How we run Free Shops

Umbrella Sussex CIC

Free Shops are community sharing events. We do them as one day physical pop ups. Our Free Shop aim: Build community, include the excluded and reduce landfill.

How they work: People bring things they don't need, and take things they can use. We usually offer tea and coffee and snacks, and a kids activity as we want people to stay and mingle. We let people can take things without bringing anything, and we don't set limits on what people can take.

We've been running Free Shops since 2021, but, there is no "one right way" Our way suits our area, and our aims and principles. These notes are a gift to inspire you to work out your own way.

What's needed to run a Free Shop:

1. People- A crew of people to plan, promote and to run the day- around 8 people
2. Money- a small budget to cover the essentials- your budget will depend on what you decide to provide, what you already have, and local costs.
3. Health and Safety- Public Libability Insurance, a Risk Assessment, First Aid Plan-
4. Venue- a large venue with lots of tables and chairs, access to toilets, and handwashing, space to set up a "cafe" zone and a kids zone, with step free access.
5. Equipment- Dress rails are great, hangers, scales, card, paper and pens, scissors for last minute signs, donation tins, bluetac, bin bags
6. A plan to clear up and take away any left overs
7. Advertising and promotion
8. *Optional- a kids activity*
9. *Optional- a Free Cafe*

People

In advance: A couple of people to organise, plan, promote and make sure all the things on the list are covered.
On the day: 6-8 people, 4 to set up the space and to clear up afterwards, plus 2 on "the door", 2 floating about, 2 for the Free Cafe, 2 for a kids activity.

We usually have a mix of people of different abilities, but you'll need some people who can lift and carry easily, some people who don't mind talking to stangers, and some people who are organised and who like writng things down.

We arrange helpers in advance, they are our core team and will come a couple of hours before we open to set up the space. This means we have a skeleton team whatever

happens.. Often we invite people to come on the day to help out, We ask them to arrive 45 minutes before we open the doors. We have a quick volunteer briefing (where the fire exits are, a reminder not to leave belongings unattended, who to ask for help, how to get a cuppa, what the lunch arrangements are, how to claim expenses)

We encourage participants to help out, for example, after we've greeted people and weighed their donations, we ask them to put their donations out on the relavant tables.

Money

We have ran big budget and low budget Free Shops, depending on our circumstances at the time. The table below is designed to give you a rough idea what you could spend money on. You will need to know local costs to work out your own budget

Catergory	Low Cost	Average	Big Budget
Venue	£0 -If you have free space or can use common land, like a local park	£100- ask around, church halls, community centres	£250- think big- any venues empty in the daytime?
Public Liability surance*	Maybe nothing if you are just a group of friends or neighbours	£40- £60 for a one off event	£300 for annual cover- but check iit's not covered in your groups annual cover
Free Cafe	£20- Just tea, coffee and squash	£150- Tea and Coffee, squash, shop bought cake, biscuits, fruit	£400- Using a local caterer
Promotion- fliers, Posters, local adverts	£10 towards ink and paper for DIY posters	£50 for a couple of thousand self drafed fliers and some posters	£230 – fliers, posters design and printing, local newspaper adverts
Volunteer Costs- Lunch and travel	£0 if you all agree you don't need it	£20- £40-**l**unch and travel- a sandwich and a packet of crisps, plus bus fare or parking	
Kids Activity	£5- Just a packet of felt tips and some paper	£20- Enough for some craft materials	£80- professional fees – say, a facepainter or story teller.

Grants and Full Cost Recovery- Some funders let you include a fair share towards overheads in your grant application. That means you can include a share of your annual insurance costs, and maybe other costs, like internet and software. Check with the funder to see what they will allow

Volunteer costs- We like to make sure our volunteers have a lunch, drinks and, if they need it, travel expenses. If you cover these costs depends on what kind of organisation you are and what you can afford.

Kids Activity- We like to have a kids activity as it ecourages people to hang around, but it's been varied. Once we just had paper and felt tip pens, at another free shop we put out jigsaw puzzles and building blocks that we'd got at another free shop. A few times we had a facepainter- which is a lovely and very popular thing, but can get pricey.

Free Cafe. We don't want people to "shop and run", even if your budget is very limited it's nice to offer hot drinks, squash for kids and biscuits.

Health and Safety

Think about the space you are using and what could go wrong. You might want a First Aider, and you should do a risk assessment. (Risk Assessments are a structured way to think about all the things that can go wrong, and then how to mitigate those risks- you might already do risk assessments in your group, if not, the Health and Safety executive is a good place to start: https://www.hse.gov.uk/

Some notes from the Free Cafe: We put up a sign asking people if they have allergies or dietary needs. If people have a dietary need we are ready to show people packaging, so they can decide if its safe for them. We don't serve unaccompanied children. We ask caterers to provide full written ingredients lists- there are some weird and rare allergies out there. We try to have a stash of gluten free, sugar free, vegan alternatives, and always have plant milk (shmilk).

Venue

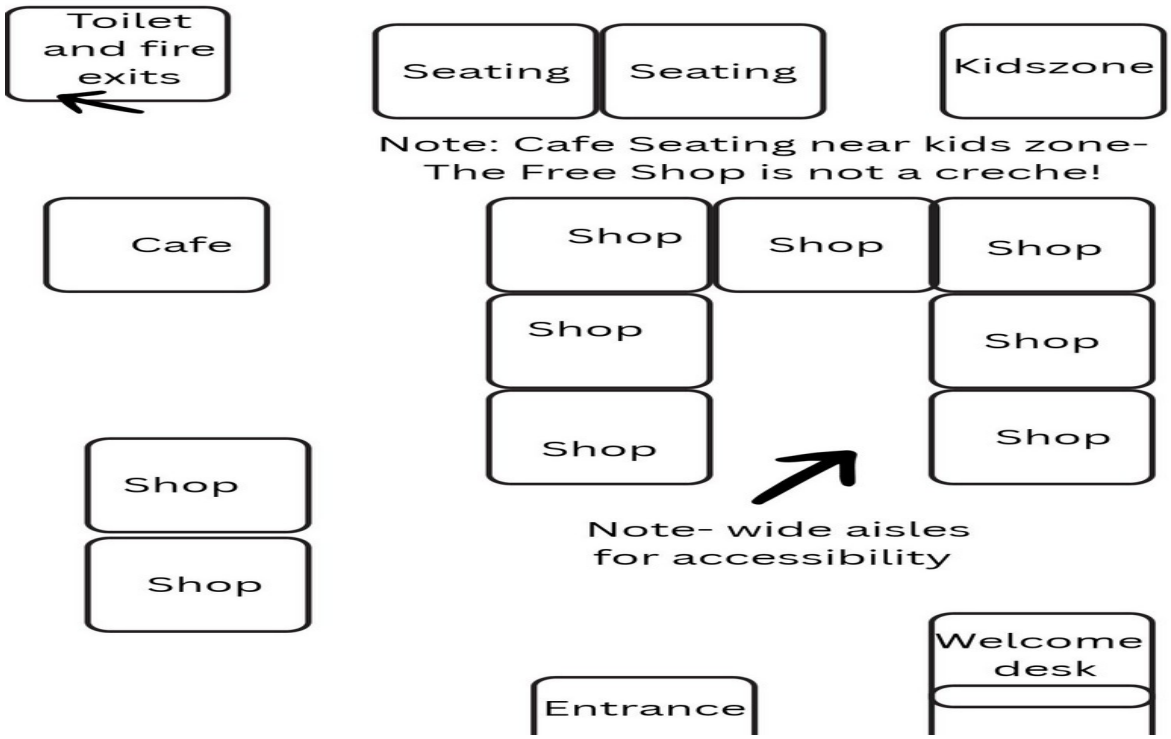
Finding a venue is one of the first things we do when planning an event. Our ideal space is- easy to get to, step free, on a bus route, has parking, and is cheap. We've heard tell of Free Shops in parks or other open spaces, but ours have always been inside.

Once you have your space you'll need to set it up:

A good Free Shop kit for us includes:

Coat hangers, dress rails, signboards, pens, felt tips, string and blue tac, bin bags, a First Aid kit, a hand sewn banner, chalk to draw arrows to the front door, extra paper for last minute signs. Tables and chairs. An attendee counter so we could count how many people came, a bag of spare carrier bags, note paper and scales to weigh donations. (It's a useful thing way to judge how much stuff your Free Shop saved from landfil)

If you run your own free shop we'd love to know how it worked for you, and what you changed or what advice you'd give to others planning their own Free Shop. Info@umbrellasussex.org.uk



We learnt that, it's really important to section off anything that isn't part of the Free Shop, for example, moving volunteers coats and bags into a cordoned off area, it wasn't enough to put things under tables, as people just thought it was donations that hadn't been dealt with yet.

We have a table near the front to greet people, to note and weigh donations, to offer carrier bags and, as people leave, ask them if they want to sign up to our mailing list.

Most of our "shop" was simple tables, and, we put cards out- "kids clothes", "toys", homewares" etc to help people put stuff out in a useful way.

Advertising and Promotion



Don't do all this work for no-one to come- advertise, at least a month ahead- use social media, posters and fliers, press releases, newsletters. Ask your networks to share it: Green Groups, Anti poverty groups in your area, word of mouth. Keep at it!

Theming your Free Shop

We've run special Festive Free Shops- getting people to bring unwanted giftable items, early November is the best time. We served mince pies, and the kids activity was hand drawn gift tags (some card, a hole punch, felt tips and string).

We've run back to school Free Shops with a focus on school uniforms, bags, pencil cases and shoes

Mainly we've run general Free Shops and let people bring what they like, as, they will anyway. People only read headlines and it's easier to just go with the flow!

What Ifs?

What if no-one brings anything?

They will, but it's worth having a few things ready to out out as soon as you open. Usually we have to restrict how much people bring, and it's wise to have a plan for what to do with any leftovers

What if people bring things you don't want- things in need of mending or cleaning?

It helps to have people on the front desk to see what people are bringing – in some cases we've asked people to take things home again, but it's tricky, peoples standards vary widely, and if they took the effort to bring it, rather than putting it in their bin for zero effort, it's because they think it's okay.

What if people take things to sell?

We don't mind what people do with the things they take, and we ask people to give freely without conditions or not at all.

What if people take "too much"?

We ask people to give freely and encourage them to take freely.

At our second free shop we noticed 2 women who arrived right as we opened and seemed to be taking quite a lot of things, so we did 2 things- we introduced ourselves and offered them a cuppa, and we asked them to help put out the donations.

They stayed to the end and helped the whole time, not just putting things out, but washing up too and saying hello to new people as they came in. They shared with us that they were Ukranian refugees, and they had very little, and were choosing summer clothes for them and their children.

A final thought

We've run over 20 Free Shops. We never used to accept any cash donations, but we noticed something unexpected, it made people uncomfortable. People put things back, they stopped their kids taking stuff, they said no to a cuppa, they mistrusted our motives.

A late volunteer of ours suggested we offer "the dignity of choice". Now we have a collection pot on the welcome desk and another at the Free Cafe. They are unobtrusive, we think we have struck the right balance, some people give, some don't, and we might collect £40-80 at an event, which helps towards to costs.