



NEAR NEIGHBOURS SUMMARY FINAL EVALUATION

This summary has been produced based on the evaluation conducted by brap, a charity transforming the way we think and do equality.

FEBRUARY 2019

brap
making equality work for everyone

**NEAR
NEIGHBOURS**
BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

CONTEXT

The Near Neighbours programme was launched in 2011 and is funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government. Near Neighbours brings people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in.

NEAR NEIGHBOURS ACHIEVES THIS IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

- Small grants (between £250-£5000) are available to local groups and organisations who bring together people from different backgrounds in a local area to improve the local community.
- Training and workshops on topics such as project planning, volunteer management, public speaking, and fundraising are offered to equip individuals and organisations (particularly those from traditionally excluded groups) to play an active and constructive role in civil society. This is delivered by Near Neighbours regional coordinators and by Near Neighbours' national partners (Christian Muslim Forum, Nisa-Nashim, and Council of Christians and Jews).
- Near Neighbours' nine regional hubs, each staffed by a coordinator, function as local focal points for Near Neighbours activities. Responsibilities of the coordinators include brokering relationships between local organisations, building interfaith networks, mentoring aspiring leaders, organising and facilitating events, and feeding into local government integration strategies.

An external evaluation was commissioned to explore the long-term impact of Near Neighbours, examining how and to what extent Near Neighbours has developed local leadership, built the capacity of community organisations, and contributed to improved social cohesion and integration. The evaluation was conducted by brap between August 2018 and January 2019.

METHODOLOGY

THE EVALUATION INCLUDED THREE PHASES:

- First, a preparatory phase was undertaken to establish relevant outcome indicators that could be used in the evaluation and a set of 'programme mechanisms' that could be further tested.
- Second, an online survey was shared with small grantholders. 275 people responded (about 23% of the target sample). Another online survey was shared with individuals who had received leadership support from Near Neighbours coordinators or national partners to establish the impact this had upon them and their organisations. 176 people responded (about 26% of the target sample).
- Third, interviews and focus groups were carried out in four local areas (Birmingham, the Black Country, Greater Manchester, and Lancashire) where Near Neighbours has been active to gain additional information about the impact of the programme and the context within which outcomes are achieved. 64 people were engaged in this phase.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

The external evaluation evidenced a number of significant and positive changes for individuals and organisations who have received Near Neighbours support.

For small grantholders, the evaluation survey revealed the following outcomes:

INCREASED CAPACITY:

73% reported that Near Neighbours support has increased their ability to network and build partnerships.

IMPROVED COHESION:

81% said involvement with Near Neighbours has made them more confident challenging intolerant or prejudiced views.

SUSTAINED COLLABORATION:

88% are continuing to work with different faith or ethnic groups as a result of engaging with Near Neighbours.

ENGAGING GRASSROOTS GROUPS:

for **28%** of respondents, Near Neighbours was the first grant they applied for. This indicates that small grants are reaching less established organisations and equipping them to make a bigger impact in their communities.

For individuals who have participated in Near Neighbours leadership strengthening activities, the evaluation survey highlighted the following positive changes:

INCREASED CONFIDENCE:

90% reported feeling more positive about the possibility of making a difference with other groups in their area as a result of engaging with Near Neighbours.

INCREASED COLLABORATION:

84% have identified a common goal or interest with someone from a different background as a result of their engagement with Near Neighbours.

INCREASED CAPACITY:

75% now feel they are better able to work with marginalised groups as a result of Near Neighbours.

CHANGED ATTITUDES:

40% of respondents claimed involvement with Near Neighbours has led them personally to question a belief/assumption or think differently about an issue.

KEY FINDINGS: SMALL GRANTS

Demographics and reach

Small grantholders have engaged people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds in their projects. About 77% of projects have engaged Asian people, for example, while 20% have engaged Chinese people. Projects have also been successful in engaging women, particularly those from historically harder to reach communities. In part, this appears to be because projects are adept at creating safe, open environments in which women from particular religious and cultural backgrounds feel welcome. For 28% of respondents, Near Neighbours was the first grant they applied for. This indicates that small grants are reaching less established organisations and equipping them to make a bigger impact in their communities.

Increased knowledge and skills

Many grantholders have found delivering a Near Neighbours project has helped them develop important skills. For example, 73% of respondents reported that support has increased their ability to network and build partnerships, and 59% of respondents reported that support from Near Neighbours has increased their fundraising skills. Participants also relayed how delivering a small grants project allowed them to get to grips with the nuts and bolts of running a project such as: organising and running an event; project planning; and recruiting and enthusing volunteers.

Challenging attitudes and building bridges

Significantly, 81% of respondents to the online survey said involvement with Near Neighbours has made them more confident challenging intolerant or prejudiced views. Generally, respondents claimed that meeting people from other faiths gave them a greater understanding of their cultures and beliefs, which in turn made them more confident challenging stereotypes. However, perhaps the most significant learning interviewees relayed developing as a result of running a grants project was a greater understanding of the needs of people in their local community. As a result, grantholders are now developing their projects to respond to issues such as mental ill health and debt advice.

Relationships developed through small grants projects

More than two thirds of respondents to the online survey reported project participants have continued to meet, socialise, and work with people from different ethnic and faith backgrounds outside of the project. There are numerous examples of project beneficiaries emotionally supporting people from different backgrounds who are going through issues such as bereavement, domestic abuse, and marital separations. In addition, some project beneficiaries have also provided more practical support, such as providing childcare, researching local provision on issues such as social housing, and even providing financial help to those in need.

AT A GLANCE...

73%



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28%



of respondents state that Near Neighbours was the first grant they have applied for.

Community resilience and cohesion

It is clear that the relationships being developed through small grants are helping to generate trust, dispel myths, and reduce barriers between people from different ethnic and faith backgrounds. Not only does this have an immediate impact in helping people develop links across cultural and faith boundaries, it is also providing individuals with the security to have potentially challenging and honest conversations. As a result, many people have felt able to discuss their feelings with, and ask questions to, other communities after potentially divisive events such as terror attacks. There is some evidence that in doing so, they have better understood the communities involved and have been able to challenge prejudiced views in their homes and schools.

In addition, a range of Near Neighbours funded projects are providing migrants with the tools they need to integrate more effectively into society (such as access to English language skills). There is evidence that because of the relations growing out of small grants projects, some of these services are being maintained through informal networks of mutual support (for example, individuals providing 'care packages' to new migrants and refugees moving into a neighbourhood).

CASE STUDY



The Women First Group is an all-women's inter-faith group located in Smethwick.

It has been running for a few years ever since it started as a Near Neighbours-supported project. The group provides a space for women of different faiths to spend time together and in doing so gives them the opportunity to share knowledge of their faith, form friendships, and have fun.

Through activities like its annual Christmas pudding making session, women of different faiths and backgrounds have formed long lasting and meaningful friendships. As one of the group's participants put it: 'We've have got our own WhatsApp group where we chat and we all cheer each other on when people have achieved something or done something. So it's quite a good group in that sense; we all come together'.

An equivalent men's group has also been established in the same area. Participants explained how friendships developed after people attended events and activities during which they deepened their understanding of each other's faiths and religions. Recently, the men decided to take a tour of the UK, showing each other where they 'came to faith'. An intense and illuminating experience, the tour strengthened the bonds of friendship between some of the members to the extent that they refer to each as 'brothers'.

KEY FINDINGS: LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Capacity and confidence of emerging leaders

90% of respondents to the online survey reported feeling more positive about the possibility of making a difference with other groups in their area as a result of engaging with Near Neighbours. Many people relayed how local coordinators built their confidence simply by listening to their ideas and offering encouragement. However, coordinators have also taken practical steps to visibly demonstrate to people that they have the skills and ideas to improve their local area (most commonly, by encouraging people to submit applications to Near Neighbours and supporting them to do so).

Many women reported that because the community sector has a high proportion of men in leadership roles, it can take courage for women to perceive themselves as qualified and capable of stepping into leadership. In this respect, many cited how Near Neighbours' Women in Leadership courses gave them the confidence to get more involved in their communities. Participants also discussed developing more 'technical' skills too. Many people reported becoming better at bid writing, for example, as a result of the feedback they received from coordinators on their applications.

Attitudes and behaviours of leaders

40% of respondents claimed involvement with Near Neighbours has led them to question a belief/assumption or think differently about an issue. The most common issue people cited was perceptions of Muslims. Indeed, some participants discussed how activities arranged by local coordinators allowed them to develop genuine friendships with people from different faiths, which in turn has created levels of trust and familiarity that is allowing people to have difficult, challenging conversations about contentious topics such as faith and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights. Many participants also talked more generally about recognising that the Muslim community is just as eager to engage in cohesion work as other groups.

In addition to these changes in attitudes, participants also discussed the practical impact Near Neighbours' leadership development has had on their work. For example, 84% of respondents have identified a common goal or interest with someone from a different background as a result of their engagement with Near Neighbours. In addition, participants are now more likely to challenge negative stereotypes from colleagues and friends; invite people from different backgrounds to community events; and initiate social action. Some participants discussed declining invitations to speak at public events and nominating someone from a marginalised group instead, while others talked about becoming more inclusive in their recruitment of staff. 75% of participants feel they are better able to work with marginalised groups as a result of their involvement with Near Neighbours.

AT A GLANCE...

90%



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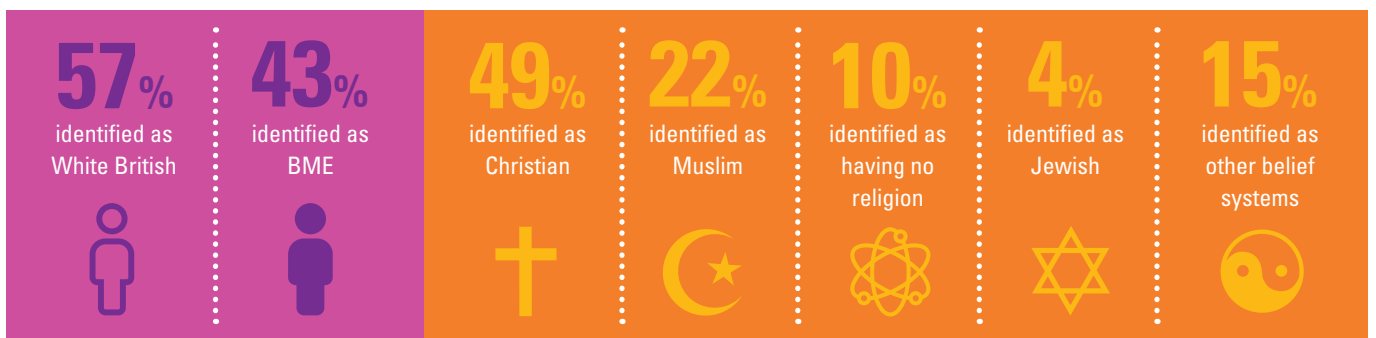
now feel they are better able to work with marginalised groups as a result of Near Neighbours.

Leadership impact

As a result of their involvement in Near Neighbours, participants have engaged in a range of activities – many of which participants claimed they would never have had the confidence to do. For example, participants report having more confidence to promote their projects and the learning arising from them on local and national media; having the confidence to get more involved with interfaith and inclusion work nationally; and having the confidence to set up programmes and initiatives to respond to local challenges. Participants are also more willing to engage with local stakeholders to lobby on particular issues and ask for funding.



THE SURVEY SAMPLE:



* The 2011 Census figures for England and Wales are 86% White and 14% BAME. Census data show that 59.3% identify as Christian, 4.8% as Muslim, 0.5% as Jewish, 3.1% as other belief system, and 25.1% as having no religion.



HUBS AND COORDINATORS:

Promoting community leadership and partnerships

There is strong evidence that Near Neighbours coordinators are playing a central role in supporting small grant holders to develop strong projects, building the confidence and capacity of emerging leaders, and feeding into integration strategies in dialogue with local government.

Coordinators use a variety of approaches to support local leaders and organisations, ranging from formal seminars to informal lunch meetings and networking opportunities. Many participants value these opportunities to engage with other organisations and stakeholders, and there is evidence that community groups are using them as opportunities to learn more about local funding priorities and develop partnerships.

One participant commented: 'Our Near Neighbours coordinator is well tuned into the issues of our local area and thinks strategically to use the resources available to make a sustainable difference; for example, she encourages groups to work collaboratively and promotes cross-cultural exchange modelling'.

Local authorities also value the access hub coordinators have to local communities, and regularly draw on their help when organising consultation

meetings on policies and strategies. There is evidence that Near Neighbours has had an important role feeding into the local authority integration strategies in each of the four sites focused on in this research. Stakeholders tend to seek hub coordinators' support partly because they are so well networked in their local area, and partly because Near Neighbours is a trusted brand with its beneficiaries. In addition, some hubs have demonstrated they are adept at translating community knowledge into strategic recommendations and actions.

Impact on the wider community and civil society

There is evidence that as a result of the Near Neighbours programme, the faith sector in particular areas of the country is now more inclusive, particularly towards women. Furthermore, the community sector more generally is more diverse and features a greater array of innovative activities. This is in large part due to the willingness of Near Neighbours to fund 'riskier' – and even radical – projects. Many grantholders value the flexible support that coordinators offer during the application and implementation stages, enabling them to develop projects as they progress. As such, many participants report that the community sector in their area is now more responsive to the needs and lived experience of local people.



CONCLUSION

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that Near Neighbours is strengthening relationships across lines of ethnic and religious difference, building the capacity of grassroots leaders and organisations, and facilitating integration in their regions of activity.

As a result of engaging with Near Neighbours, small grantholders have grown in confidence, capacity, and collaboration in their communities. Relationships developed through small grants projects are leading to genuine and sustainable friendships between people from different faith and ethnic backgrounds. Not only is this leading to mutual support between groups – such as providing childcare or emotional support on issues like domestic abuse – it is encouraging honest and challenging conversations, which in turn are helping communities to become more resilient in the face of potentially divisive events.

The work of Near Neighbours is equipping and enthusing leaders – including women, youth people, and members of traditionally excluded groups. These leaders are now more confident in challenging negative attitudes, working with other faith and ethnic groups, and initiating projects to bring positive change to their communities.

Because of their breadth of community relationships and depth of insight into cohesion issues, Near Neighbours coordinators are providing valuable support to both grassroots leaders and local government. Their expertise and mentorship are contributing to a more diverse and innovative voluntary sector, and their collaborative approach is fuelling optimism about the prospect of meaningful integration.



ABOUT THE REPORT AUTHORS

brap is a charity transforming the way we think and do equality. Led by Dr Asif Afridi and Joy Warmington, PhD, the brap research team have extensive experience working with marginalised groups to understand how 'cohesion' and 'integration' are conceptualised and promoted within grassroots communities. The Near Neighbours evaluation was conducted by Asif Afridi, Ghiyas Somra, and Claire Christopher. For more information about brap and their research, please visit www.brap.org.uk.

NEAR NEIGHBOURS: CENTRAL TEAM



Paul Hackwood
Executive Director



Elizabeth Carnelley
Programme Director



Ali Khimji
Grants Coordinator



Florence Akuffo
Programme Administrator



Jessamin Birdsall
CUF Research &
Evaluation Manager



Lazzaro Pietragnoli
Comms & PR
Manager

NEAR NEIGHBOURS: HUB COORDINATORS



BIRMINGHAM
Rabiyah Latif



BLACK COUNTRY
Ruth Burgess



EAST LONDON
Marzena Cichon-
Balcerowicz



EAST MIDLANDS
John McCallum



**GREATER
MANCHESTER**
Samra Kanwal



LANCASHIRE
Lynne Mitchell



LUTON
Kim Greig



PETERBOROUGH
Femi Olasoko



**WEST
LONDON**
Elisabeth Fewkes



**WEST
YORKSHIRE**
Kaneez Khan

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Near Neighbours, 27 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ
t: 0207 898 1508 | e: hello@nearneighbours.org.uk | w: www.near-neighbours.org.uk

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