



Near Neighbours Small Grant Fund 2016/17 Evaluation

Executive Summary

**This summary has been produced
based on the evaluation conducted
by Dr Sophie E. Bremner
May 2017**

About Near Neighbours

The Near Neighbours programme, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, aims to bring people together in communities that are ethnically and religiously diverse. The work of Near Neighbours enables people to get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate on initiatives that improve their local communities. This is achieved through the capacity building work of Near Neighbours' local coordinators and national partners; programmes of leadership development; and a small grants fund that resources and catalyses social action in diverse communities.

The Near Neighbours small grants fund provides grants of £250 to £5,000 to support projects which:

- Bring together peoples of two or more different faiths and/or ethnicities to build friendships and develop relationships of trust;
- Work locally, enabling people from the same street, estate or neighborhood to come together;
- Work sustainably, nurturing long term relationships that will last beyond the period of funding;
- Work to improve the community, making it a better place to live;
- Involve people from more than one faith group or ethnicity in planning the project and making it happen.

This report explores the impact of Near Neighbours' small grant fund administered in the 2016/17 funding cycle, focusing on two of the programme's key aims: bringing together people of different faiths and ethnicities to build relationships of trust; and encouraging people to work together to make their communities a better place to live. In the 2016/17 funding cycle, Near Neighbours awarded grants to 311 projects, with the average grant totalling £3391.

Evaluation Approach and Methodology

The evaluation was based on a survey of small grants project participants across England, completed by 581 individuals, and qualitative research on a subset of the projects.¹ The qualitative research included 12 case studies and telephone interviews with the organisers of 16 further projects. All of the projects that formed part of the qualitative research were based in one of three Near Neighbours Hubs: East London, East Midlands and West Yorkshire.²



Key Findings

- **Diversity:** Small grant project participants were ethnically and religiously diverse. Survey participants were 37% Asian, 13% Black, and 31% White British. In terms of faith, 39% identified as Muslim, 31% Christian, 4% Hindu, 4% Sikh, 3% Jewish, 12% as non-religious, and 1% Buddhist. Participants included refugees, asylum seekers, elderly people, men and women, youth and adults.
- **Increased social interaction:** 97% of respondents said they had met people who were from different faiths or ethnicities because of participating in a small grant-funded project. Participants reported a reduction in feelings of isolation and loneliness, which was particularly significant for vulnerable or marginalised groups such as recently arrived refugees and the elderly.
- **Increased social action:** Grantees implemented a range of projects to improve their communities, including homelessness interventions, girls empowerment workshops, renovating a community café, providing immigration advice, and volunteer training.
- **Improved understanding between groups:** 93% of respondents agreed that “because of the project, I feel I understand people in my local community who are from different religions or ethnic groups better.”
- **Increased trust:** 86% of respondents agreed that “because of the project, I now feel I trust people in my local community more.”
- **Strengthened sense of belonging:** 93% of respondents said they felt “more connected to their local community” as a result of participating in the project.
- **New skills gained:** 90% of survey respondents agreed that they had developed or learnt a new skill through participating in a small grant-funded project (including CV development, leadership, interpersonal skills, upcycling, and gardening).

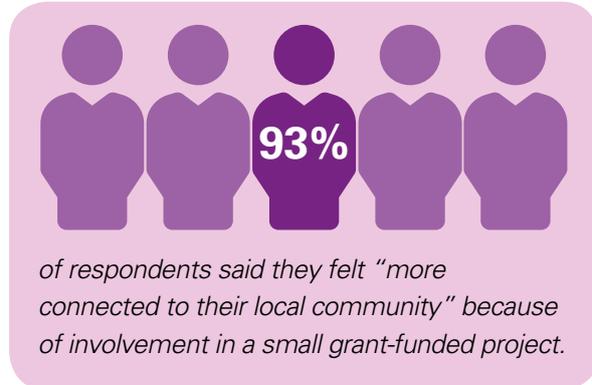


Key Findings

1. Strengthening belonging

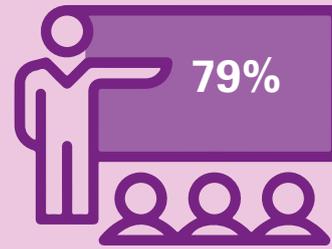
Individuals can feel low levels of belonging for a number of reasons, including isolation, mobility constraints, or social and cultural barriers. By bringing people together in a safe environment, Near Neighbours is overcoming these barriers and enabling people to confidently engage with their neighbours. The outcome of increased belonging was significant for long-established residents and more recent arrivals alike. One participant shared that as a result of being part of a Near Neighbours project, “I feel more connected with my community. I don’t go out much due to mobility and health issues, but I always come home happier. I am building my confidence as I used to get very nervous prior to attending this group.”

Near Neighbours small grants have enabled individuals to deepen their sense of belonging to each other and to their neighbourhoods and wider communities. This was the case with participants of the memory café project run by the Muslim Community Organisation – Nottingham (MCON) in Sneinton. The adults involved in the project (a diverse group of Muslims and Christians) have now been meeting regularly for two years, far longer than the initial small grant-funded phase of 10 weeks. “It’s rekindled pride in Sneinton,” Nadeem explained, both for those born in the UK and those who have migrated to the area. The jointly run café has given the group a shared sense of purpose and pride in their community as they work together.



2. Catalysing change in the community

In addition to facilitating a deeper sense of belonging among participants, Near Neighbours small grants have catalysed concrete changes in the communities where they have been implemented. Social action projects supported by Near Neighbours include homelessness interventions, girls' empowerment workshops, renovating a community café, providing immigration advice, and volunteer training.



of survey respondents reported that being part of these projects gave them greater skills or knowledge to try to change things in their local community.

Though Near Neighbours-funded projects are small in scale, they have demonstrated the capacity to motivate and equip people to make a real difference together. In some cases, this has taken the form of improving the physical environment through litter clean ups or refurbishing community spaces. In other cases, the group developed an understanding that they could enact change in the community through more diffuse, longer-term impacts on society: by breaking down barriers and increasing knowledge and understanding of people from different faiths, cultures and outlooks. The findings of the evaluation suggest that getting people together, with a common purpose or activity, not only increases a sense of belonging but also sets in motion future positive change.

Community Café (Applecrtlive) – East London Hub

Applecrtlive is an arts charity which focuses on community theatre and is based in an old Methodist church in Plaistow. The Near Neighbours small grant helped the charity renovate a dilapidated space within the building to create a community café – a place for people to spend time together and a new hub for community events. The café has hosted events such as poetry readings, art exhibitions with local schoolchildren and BAME artists, parent and baby groups, craft events for children and quiz nights. People using the space include youth groups, religious groups, artists and potters, a local choir (which includes refugees), and other local residents. In an area with few healthy eating options or pleasant places to have coffee and conversation, the café has created an alternative, welcoming community space. The volunteers who help run the space are ethnically and religiously diverse (including Somalis, Eastern European and White British people). Since the opening of the café, there has been a significant rise in people volunteering.

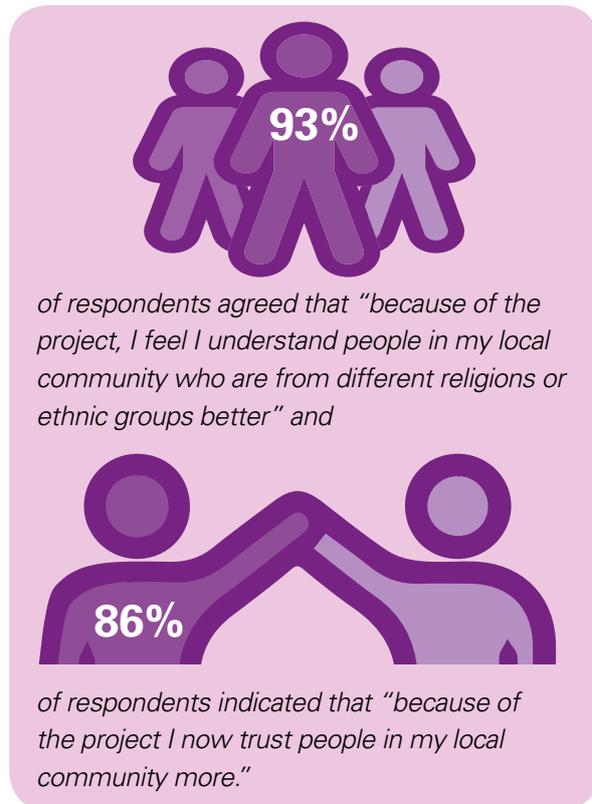
3. Building relationships of trust and understanding

Through these shared activities, participants in small grant-funded projects not only met new people, but had opportunities to understand people of different cultures and faiths and often to build relationships of trust.

A number of people reported that as a result of engaging with neighbours, they were challenged to change some of their negative views and stereotypes about people different to them. For example, one participant reflected that, "I used to see a Muslim as a potential bomber. Now I think that in the community there are just normal people living a normal life."

Though language differences created a challenge to communication in some projects, participants nevertheless experienced a sense of camaraderie that was psychologically supportive.

Some participants formed friendships that continued beyond the life of the project, leading to deeper mutual understanding and support.



Eat Well for Less project (The Anchor Project, Bradford)

The Eat Well for Less project brought together women, including asylum seekers, from diverse backgrounds (including British-Pakistani, Albanian, Congolese, and Iranian, among others) living in a more deprived part of the city, to share recipes, cook healthy dishes together and also learn about budgeting with regards to food shopping. In addition to the regular women's meetings, the project had a few sessions for men (predominantly Nigerian and Pakistani). The project was participatory in its planning, responding to the interests and ideas of the women involved. Although there were language barriers, friendships were made and the more informal structure of the sessions allowed for conversations on more sensitive cultural issues to arise, including the wearing of the hijab among some of the women. Although the project has not continued beyond the grant funding period, the women hope to use its success to help kick-start future projects on food and healthy eating.

Sustainability

A number of projects that were funded by Near Neighbours in 2016/17 have been able to continue through securing further funding, whilst others found a way to continue projects without further funding. Project organisers who have secured additional funding acknowledge that the small grant funding played a key role in that process, by inspiring new ideas and by building organisational capacity to successfully apply for grants. The impact of small grants continues in diverse ways, even if the initial project is no longer active in the same form. For example at CATCH, a volunteer-led, award-winning youth and community development charity in Leeds, volunteers who had participated in the small grant-funded development programme went on to develop their own projects and train other volunteers.

Conclusion

Outcomes of building trust, increasing belonging, and catalysing wider social change can be challenging to measure. However, the quantitative and qualitative data from the evaluation suggest that the small grants programme is enabling people and communities to progress towards these significant outcomes. A number of project organisers expressed that the post-Brexit socio-political climate made initiatives that brought people together all the more important. While Near Neighbours grants are small in size, the relational approach of the projects coupled with the dedication of the organisers, volunteers and participants enable them to make a significant difference to individuals and communities.

“By taking part in the project I was able to gain confidence and work with people that I would not have before. I learned a lot more about other religions and cultures. I feel there is lot more that we have in common than what differentiates us.” Survey Respondent

Evaluator Dr. Sophie Bremner concludes, “The impact of the small grant ripples throughout communities, not only through real practical outcomes for some of the beneficiaries and increased knowledge and respect for people of different beliefs and backgrounds but also through partnerships formed, friendships made and future investments in local communities made possible through further volunteering and further projects planned”



References

- ¹ An online survey was sent to organisers of all projects funded in 2016/17, requesting that they forward the survey to participants. One disadvantage of this method is that some people would be excluded from being able to complete the survey (because of language or lack of internet connectivity, for example). However, within the scope of this evaluation, this was considered to be the best way of enabling a broader response to some key questions.
- ² The projects consulted for the qualitative research were chosen as follows: firstly, three of the nine Near Neighbours geographical hubs were chosen, one each from the North, the Midlands and the South. The evaluator then chose four case studies from each region, aiming for a diversity of project themes, types of grant-holders and intended beneficiaries. Further projects from each Hub were then sampled for phone interviews. The evaluator did not have knowledge of those projects prior to sampling. Later on in the evaluation, due to a lack of response from some projects, three projects were sampled on the basis of recommendations that the organisers of those projects were quick at communicating. Otherwise, the projects sampled were chosen by the researcher.

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