



Running a supportive and welcoming group

Time to Shine toolkit
September 2019

Time to Shine has developed new groups and supported people to attend existing groups. Groups can provide regular opportunity for people to get together, share interests and hobbies and feel a connection with other people.

This toolkit highlights our learning to enable and encourage group organisers to further develop supportive and welcoming groups for new members.



Background

Groups provide regular opportunities for people to get together and socialise. This could be to share an interest or hobby or to get together informally for a drink and a chat.

Established groups are a good way to introduce people to each other; they provide an offer to a person to get them involved in the local community and an opportunity for human contact. Groups can provide a supportive friendship network and help to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

For many the idea of attending an existing group is nerve-wracking. Common feelings can include: **Will I know anyone? Will they talk to me? What happens if ...?** It is understandable that many people find reasons not to attend a group activity as the fears can be overwhelming.

When an individual attends a group and has a positive experience the individual can flourish, develop friendships and feel a connection to the community. If the experience is negative and the individual feels unwelcome or excluded this is likely to put them off attending again. It may also put them off attending other groups in future.

Running supportive and welcoming groups requires ongoing work, commitment and regular reviews to assess whether the group continues to be open and friendly.

Supporting people to attend a group

Involving older people in the development of each project has been key to the Time to Shine programme. Developing and running groups that people actually want is crucial. An activity is often a hook to encourage participation.

Groups such as coffee mornings can be beneficial but project workers have found that encouraging people to play games or do activities such as word searches or mindful colouring has been helpful. This ensures everyone can be part of the group without the pressure of conversation.

Projects have developed drop-in or welcome sessions for new members to provide a stepping stone to existing groups and to reduce some barriers.

An assessment of the person's needs is essential to understand whether they would benefit from additional support to connect with others. This additional support may require considerable time and skill. Many workers have attended an activity with the individual and helped them to identify any additional transport or support needs.

It has also been beneficial for the worker to speak to the group leaders to ensure they are aware that a new person may be attending and what support needs they may have. An example of this is enabling the person to sit where they can hear if they have a hearing impairment.

When groups have worked well

There are many examples of great groups which are both open to new members and supportive of existing members. A common trait in such groups is the ongoing effort from those involved to maintain the purpose of the group and to ensure the group is meeting the needs of all of its members.

Groups with a clear purpose and target audience work well, eg. dementia groups, bereavement groups or carers support groups. Such groups provide a shared purpose and understanding of members' needs. This common bond can be beneficial and encourage openness and empathy and attending groups like this can provide a stepping stone to other more general groups. Small groups can also be valuable as a stepping stone to general groups and can provide an opportunity to develop bonds with others in a trusted environment. This has worked when facilitated by a staff member or skilled volunteer. Small groups have enabled individuals to build confidence, recognize their own strengths and rediscover their ability to make conversation.

Both small and larger groups have worked well when all participants are able to shape and contribute to their development. This can be as simple as asking people a theme of the next discussion or helping shape the plan of activities. Skilled and sensitive workers and volunteers can help harness the contribution of those who may feel they have little to contribute. Volunteers are often recruited from previous participants who have been encouraged to value and identify their skills.



Key learning

- Being clear to both staff and volunteers about the purpose of the group; the group belongs to all of its members.
- Being flexible and trying out new approaches is positive and gives permission to people to try new things.
- Consider the needs of the person attending the group and barriers can be removed. Maybe asking the question 'what do you want from this'.
- First impressions count and a bad first impression is really difficult to recover from, however unintentional.
- Not everyone is interested in general groups, but maybe be creative in the offer: Would that person be interested in an activity based group?
- Often the groundwork to enable a person to attend a group is key, get to know their needs and aspirations. Gentle support and encouragement. This tailored approach takes time and resources.

Top tips

- Think about ways to introduce new members
- Welcome the person, having a familiar face or a named person to ask for may make the difference.
- Sit next to someone who staff/volunteer knows will be friendly
- Consciously move people around each month surreptitiously
- Take the time to get to know what people like and are interested in
- Games may work to break barriers
- Checking in with people who have attended especially new people
- Be clear on the roles and expectations of volunteers and use them to help you.
- Be prepared to use negotiation skills and management techniques to effectively support volunteers and address issues.

