

CHURCH URBAN FUND

CHANGING LIVES AND
COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Places of Welcome Evaluation

Executive Summary

**This summary has been produced
based on the evaluation conducted
by Dr. Heather Buckingham
October 2016**



**PLACES OF
WELCOME**

About Places of Welcome

Places of Welcome began in 2013 as a development of the Birmingham Social Inclusion process 'Giving Hope, Changing Lives'. It is a network of small community groups, including faith communities, who aim to offer an unconditional welcome to local people for at least a few hours each week. The primary aim of the Places of Welcome network is that 'Every neighbourhood has places where all people feel safe to belong, connect and contribute'. The network has grown rapidly and there are now over 120 Places of Welcome. There are five guiding principles which all Places of Welcome agree to, known as the '5 Ps':

- **Place:** An accessible and hospitable building, open at the same time every week.
- **People:** Open to everyone regardless of their circumstances or situation, and staffed by volunteers.
- **Presence:** A place where people actively listen to one another.
- **Provision:** Offering free refreshments (at least a cup of tea and a biscuit) and basic local information.
- **Participation:** Recognises that every person coming to a Place of Welcome will bring talents, experiences and skills that they might be willing to share locally.

Places of Welcome have developed through Church Urban Fund's (CUF) Together Network, a network catalysing social action and bringing about positive change in lives and communities across England.

Evaluation Approach and Methodology

This report summarises the key findings of an evaluation of Places of Welcome conducted from May – August 2016. The evaluation aimed to identify the key impacts of Places of Welcome for those that participate in them. It was commissioned by CUF and conducted by an independent consultant working collaboratively with CUF Research and Policy staff. The evaluation focused on the West Midlands area (Birmingham, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Sandwell).

The methods used to gather evidence included interviews with two Area Coordinators and ten Places of Welcome Coordinators; a survey of Places of Welcome Coordinators and others attending a Places of Welcome Midlands event in June 2016; participant observation visits at five Places of Welcome; and a survey of Places of Welcome participants.



Key Impacts of Places of Welcome

Meeting people, building relationships, and reducing isolation

In the participant survey,



of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had got to know new people by coming to the Place of Welcome.

Among survey participants, there was widespread agreement with the statement that 'coming to a Place of Welcome makes me feel more connected with the local community', with 55% (147 people) strongly agreeing and 36% (96 people) agreeing with this. Participant observation and interviews with Place of Welcome Coordinators also indicated that Places of Welcome were contributing to alleviating isolation, particularly for people who lived alone or had few other opportunities for social interaction.

For example, at St Peter's, Walsall, it was clear that for some of those attending, the laughter and conversation they enjoyed with others there was very important to them: one participant explained that she didn't know many people locally and mostly chose to keep herself to herself, partly because of fear and to avoid trouble. At The Pod in Nechells, Birmingham, participants asked after each other's family members and knew about things going on in each other's lives such as holidays, children's birthday parties, and babies getting jabs done. This demonstrated a depth and continuity of relationship, as well as trust, amongst participants.

Opportunities to participate

Encouraging participation, rather than having a 'them and us' relationship between the people running a Place of Welcome and those who attend it, is an important aspect of Places of Welcome. Out of 35 coordinators, helpers and participants who responded, 86% agreed that some people who came along to their Place of Welcome had increased their level of participation in it. The forms that this participation took varied from place to place, but included activities like serving tea and coffee and helping to clear up. Key factors that seemed to influence opportunities for participation were the scale of the Place of Welcome (i.e. numbers attending), where it was based (and what else went on there) and the vision, ideas and aspirations of the people involved.

In Yardley Wood, a mother who had recently moved to the area had been directed to the Place of Welcome after receiving assistance from the foodbank on the same site: she now attends regularly and uses her skills to offer haircuts or eyebrow threading to those attending the Place of Welcome who would like this. The coordinator of Summerfield Place of Welcome explained that participants would sometimes exchange items that they no longer needed with each other, saying that it gave people an opportunity to be kind to each other. Several coordinators said that participants exchanged information about local activities or services with one another.



Connecting communities

In the participant survey,

73%



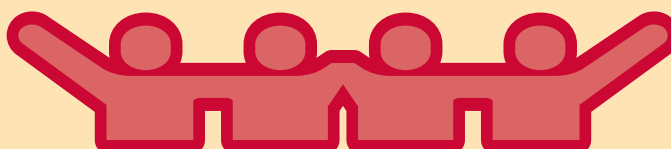
of respondents said they had got involved in other activities locally that they heard about through coming to a Place of Welcome.

Places of Welcome were also connecting communities by providing opportunities for people to meet others who lived near them, who they may not otherwise have met, including those from different social, ethnic or religious backgrounds to themselves.

The coordinator at The Thomas Project said they had seen people meet there, realise they lived near each other, and start getting to know each other and helping each other out outside the Place of Welcome. Others described opportunities for relationships to form between people from different backgrounds: at St George's Hub, for example, a man from an Asian background said that he had appreciated opportunities to get to know people from other backgrounds there.

Building confidence and resilience

80%



of respondents to the participant survey felt that getting involved in a Place of Welcome had made them feel more confident.

Participants in the Midlands Event survey were asked to give an example of how their Place of Welcome had made a difference to someone, perhaps at a time of difficulty or distress. Of the 31 examples given, 8 mentioned providing comfort, company or a place to talk for people who had been bereaved, 4 mentioned people experiencing health issues, and 2 referred to people experiencing difficult family relationships, where involvement in the Place of Welcome was helping to bring about reconciliation.

During participant observation visits, some of the people attending Places of Welcome spoke about their experiences of domestic violence, loneliness, bereavement and health problems: it seemed that the Places of Welcome were serving as safe places for these things to be talked about on occasion, but also as places where relationships could be built that enabled people to find support and purpose beyond their own immediate circumstances.



Key Themes and Recommendations

- **Keeping it Simple.** The simplicity of Places of Welcome, both in terms of the '5 Ps', and the practical process of setting up and running one, was seen by coordinators as an attractive and important feature.
- **Importance of the Network.** Being part of a network was one of the features that coordinators identified as unique about Places of Welcome. The Places of Welcome network has grown rapidly and there are now over 120 Places of Welcome. The majority of these are in the West Midlands but the geographical reach of the network continues to expand and Places of Welcome have been set up in the Wirral, Greater Manchester and Bradford, amongst other locations in the UK. Several coordinators spoke appreciatively of the support they had received from Area Coordinators, particularly during the set up phase. Some valued opportunities to meet and talk with other people involved in Places of Welcome at events organised for the network.
- **Attracting new people to attend Places of Welcome.** The value of even very small gatherings for those who attend should not be underestimated, but in many cases there is potential for more people to benefit, and having a reasonable 'critical mass' is likely to help maintain volunteer motivation and make it easier to welcome newcomers.
- **Having sufficient and sustainable volunteer support in every Place of Welcome.** Shared responsibility for making the Places of Welcome happen is likely to make it more sustainable for those involved in running it.
- **Recognising and respecting the specific faith-motivations** of many Place of Welcome volunteers and helpers, whilst increasing the diversity of venues and ethnic and faith groups involved, is likely to further strengthen the movement.



Conclusion

The findings presented in this report suggest that Places of Welcome are providing safe spaces in local communities in which people from a variety of backgrounds – including those who are otherwise socially isolated – are building friendships and finding ways of participating or contributing, both within and beyond the groups themselves. It is clear that the Network has grown substantially in a relatively short period of time, and there is strong evidence to suggest that the Network is providing opportunities for people to meet and get to know others from their local neighbourhood they may not otherwise have met.

Conversations with participants during this research suggested that for many, the Place of Welcome was helping them to feel less isolated and more connected to others in their community. There was evidence of participants becoming more actively engaged, either in helping at the Place of Welcome itself, or in other activities in the local community: for some, this certainly marked a growth in confidence too. Importantly, Places of Welcome has generated – or tapped into – considerable energy and enthusiasm amongst those who have become involved. Coordinators and others involved in making Places of Welcome happen showed a strong level of commitment to the Places of Welcome ethos and to the goal of providing spaces in which all people can feel safe to belong, connect and contribute.

Author:

Dr Heather Buckingham

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Charity number: 297483

Church House,
27 Great Smith Street,
London,
SW1P 3AZ

T: 0207 898 1647

E: enquiries@cuf.org.uk



www.cuf.org.uk



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