

NEAR NEIGHBOURS

NEAR NEIGHBOURS PROGRAMME: 2014 – 2016



Good Neighbours and Great Neighbourhoods: A summary of evaluations of the Near Neighbours programme 2014-2016

Near Neighbours is a programme which runs in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse to help people know each other better, build relationships of trust, and work together on initiatives that improve the areas in which they live.

This programme is funded by both the Department for Communities and Local Government and Church Urban Fund, and is based in particular locations around England.¹ In each location there is a dedicated Area Coordinator who connects with local groups and activities, and encourages new individuals and groups to become involved in their communities. A national, small grants scheme provides funding for local initiatives that promote social action and social interaction, and a youth leadership programme, Catalyst, helps to raise up new leaders for the future.

The programme is based on close collaboration with national partners including the Nehemiah Foundation, The Feast, 3FF, Catalyst, Christian Muslim Forum, Hindu Christian Forum and the Council of Christians and Jews.

This paper summarises the impact of Near Neighbours in local communities between 2014 and 2016, drawing on three evaluation reports produced by the Woolf Institute and Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations.

¹ Near Neighbours works in London, Luton, East Midlands, Birmingham, the Black Country, West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester.

Coventry University worked with Near Neighbours for 15 months to develop an evaluative framework and explore the impact of the programme as a whole. They also conducted an in-depth evaluation of the Catalyst programme. The Woolf Institute carried out focus groups, interviews and surveys in five neighbourhoods to explore how perceptions and practices of community have changed as a result of Near Neighbours.²

The impact of Near Neighbours

The aim of Near Neighbours, as summarised by evaluators, is to develop *Good Neighbours and Great Neighbourhoods*. Throughout the lifespan of the programme, external teams have researched how and to what degree we are achieving this goal. The Coventry University team identified four ways in which the Near Neighbours programme is having a unique impact in communities around the country.



'You cannot have a more peaceful project in the country. Programmes like this will change people. It is the biggest investment for the future. Every community where people are sitting down and knitting together, eating together, singing together will not have tension in it.'

Focus group participant

1. Encouraging a relational ethos and trust

Experienced activists reported to evaluators that when it comes to creating a movement for change, the ethos of Near Neighbours is as important as the funding. As one focus group participant said: *'The ethos of Near Neighbours is beyond race, religion and culture. It is something about connecting human beings first.'*

The mere presence of Near Neighbours and its ethos in an area was found to encourage the development of new relationships between groups, even those without Near Neighbours funding. This occurred because the programme was able to build 'trust between people of different faiths whilst simultaneously creating the conditions for much needed social action'.³

Both evaluators separately identified this ethos as a core element of Near Neighbours' success and concluded that over time Near Neighbours becomes more than just a programme; it becomes a catalyst for integration in diverse communities. The relational ethos of the programme legitimises other attempts to build bridges between different faith and ethnic groups and so stimulates a range of related, but not dependent activity.

The fact that many Near Neighbours projects, and other projects that develop as a result of the programme, continue when funding ends demonstrates the long-term impact of the programme in building a relational ethos at a local level.

² The areas studied by the Woolf Institute were Prestwich, Luton, Nottingham, Rochdale and Tipton.

³ *An Evaluative Framework for Near Neighbours*, Coventry University, 2016, p5

2. Facilitating innovation through small grants

Near Neighbours awards grants of up to £5,000 as seed funding for local groups and organisations that seek to bring people of different faiths and ethnicities together and to improve their community. Between April 2014 and March 2016, Near Neighbours invested more than £1.8 million in grass-roots activity and awarded 543 separate grants.

Evaluators report that Near Neighbours is distinctive as a small grants provider. Through the partnership of the national grants programme and locally-based Area Coordinators, Near Neighbours is able to give a high level of financial, technical and emotional support to local groups. This intensive support results in incredible innovation, with funded activities ranging from community gardening to football clubs, from entrepreneur classes to radio shows, and from youth mentoring programmes to music groups.



The Near Neighbours grants scheme is also successful at enabling people to take action locally. Up to 81% of funded projects take place in the same postcode area in which the lead organisation is based. Both evaluators concluded that this degree of local rootedness increases the sustainability of the projects and is crucial for enabling people in a local area to get to know each other.

One Area Coordinator commented, *'I have worked in community work for 30 years and have seen models come and go. A lot of them were designed to help grassroots, but did things for people rather than allow people to do it for themselves. Near Neighbours is better because it gets people to pursue their dream. Near Neighbours helps them to explore it.'*

CASE STUDY

Investing in new opportunities

A multi-cultural and multi-faith group of women from the Black Country wanted to come together to learn basic business skills so that they could start an enterprise to sell their sewing products online. They had secured a venue, a teacher and a group of willing learners, but could not find or afford childcare. Near Neighbours was able to respond to the situation by funding a crèche for a few hours per week which enabled the project to go ahead.

The diverse group of women, representing seven nationalities, met each week to learn about how to get their business idea off the ground. This led them to form an enterprise which meant that their interaction continued after the grant-funded project and generated income to support their families. Other, more traditional grant programmes would have likely passed on this opportunity because the crèche was not the main focus of the activity.

3. Going beyond the usual suspects

Near Neighbours has a distinctive ability to reach people who have never been involved in this type of work before, as well as connecting and enhancing the work of those who have.

Near Neighbours is increasing social action. Between April 2015 and January 2016 over 33,000 people are estimated to have been involved in grant-funded activities. This was enabled by an estimated 1,775 volunteers investing over 44,000 hours of work.

Area Coordinators, who are embedded in communities, share their contacts and give emotional and practical support to leaders who are developing projects. Coventry University reports that Coordinators have 'a first-rate understanding of the local area... helping to boost the impact of grants and build sustainable community networks within neighbourhoods'.⁴

As they work closely together, the Coordinators encourage and mentor project leaders, empowering those with little or no prior experience of community development to get something started. Evaluators found that this support has succeeded in fostering engagement amongst and between experienced and new activists, and has led to new ambitions for an inclusive community in the local area.

Both the Woolf Institute and Coventry University highlight the crucial role of the Area Coordinators in developing constructive relationships between groups that have experienced tensions in the past. As a result

⁴ *An Evaluative Framework for Near Neighbours: Executive Summary*, Coventry University, 2016, p3





of their extensive knowledge of the local area, Coordinators are well equipped to connect previously disparate activists, community groups and religious leaders and to enable new and dynamic partnerships to grow. The Woolf Institute highlights a partnership between Muslims and Jews to run a joint café, and a decrease in tensions between Roma groups and a local council as particular advances. These new partnerships transcend religious and ethnic categories and encourage new activism to improve local communities.

CASE STUDY

Bringing about social change through sport

In response to social exclusion and violent racist attacks in Yorkshire, a group of three local Zimbabwean men decided to use football to enact change. With the help of a local vicar, the local Near Neighbours Coordinator and funding from the Near Neighbours grants programme, the group established a football team - launched with an event in the local church - with the aim of bringing together people from the different faith and ethnic groups in the local area to build relationships.

The group, including retired professional footballers, started training sessions with a few young people in the park. They have gone on to build a self-sustaining, self-funding club of 40 people from lots of different faith and cultural backgrounds, as well as a team of eight volunteers. Meeting to train twice a week, they are now set to enter multiple teams in the local football league.

The impact has been transformative and not just for those in the team, who now have much more contact with people from other backgrounds than before, it has also made a significant difference to the lives of the three leaders.

One of the founders said, 'I am accepted in the area now. I can speak to my neighbour now because I'm known as the football guy. He'll ask me when the next session is. [...] And my car and house has been left alone since the project started - I think the kids from the football protect them!'



'It was life changing. Catalyst opened my eyes to other faiths, aside my own... it has inspired me as to how different faiths can work together for the better of the community.'

Catalyst Alumnus

4. Investing in new leaders

Near Neighbours is committed to raising up people who can take a leading role in multi-faith and multi-ethnic Britain in the future.

The Feast is a partner of Near Neighbours and works with 11 – 16 year olds from diverse backgrounds, bringing them together to explore their faiths, create friendships and engage in positive discussions that challenge stereotypes. The demand for their 'innovative and fun'⁵ services has increased greatly and they are now working across the country to help young people grow in confidence and understanding of other people's faiths and their own.

The Feast is complemented by Catalyst which is a leadership programme for 16 – 30 year olds from different faith and non-faith backgrounds. The four or five-day course is run in various Near Neighbours locations across the country and is accredited by Leicester College.

Catalyst equips young people to take action by giving them training on a range of topics including leadership, faith, conflict and power, identity and belonging, and social action. Importantly, it also gives them experience of speaking about sensitive issues with people from other backgrounds and the opportunity to develop friendships and collaboration with people they may not otherwise have met.

⁵ *Catalyst Evaluation 2016, Coventry University, p13*

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One of the aims of Catalyst is to build relationships between people from diverse backgrounds. Evaluators found that the course was very successful in developing lasting relationships – over 70% of alumni surveyed remain in touch with one another six months after the course had finished.

The course also aims to empower people to take action locally. Again, evaluators found that the course was able to build confidence and motivation to get involved in local community work – 87% of alumni surveyed felt that Catalyst had prepared them to take a more active leadership role in their community.

The course was seen as a powerful example of how Near Neighbours 'blends national-level relationships with locally-relevant delivery', using the programme's profile to give young people contact with locally important leaders and national experts.⁶ The course is also a 'flagship example of the relational approach taken by Near Neighbours'⁷ and would not exist without the investment, skills and relationships made possible by the programme.

Catalyst is part of a long-term strategy for the Near Neighbours programme as it equips the next generation of community leaders with confidence, experience, diverse networks and critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

Both Coventry University and the Woolf Institute have found that Near Neighbours is having a significant impact in the communities in which it operates. The Near Neighbours programme continues to support the growth of *Good Neighbours and Great Neighbourhoods* as it enables people in diverse communities to build relationships of trust and transform their neighbourhoods together. The programme has achieved this by offering people funding, opportunity and guidance from locally embedded Coordinators, as well as the confidence to take a first step in organised social action.

The interplay of the Area Coordinators, central Near Neighbours staff and national partners has been found to enhance the impact and significance of the programme, helping to build sustainable networks within communities. Coventry University concludes that Near Neighbours 'has all the strengths of a prominent national programme and works towards far-reaching societal goals whilst being able to support a range of relevant, non-intrusive, impactful and locally-led activity'.⁸

These three pieces of evaluation have shown the strength and sustainability of the work that Near Neighbours is continuing to facilitate and produce in communities across the country.

⁶ *Catalyst Evaluation 2016*, Coventry University, p15

⁷ *Catalyst Evaluation 2016*, Coventry University, p15

⁸ *An Evaluative Framework for Near Neighbours*, Coventry University, 2016, p36

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