unhappiness, nervousness, moodiness* and a *lack of confidence*. Weekends, evenings, dark winter nights, coming back to an empty house and simple things going wrong like a light bulb needing change were dark moments. Their experience of neighbours was mixed, some speaking of a caring attitude but most noting ‘*they keep themselves to themselves*’ and ‘*they never even said anything when my husband died*’.

Volunteers have been central to the success of Shared Tables

Volunteer table hosts have been central to the success of Shared Tables, particularly as the activities take place out of hours (i.e. evenings and weekends) when staff are not available. Participants and volunteer table hosts also contributed to quarterly internal evaluation events to facilitate future planning, and one table host trained and helped deliver focus groups. Table hosts were also involved in evaluating existing venues, suggesting new ones and also following up on non-attenders.

Volunteers have also helped ensure Shared Tables can continue after the funding end. In fact, nearly all volunteers (10 out of 12) wanted to continue to host shared tables, not just in their local area, but support the rolling out of Shared Tables in other areas across Leeds.

The success of Crossgates has led to the model being upscaled

As well as the current project (based in Crossgates) continuing, Shared Tables is being upscaled through a series of pilots across other areas in Leeds. Plans include writing a Toolkit and mentoring other Neighbourhood Network centres across Leeds to introduce the scheme. Participants and table hosts will assist with this. These new pilots have been set up with the Test and Learn principle in mind, aiming to be exploratory, focusing on what environments or contexts may impact on success.

The successful transfer of the Shared Tables approach is felt to be dependent on a number of localised factors, linked to the assets in a community, particularly having good transport links and accessible places to eat. It was identified that this is less likely to be the case in the most deprived areas.

The following discussion considers what worked to make Shared Tables successful.

What has worked?

Older people feel less socially isolated and lonely

Social isolation was reduced through developing meaningful relationships

Many said that getting involved in Shared Tables had led to the development of new friendships:

I feel happy and have a host of new friends and I have cemented relationships

In fact, while some enjoyed visiting a variety of restaurants and trying interesting food, the social contact was viewed as more important: *[its] not about the food, it's about the company*.

The intimate nature of sitting together in a small group of six to eight people was identified as much more rewarding than large coffee mornings (which some found daunting). Meeting new people was

recognised as difficult, but a participant, recently bereaved, spoke of leaving her first meal feeling she had known everyone for years. Another, valued the opportunity to really get to know other people and several spoke of the comfort sharing time with likeminded people had brought:

I knew people by name or in passing, but now I feel I have much deeper connections as a result of spending time with small groups on the shared tables

As a result of making friends through Shared Tables, small groups have shared unfacilitated meals or coffee together and gone out to the cinema. Shared Tables has even produced its first *Time to Shine* marriage when romance blossomed for two participants!

Shared tables increased confidence and provided a sense of purpose

Participants of Shared Tables, through developing their own confidence, went on to become volunteers themselves, which in turn increased the number of shared table activities taking place in Crossgates. At the time of writing, five participants had become table hosts and three others had become volunteers in other projects.

For other participants, participating in Shared Tables gave them the confidence to go out more by themselves. For example, one said she previously would not have gone out to the pub or for a meal on her own before getting involved, but now feels able to do so:

I wouldn't have gone for a meal on my own, I might have gone to a café, but a pub or restaurant, I wouldn't do that on my own...now I have been a couple of times [to the shared tables] I would go to a restaurant or pub on my own, I wouldn't dream of doing it alone before.

Another participant is proud of her increased confidence in talking about Shared Tables in the community, both casually at the supermarket checkout and at a marketing stall in the shopping centre.

Before I was involved in Shared Tables I didn't feel valued and felt worthless.... (now) I feel good about introducing new people.

One respondent valued the structure and the feeling of commitment involvement has brought. He feels belongs to a community of friends which brings responsibilities.

It's given me a purpose, structure at the weekends. It makes me fit in with other people rather than pleasing myself.

Participants reported improved mood through increasing social contact

Many who got involved in Shared Tables said it had led to them feeling happier,

Life has meaning now. There is more to life than just waking up and going about routine things, I feel as if I am sharing my life.

It has brought me out and it has given me a new life

It's like sunshine. Sunshine makes me feel better.

Older people are more actively involved in their community

Participants and volunteers felt that participating in Shared Tables had led to them feeling more a part of the Crossgates community, the Delivery Partner working on the project agreed:

It is not just the opportunity to eat, its more than that, it cements social relationships in their own community, I feel this is important, if they go shopping in the local centre they may see these people and say hello

For others it has been a springboard to participation in other activities offered by CGGN, such as art classes and a walking club. Also, as highlighted previously, a few have become volunteers for other projects, with two signing up as volunteer befrienders for another Time to Shine project.

Shared tables have encouraged local businesses to become more age friendly

CGGNS had an ambitious aim of changing the culture of local pubs and restaurants, to ensure they gave more regard to the needs of older people through recognising that they may want to visit a pub and/or go out at night.

Whilst the success of this ambition has been mixed (for example, independent venues were viewed as more age friendly than national chains), there were examples provided of older people feeling welcome and businesses being understanding in terms of not rushing people to finish food, not situating them near a TV or music source, accommodating a preference for round tables and allowing the food bill to be split. An example was provided of one accommodating local business:

[A] place that everyone loves, the manager makes a real fuss, a free drink at the end, he knows who we are, he doesn't rush them, he works well catering for them (Delivery Partner)

Shared Tables has also engaged local businesses to contribute in other ways. For example, one restaurant offered to open early, another donated twenty free meals for a festive celebration and others have donated raffle prizes to CGGNS. One restaurant owner took a participant home in his own car when the taxi did not arrive.

Part of this, of course, was felt to be due to the local business in turn benefitting in terms of increased revenue:

It is a two-way thing, a local business will take note of its customers, and will change, be more age friendly, if they have increased clientele who require it (Delivery Partner)

Barriers and challenges

Shared Tables may not be suitable for people with higher support needs

Projects such as Shared Tables, which require less staff input or provide group activities, may only be suitable for older people who are independently mobile:

[They] need to get to the venue and toilet independently...they also need to order and pay for food (Delivery partner)

Those with a limited income may also find it difficult to participate in an activity such as Shared Tables, as participants are required to pay for their own meal. Even though volunteer hosts gave consideration to cost, this may nevertheless prove too expensive for some.

It is worth noting here that CGGNS ran another strand called *Time Together*: a befriending scheme which paired a younger volunteer with a housebound person to plan, cook and share a meal together in the latter's home (though assessed as more suitable for people with poorer health, this project experienced challenges (see Wigfield and Alden 2017, for more details)).

How to continue facilitating meaningful relationships as membership grows

A challenge is to maintain the intimacy which is attractive to participants and is successful in creating lasting friendships, while extending participation opportunities for more beneficiaries, especially those not already involved in other CDGNS activities.

Model may be less suited to areas which have limited 'assets'

It has been suggested that part of the reason for the success of Shared Tables in Crossgates is that the area has a range of pubs and restaurants and good bus routes. It will be interesting to trace how the pilots running in other areas work, particularly those with more limited local resources.

While one volunteer felt that the Shared Tables model could work anywhere: *It's the people who matter not the area*. It was felt to work especially well in Crossgates as there is an existing centre with other activities facilitating further community involvement. It also offers a base where people can express interest in attending a shared table activity. For this reason, it may be useful for CGGNS to link to a local organisation in areas that they are working in, to ensure that participants have a central *hub* that they can use for communication.

Learning and recommendations

Based on the findings, Shared Tables worked well in Crossgates, with CGGNS awarded a new contract to pilot the model in different geographical areas of Leeds. This type of upscaling is an important way of testing what works and can contribute towards both system change and sustainability. One of the reasons for the success of Shared Tables is perhaps the fact that it is relatively self-sustaining, and in the main, run without paid staff input. It also contributed to capacity building in the local area through engaging local businesses.

For other service providers who wish to run Shared Tables there is some specific feedback on planning the activities, such as the *optimal* table size (6-10 people, so the group is not too large) and timings (around three hours), keeping the cost down and also consideration of accessibility of the venue for which the shared tables are hosted. Feedback suggested that some local businesses were accommodating, such as being willing to provide separate bills or giving people longer to finish their meal, but others were less so. This, of course, will vary across different locations, but is likely to be key to the success of Shared Tables moving forward. It was also felt to work especially well in Crossgates as there is an existing centre (CGGNS) with other activities facilitating further community involvement.

Though all participants said they felt comfortable once they had given Shared Tables a try, some felt nervous on the first visit. One participant said she would tell prospective members: *Don't give it a second thought... Just do it!* However, for some a little more support might be needed and perhaps a buddy type system may be of benefit.

References

- Dunbar, R.I.M. Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology (2017) 3: 198.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40750-017-0061-4>
- Julier, A. P. (2013) **Eating Together: Food, Friendship and Inequality**. University of Illinois Press.

Wigfield, A and Alden, S. 2017 Evaluation of Time to Shine: Year 2: Interim Findings

<https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/local-evaluation>.

Also check out the Time to Shine programme website on: <https://www.timetoshineleeds.org>.