

Age-friendly case study



Age-friendly communities
Older people eating out together

Shared Tables: Older people eating out together

Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours Scheme CIO and Time to Shine Leeds

Shared Tables, a project developed in the Crossgates area of Leeds, invites older people living alone to enjoy a meal together at a local restaurant. The project offers an alternative to traditional coffee mornings by providing opportunities to socialise at weekends and in the evenings. This simple, successful, volunteer-led model is now being used in other areas of the city.

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It really does make a difference. To know that you can go and meet a group of like-minded people and have a chat while you're having a meal.



Developing and piloting Shared Tables in Crossgates

Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours' Scheme CIO (CDGNS) is a community organisation working with and for older people in the Crossgates area of Leeds to reduce loneliness, support independence and promote health and wellbeing in later life. It is part of the Neighbourhood Network Scheme, which links similar local organisations across Leeds.

CDGNS started developing the Shared Tables project in October 2015, after local older people identified a lack of social opportunities in the evenings and at weekends as a main barrier to social inclusion. While there are often activities available during the working week, evenings and weekends can be particularly lonely.



This project is something that can be pretty much self-governed by older people. It's very light touch in terms of staff time or oversight. People can choose what venues [they go to], they can go every week if they want or they can go once a month, or they can just go now and again. So people have choice and control over their social inclusion.

Claire Lovatt,
Deputy Manager, CDGNS

Shared Tables evolved from a wider project called 'More Than a Mealtime', which recruited students as volunteer 'buddies' to cook a meal in an older person's home. However, they found they struggled to recruit volunteers. Through Shared Tables, they took a slightly different approach, aiming to make it easier for single older people to eat out at local venues in the evening and at weekends in the company of other people. Of the two approaches, it was Shared Tables that took off.

CDGNS worked with their members to identify age-friendly venues in the local area and provide sociable volunteers to facilitate the meals. Initially, meals were fortnightly, progressing to weekly once the project was established; usually on a Saturday or Sunday at lunchtime or in the early evening.



It involves people, virtually exclusively people who live on their own, such as myself. If it wasn't for Shared Tables and you weren't going anywhere with relatives, you'd be stuck on your own. To my mind, it creates a sense of occasion. It takes you away from the mundane routine of doing your washing or being stuck indoors watching television.

Melvin Lamb,
Shared Tables participant and table host

CDGNS already had a strong base of around 80 older volunteers when the project started, from which a group of eight were selected as table hosts, fitting the criteria of living alone, being able to get to the venues themselves and keen to share a meal with others.



[As a table host] what I do is make sure everything is going smoothly and the conversation is flowing, ensure there are no problems paying bills and deal with restaurant staff. It's not a massive responsibility, but it's helpful. I make a point of introducing myself and making newcomers feel welcome. It can be very, very difficult for people. Say, if their partner's died, they can find it very difficult.

Melvin Lamb,
Shared Tables participant and table host

While some of the original table hosts have had to drop out for health reasons, others have signed up to volunteer after attending Shared Tables themselves. The current group of 11 table hosts meets quarterly to choose venues and set dates and times for Shared Tables. This helps ensure venues are suitable in terms of noise levels and accessibility, including taking account of Sunday bus timetables to make sure participants can make use of public transport. The project worker organises these meetings and creates a template for the next few months, which table hosts work together to fill in.



It's all very noisy, it's a bit like an auction; people have to stick their hand up and say 'I'll do that date'. It's quite fast paced, so they all have to keep up with who's doing what date and which venue. It's a good way of getting people together from a social point of view as well. We always do tea and cake, it creates that cohesion amongst the volunteers.

Claire Lovatt,
Deputy Manager, CDGNS

Dates and venues are published in the CDGNS newsletter and the project worker takes bookings from individuals wanting to attend and finalises numbers with venues. They also identify and invite any newcomers to CDGNS who fit the criteria of being able to get to the venues themselves and living alone, including liaising with the facilitator of the bereavement group. In the first round of funding (October 2015 to June 2017), which comes from the Time to Shine programme, Shared Tables took up one day per week of staff time, in the second round (from June 2017 onwards), this increased to two days per week, with much of this time spent on the monitoring and evaluation requirements of funding.

Age-friendly domains covered by the initiative

Domain 4. Social participation

Domain 5. Respect and social inclusion

Impact



People have said how much they've enjoyed it – the volunteers and the people who attend – they've said it's something they would not normally do, to go out for a meal at the weekend.

Wendy Headley,
Project Worker, MAE Care

Over 100 people have now attended at least one Shared Table in Leeds, with one evaluation finding that 63% of respondents reported better wellbeing after being involved in the project. As a result of meeting people at Shared Tables, participants have shared unfacilitated meals or coffee together and gone to the cinema.



For some people it's an absolute lifeline – to be able to get out and talk to people and have a meal – because most people wouldn't go into that type of place on their own.

Anne Cresswell
Shared Tables table host



Shared Tables participants report how the project offers a different experience from traditional social opportunities laid on for older people, because the times, dates and venues for Shared Tables are decided by older people themselves. Being in a smaller group having a meal at a local restaurant at the weekend creates a different atmosphere from larger drop-in events during office hours.

In providing a supportive group of peers, Shared Tables has been beneficial to people suffering mental ill-health and particularly to people beginning to socialise again after bereavement. Table hosts describe how participants share stories about loved ones and feel able to talk openly to a small group with similar experiences, enabling in-depth personal conversations that would be 'very unlikely' at coffee mornings. One participant who had recently lost her husband felt it was the right time for her to start socialising again and, while she didn't know other participants beforehand, left her first Shared Tables event feeling like she had known them for years.



For people who've perhaps never socialised for 50 years without their spouse, it's a big step. Quite a few have joined the bereavement group and then gone on to Shared Tables, which is a really good stepping stone for them making new connections and friends and also people with mental ill-health where they've become socially isolated but they're still very mobile. It's just a more supportive environment to make more meaningful connections, rather than our coffee mornings, which tend to be quite busy, they can be quite overwhelming.

Claire Lovatt,
Deputy Manager, CDGNS

Local venues benefit from group bookings, regular custom and enhanced reputation as age-friendly businesses. When deciding on venues, table hosts try to cater to a range of tastes but favour businesses that value and respect older customers by providing good quality, unhurried service and welcoming, accessible premises. Participants describe how restaurant staff will join tables together, arrange seating, safely store walking aids and cater to specific requirements. One restaurant manager provided free Christmas dinners to thank Shared Tables participants for their custom, and another gave a participant a lift home when his taxi was delayed.



“ It’s nice, as a local restaurant. We see them about once a fortnight. I think they choose us because we make them feel comfortable, we have their favourite dishes, we look after them – that is the main thing.

Restaurant Manager
Leeds

Costs

Shared Tables in Crossgates was commissioned by Time to Shine, a Big Lottery Funded programme managed by Leeds Older People's Forum that aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation in people over 50. CDGNS was awarded £20,000 for the More than a Mealtime project, of which Shared Tables is part, in October 2015. This covered overhead costs and a staff member for one day per week until June 2017. Shared Tables was then awarded £40,000 continuation funding from Time to Shine to share learning across Leeds. This has covered overhead costs and a staff member for two days per week.

Shared Tables participants pay for their own transport, food and drink. Table hosts are reimbursed up to ten pounds for their own meal and drinks. Project workers and table hosts select a range of venues to suit different budgets. Some venues offer early bird menus at discounted cost.

Challenges

As Shared Tables in Crossgates became more popular, opinion was divided on whether to limit table numbers. Some felt that smaller numbers better promoted inclusion in conversation and helped build confidence and connections. Others felt it was harder to get conversation flowing in very small groups, enjoyed larger gatherings and were reluctant to limit table numbers in case this put people off booking. There are also practical considerations in accommodating larger numbers at some venues. Project workers and table hosts identified six to ten as an optimum number of participants and tend to keep tables to a maximum of 15, depending on the venue.



It's more difficult if there's too big a number and you're on a long table. If you're on a round table with up to ten people – that is brilliant. I think from six to ten works best.

Anne Cresswell,
Shared Tables participant and table host

Splitting the bill has sometimes proved challenging, so CDGNS developed a formatted slip of paper to help people keep track of how much their food and drink cost. Table hosts report that this simple bit of paperwork has made it 'much easier' to calculate contributions to the final bill.

While Shared Tables participants went on to volunteer as table hosts in Crossgates, this has not been the experience in Moor Allerton in north Leeds, where Moor Allerton Elderly Care (MAE Care) continues to recruit table hosts from an existing base of volunteers. There are fewer restaurants in Moor Allerton compared to Crossgates, so the choice of venues is more restricted and Shared Tables events are not so frequent.

There tend to be fewer men attending Shared Tables than women, with the female-to-male ratio currently standing at around 2:1 at CDGNS. CDGNS have recently trialled men-only Shared Tables. While no formal feedback has been gathered yet, informal feedback from male participants is that the majority prefer the atmosphere created at mixed gender Shared Tables.

While Shared Tables requires lower staff input than some other projects, it has been helpful to have a central hub (such as CDGNS in Crossgates and MAE Care in Moor Allerton) to publicise events, facilitate further community involvement and offer alternative social opportunities for those who are not able to get to venues themselves or pay for a meal out.

There have been challenges in trying to get more Shared Tables projects off the ground in Leeds. Neighbourhood Network Schemes like CDGNS and MAE Care rely on funding from Leeds City Council and other sources. Some schemes have shown an interest in setting up Shared Tables but have limited capacity to do so.

Passing on the Shared Tables model

The Shared Tables model has now been successfully taken up by MAE Care. The project worker from CDGNS developed a toolkit and supported MAE Care to set up their own Shared Tables project. MAE Care now organises monthly Shared Tables, and all ten events so far have been well attended. Discussions are underway to pilot the model in another two areas of Leeds.

The element of choice and control by the participants themselves means that Shared Tables can be adapted to meet local needs. For example, CDGNS tends to organise evening Shared Tables in summer, as female members have expressed concerns about getting home safely in the dark. However, in Moor Allerton, one female volunteer is keen to organise Shared Tables during the winter evenings, which can be long and lonely.



There are lots of variations of how to get this to work but the main aim is to get people out eating at the weekend, however you do it.

Claire Lovatt,
Deputy Manager, CDGNS



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 ageing-better.org.uk

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The Centre for Ageing Better received £50 million from the Big Lottery Fund in January 2015 in the form of an endowment to enable it to identify what works in the ageing sector by bridging the gap between research, evidence and practice.