

FOOD HERO

The Chatty Café Scheme founder, Alex Hoskyn, explains how getting people talking is bringing together communities and helping to reduce loneliness

I have always loved doing things on my own,' says Alex Hoskyn, 'but there are certain times in your life when you fancy a bit of a chat.' It was a day like this when Alex, a social worker

living in Oldham, had the idea for what would become the Chatty Café Scheme.

Alex was sat in a supermarket café with her four-month-old son, Henry. As a new mum, away from the emails, phone calls and socialising of her regular working day, she was already struck by how few interactions she might have in a 24-hour stretch – even if she was out the house. Feeling a bit fed up, she noticed an elderly lady

by herself, also looking downbeat. On another table was a young man with his carer, both visibly out of conversation. 'We probably could have made each other's day better if we'd all sat together,' says Alex. 'But you don't want to approach people because there's that stigma and caution.'

It gave Alex a thought: what if there was a table for people happy to talk with other customers? In time, this would become the 'chatter and natter' table. First trialled by Alex in an Oldham café in 2017, the Chatty Café Scheme has grown to almost 600 venues taking part

across the UK every week. While the setting can differ – pubs and libraries now take part – the premise is the same: these are simple spaces, with a day and time designated for adults to meet and talk. Some might chat for the time it takes to finish their latte, while others will stay longer, but, importantly, it's open to everyone. 'It's not pitched as just for elderly people, or just mums and babies. It's about mixing people up,' says Alex.

A HELPING HAND

A key part of the scheme is its volunteers, Alex explains. There are those who help run



From left: The Chatty Café Scheme founder, Alex Hoskyn; a 'chatter and natter' table in full flow



DID YOU KNOW?

In addition to 592 UK venues taking part, and 210 table volunteers, the Chatty Café Scheme also has venues participating in Australia. If you'd like to find out more about chatter and natter tables, or volunteer, visit the website or follow @thechattycafe

'It improves people's wellbeing and makes them feel connected with where they live'

the tables in the cafés, not only getting the conversation rolling on the day but helping to establish their spot within

their community. There are also volunteers for the scheme's telephone friendship service. This started when the pandemic put a halt to in-person meets. Alex and her sisters Jenny and Abi, who both manage the Chatty Café Scheme, would take turns making weekly phone calls to anyone who might benefit. The idea stuck – there are now almost 200 telephone volunteers phoning 225 people a week, as well as two weekly virtual Chatty Cafés. 'What's interesting with the virtual ones is we get a lot of men,' says Alex. 'Which is great because men are notoriously hard to reach.'

The Chatty Café Scheme has been lauded for its role in reducing loneliness, with it receiving government awards and Alex getting an OBE in 2021, while many of those that have interacted with the scheme have said it's reduced their experiences of isolation. Part of the scheme's appeal is its open and welcoming approach – Alex has always been careful that the messaging be upbeat and positive, rather than focused on loneliness. 'The aim is that by encouraging human connection and social interaction, we're getting people chatting, and that reduces loneliness along the way,' she says.

That sense of bonding and community building is plain to see. Some of those attending the chatter and natter tables have made new friendships, while others have found other groups and activities simply through having someone to talk to. In its essence, the scheme may only be offering simple interaction, but there's proof that that can go a long way. 'It's human interaction. We're not pitching it as anything more than that. But that improves people's wellbeing, it makes people feel connected to where they live; they have somewhere to go and they get to know faces,' says Alex. 'It's about feeling human.'

For more information on the Chatty Café Scheme, visit thechattycafescheme.co.uk