



Setting up a Shared Tables project in your local area

A Time to Shine toolkit written in partnership with Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours' Scheme March 2020

Friendships take time to develop and it can be hard to take the first steps to transform an acquaintance into a true friend. Shared Tables helps to bridge that gap by creating opportunities for older, single people to eat together socially in local restaurants and cafes.

The idea for Shared Tables was devised and delivered by Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours' Scheme (CDGNS) in response to conversations with older people who said they often felt lonely at weekends. The project was funded for four years by the Time to Shine programme.

This toolkit was created by Time to Shine, in partnership with volunteer table hosts, staff and participants at CDGNS. It explains, step-by-step, how to go about arranging your own Shared Tables project, wherever you may live.

CDGNS, one of the 34 Neighbourhood Network Schemes in Leeds, works with older people to reduce social isolation and loneliness, support independence, promote healthy lifestyles and support carers.

Time to Shine is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and takes a 'test and learn' approach to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over.



Background

CDGNS piloted the idea of reserving shared tables in local cafes and restaurants and inviting local older people - who were single, living alone and able to make their own way to the venue - to join the table and enjoy a self-funded meal together with other people. Over the two year pilot period 60 older people participated and feedback was very positive. Time to Shine funded the project for another two years to further develop Shared Tables at CDGNS and test whether the model could be replicated by other organisations in different areas of Leeds.

“My weekends are much better. I have met lots of new people who I hadn’t met before at CDGNS as we attend different activities there. It means that when I go shopping now I bump into people I have met on Shared Tables and get invited to go for coffee so it has had a positive impact for me that is wider than the weekend”

The basics

Shared Tables creates a caring and welcoming space and offers good company, good food, laughter and peer support. Shared Tables happen at the weekends or early evenings when charitable organisations are often closed. Staff and volunteers arrange, reserve and advertise a series of Shared Tables. Older people contact the office to book a place on one or more of the tables.

On the day of the meal, a volunteer table host is the main point of contact. They take responsibility for welcoming people into the group, helping the conversation flow and assisting with practicalities such as food ordering, knowing where the loos are and splitting the bill. The general public in the restaurant won't know that it's a Shared Table - all they will see is a group of 6-8 diners chatting, laughing and enjoying their meal together.

CDGNS hold regular socials for volunteer table hosts so that everyone can get together to share their views on how Shared Tables is working, how participants feel, which venues are popular and how the project could develop in the future.



A Shared Tables toolkit

The project was funded to work with people aged 50+ but the model could be adapted for use with groups of people who share particular interests or life experiences. All Shared Tables must be inclusive, friendly and welcoming.

One person's Shared Tables story

“At my first Shared Table everyone made me feel comfortable, I didn't feel out of place and I was able to relax and enjoy a meal in company. It got to a point where I wasn't cooking and I wouldn't really have a meal at home. It is reassuring to know that there are other people who understand and know what you're going through.

Because the table is booked it removes the fear of rejection that comes with asking people yourself because people can join on these tables as and when they choose.

I feel entirely different now. Life has a meaning. There is more to life than just waking up and going about routine things. I've made new friends and developed friendships that I already had.”



A step-by-step guide to setting up a Shared Tables project

1. Explain the idea behind Shared Tables and consult with your target group(s).
2. Identify popular cafes, pubs and restaurants and check accessibility. Use local establishments (or ones on a bus route) and choose venues to suit a variety of budgets and tastes - some formal restaurants, some less formal pubs and cafes, buffet style, curry, fish and chips etc.
3. Allocate approximately 2 hours of staff time initially to support each Shared Table. This will reduce as a routine is established.
4. Recruit a few table hosts who are sociable, able to relate to the target group for each Shared Table they host and able to make their own way to and from the venue.
5. Staff and volunteer hosts need to work together to prepare the paperwork and agree the practicalities, ensuring that table hosts have all the information they need to host a successful meal.
6. Recreate a trial Shared Table for staff, volunteers and hosts to see how it all works in practice. Discuss how it feels before, during and after taking part. This experience builds empathy and illustrates how it might feel to be new to the experience and is also an opportunity to check accessibility and test the processes and paperwork.
7. Check facilities and accessibility and then plan, reserve and advertise a series of 6 Shared Tables and limit numbers to 6-8 diners to make it easier to take part in all conversations. If there is a lot of interest book 2 smaller tables at the venue instead of one large table.
8. Clearly state the target group for each table - single people, couples or carers for example - and identify a table host who has similar lived experience.
9. Advertise the Shared Tables dates widely and encourage older people to tell others about it. Make it easy for people to book a place on a Shared Table and personally invite some people, if possible.
10. Make it clear that all diners pay for their own food and drinks.
11. Schedule ways to listen to and act on feedback and ideas from diners and table hosts. Find supportive ways to help new and potential hosts ease into the table host role.
12. Show appreciation to table hosts via regular volunteer socials, paid volunteer expenses and lots of positive encouragement.



Understanding the table host role

“I started as a participant but felt I would like to be more involved so volunteered to become a table host. As a table host you’re more involved making sure meals are successful, people are happy and relaxed.”

The role of the table host is primarily to meet and greet older people at the designated venue to provide reassurance of table location and identify themselves as the host.

The host inspires conversation, puts people at ease, makes sure all diners are included in conversation and that new participants are made to feel welcome. Hosts sometimes need to help organise payments, using a simple form, particularly if venues don’t provide guests with separate bills. Tips are separate from the bill and are often left on a saucer on the table.

During quarterly volunteer socials, table hosts agree the rota for the next series of meals and a staff member is the main point of contact if a host needs to cancel. CDGNS suggests that volunteers host a maximum of 2 meals per quarter so that everyone gets a turn.

Shared Tables	
Name	Cost
Starter
Main
Desert
Drink
Total to pay	£



Volunteer table host recruitment

CDGNS recommends recruiting a minimum of 2/3 table hosts to begin with, initially inviting people who are socially confident and already well known to members and/or volunteers. Both male and female table hosts were invited although substantially fewer men volunteered initially and fewer fitted the criteria.

Having several table hosts means that duties can be shared and if one host can't volunteer for any reason the others could step in. Prospective table hosts are invited to shadow an experienced host in order to gain confidence.

A table host's story

“I retired at 65 and lived alone since I was 26. I got involved in CDGNS because I knew when I retired that I wouldn't have the social life I'd had during my working life. Joining as a member really gave me the social inclusion I was looking for.

I was delighted to become a volunteer on this project. I attended the shared tables as a participant originally and then one day a table host volunteer couldn't come so I stepped in. Nowadays, I don't have enough days in the week to fit in all the various activities and interests I have. I don't worry about not seeing people now as I feel part of a family.”

Suggestions for timing meals

CDGNS initially advertised fortnightly Shared Tables progressing to weekly once they became established and the number of participants had grown. Alternating between Saturdays and Sundays provides as much choice as possible and booking tables at the same time helps people to get used to a regular social opportunity.

Most participants at CDGNS prefer lunch or early afternoon meals at weekends.



Table Bookings

CDGNS found it useful to create a booking form which is stored securely in the office. This helps when reserving the table and can be used to tell table hosts who to expect at the meal. When arranging Shared Tables as part of a funded project the booking form can provide monitoring information.

CDGNS gives each diner the phone number for the venue so that they can call on the day if they are delayed or unable to attend. This helps table hosts to keep their own phone numbers confidential.

	<h3>Shared Tables</h3>	
Date:-		Venue:-
Time:-	Phone No:-	Host:-
	Name	Phone Number
1		
2		

Transport and Accessibility

CDGNS developed Shared Tables specifically for people who can make their own way to the venue, can order their own meal and also handle money. Meals happen when CDGNS is closed so participants need to be self-reliant and arranging their own way there means people have more choice and control over when to leave.

Prior to advertising a list of Shared Tables staff or volunteers contact the venues to check accessibility (step free, accessible toilets etc), serving times and the availability of 'early bird' menus, the type of food available and the likely noise levels.

Flexible delivery

Although Shared Tables was initially developed for single people, men's tables, couples tables and mixed tables were trialled in response to feedback. Mixed tables are very popular especially for couples where one partner is very quiet, sometimes due to dementia or deteriorating health, but is still able to participate in social events. Good communication and a willingness to try new approaches help to strengthen the project.

Challenges to consider

- Establishing Shared Tables - this can take a while so don't get disheartened!
- Introducing appropriate ways to evaluate the outcomes for participants
- Managing risk and creating policies, procedures and support mechanisms
- Recruiting enough table hosts
- Managing change in the project as people develop friendships or relationships
- Adapting the project to meet the changing needs of participants
- Addressing any cliques and reiterating the ethos of inclusivity
- Enticing new people to join a Shared Table

Top tips

- Make a courtesy call to participants a couple of days before the meal
- If there aren't sufficient venues in the local area, choose venues on a local bus route near to a bus stop
- Reserve the table in the name of the organisation, or choose a neutral name, considering how diners may feel if it was shouted across a restaurant
- Commit to paying volunteer expenses for table hosts promptly and efficiently
- Accept that some table hosts may wish to donate their expenses back to the project instead of retaining the money
- Actively encourage a person's progression from participant to table host
- Staff involvement is vital to follow up any issues, problems or disagreements
- Build relationships with local café and restaurant owners

Quote from a Shared Tables participant

“It's given me a purpose and structure at the weekends. Makes me fit in with other people rather than pleasing myself, especially during the weekends when I am likely to be by myself. I knew people by name or in passing but now I feel I have much deeper connections now as a result of spending time with small groups on the Shared Tables.”

For more information please visit www.opforum.org.uk/resources

