Building Connection:
Exploring What Works

THE **CARES** FAMILY

Contents

Foreword

The Cares Family has always been about creating connection. Each of our five local charities – North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares and East London Cares – bring people together to share time, laughter and new experiences in their local communities and our national work looks to spur a ripple of connection across the UK.

To better understand the difference our work makes we have spent time with our colleagues exploring in detail what it is our teams do every day in London, Manchester and Liverpool that allows them to build meaningful connection with and between the older and younger people that are part of The Cares Family.

'*Building Connection: Exploring What Works*' is the result of that exploration and we're delighted to share it with you[1]. The report lays out ten techniques and approaches that bring to life the two key principles we believe underpin meaningful connection: authenticity and reciprocity.

By carefully outlining the components that make up our work we hope to help policymakers understand the skill, focus and intention needed to make meaningful connection as well as support the growing calls for investment in social connection through connecting institutions such as The Cares Family. We also hope it will serve as a companion to those wanting to create meaningful connection where they are.

This comes at a time when the need for social connection has never been more important. As Dr Vivek H. Murthy, the U.S Surgeon General, said in his 2023 Advisory '*Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter.... the health and societal impacts of social isolation and loneliness are a critical public health concern.*'[2] We know that this issue is just as pressing in the UK and that the crisis of social disconnection is at once a personal crisis, a public health crisis and a political crisis, and it simply cannot be ignored.

While the ten techniques have emerged from The Cares Family's own work we are part of a much bigger ecosystem calling for social connection to be recognised as the essential issue it is. In recognition and celebration of this you will hear the views of other civic innovators throughout the report who have built connection in their own communities and we are proud to add our voice to theirs.

Now more than ever we need to bring people together. After 12 years of exploring what works we hope this report helps to further the case for social connection and underlines the urgent need to make it happen.

Roxi Rustem,
Director of Programmes
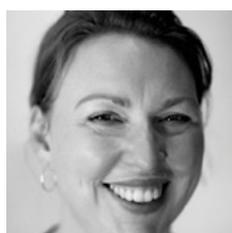
Sara Masters,
Director of Projects

Introduction

Our Model

The Cares Family is a network of charities which bring people together across generations, backgrounds, and experiences to build community and connection. Our vision is of socially connected communities in which people feel less lonely, more united, and that they belong.

Nationally, we run programmes through which we invest in and support local people working to build more socially connected communities all across the country. And, over the course of the last 12 years, our five local charities – North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares, and East London Cares – have supported over 26,000 older and younger people to share time, laughter, and new experiences.

Each local charity includes an Outreach team which works to proactively identify and invite people to take part in The Cares Family's local activities. These include regular Social Clubs, which range in size from 10 to 150 attendees and take many forms – from cooking classes, film screenings, and discos to podcasting clubs, Pride celebrations, and woodworking lessons. The Cares Family builds these events around such a broad array of activities partly in order to attract people with diverse interests and inclinations – and of all ages – to take part. Some are purposefully structured around activities that people are familiar and comfortable with, such as pub quizzes, to minimise barriers-to-entry, while others enable people to try new things together. Through organising Social Clubs, our local charities both create opportunities for the same group of people to come together on a regular basis and encourage people to try new experiences and meet new people.

In addition, through our Love Your Neighbour one-on-one programme, we match older and younger people[3] to share at least one hour together each week. These friendships often centre around shared meals, games, stories and other experiences and can bring the outside world in for people who struggle to get out.

Our Methodology

In this paper, we explore the ten techniques and approaches through which we seek to ensure our programmes result in meaningful connection between older and younger people.

It is informed by a content analysis of nine workshops held between 2021 and 2023, during which we posed questions to The Cares Family staff regarding their approaches to planning Outreach, designing and delivering Social Clubs and to making and monitoring Love Your Neighbour matches. During these workshops, we asked specific questions on topics including: the role of storytelling and of place-based identity in our work; whether and how we enable people to engage with one another on an equal-status basis; and whether and how we seek to empower people through our programmes. In total, 36 team members took part.

We then cross referenced these contributions with various case studies and accounts drawn from three major independent evaluations of our work and from our own impact monitoring conducted over the past 12 years. We did this in order to ensure that the perspectives of our staff aligned with the perspectives of the older and younger people who have taken part or are currently taking part in The Cares Family's programmes.

Exploring 'What Works'

This paper is rooted in and serves to support an argument that, for connection to be meaningful, it must be both authentic and reciprocal[4]. This core contention is supported by the findings of the content analysis, but it's also true that The Cares Family has – since its founding – been focused on nurturing genuine, mutual relationships which transcend lines of difference.

We are clear that none of these techniques or approaches are panaceas – people build relationships in their own ways and on their terms, and in many ways one of the strengths of The Cares Family is simply that we create the space and bring people together to enable this to happen. Equally, the analysis which follows is grounded in a conviction that enabling people to connect positively and meaningfully – across social, cultural or generational lines especially – requires intention, focus and skill.

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3   Within The Cares Family's own programmes, we use the term 'neighbours' to describe the people who come together to build social connection. However, we have chosen to use 'people' in this report for clarity.

4   We refer to authenticity and reciprocity as principles underpinning meaningful connection.

This paper is not intended to outline all of the ways in which our local charities work to bring people together across generations, backgrounds and experiences, building social connection. It doesn't, for instance, examine the importance of the language which we use[5] to describe our work in any level of detail (though we believe this to be key to our programmes' impact). Instead, it zeroes in on the question of how we seek to ensure that they are able to connect meaningfully, in ways which enable them to look past their differences and recognise what they have in common, and to build bonds of friendship.

It explores what we – as an organisation with a substantive track record of generating intergenerational connection in communities across the UK – know about 'what works' in this specific respect. We do not believe that any one organisation has a monopoly on knowledge of this topic – far from it, we believe that a plurality of voices needs to emerge in different places in order to build a more connected age –but we hope that this paper might usefully add to the evidence base regarding the most effective approaches towards building connection across difference. In addition to a thorough analysis of our own practice, the case made in this paper has been informed by the Relationships Project's notion of 'relationship-centred practice'[6] , by social contact theory and by our experience of working with local and national partners.

Making the Case for Connecting Institutions

We hope too that this paper will help fuel the development of new and existing connecting institutions through backing from policy-makers. Connecting institutions are organisations and projects which work in purposeful ways to shape encounters and foster positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations. It follows both that they fulfil a special function in connecting our modern, diverse and disaggregated communities together and that they are especially time, labour and knowledge-intensive to build and run.

Through detailing the various ways in which The Cares Family's programmes work deliberately to achieve these objectives, we are seeking to begin the process of more carefully defining what constitutes a connecting institution. Connecting institutions can be recognised in part as they exist to a large extent simply to enable people to share one another's company and to foster social connection. In the words of Emily, who has been taking part in events run by South London Cares since 2015, they provide '*the setting for something so essential but [which is] often in short supply: friendship and fellowship'*. Because forging meaningful connections across difference is skilled work, we believe there are common methods and mechanisms at the heart of a connecting institution.

The Cares Family last year launched a podcast with the think tank Onward, *Building Belonging*[7]. This podcast explores the stories of what our two organisations would contend are a new wave of connecting institutions which have sprouted up in communities across the UK in recent years. We believe the conversations captured through this podcast demonstrate that much can be gained by tapping into the expertise of civic innovators who have built and run organisations and projects of this kind. We also believe they point to several key aspects of connecting institutions and, throughout this paper, we seek to shine a light on the techniques and approaches which are shared by The Cares Family's local charities and these other organisations and projects.

Connecting institutions

Connecting institutions are community initiatives which create positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations. They work in purposeful ways to shape encounters across difference and to nurture strong social ties between people who might not otherwise meet and mix – fostering cross-community empathy.

5   South London Cares, 7 April 2016, 'Community voices: why do we choose the words we use?':
    https://southlondoncares.org.uk/blog/community-voices-why-do-we-choose-the-words-we-use

6   Relationships Project, 7 November 2022, 'What is relationship-centred practice?' https://relationshipsproject.org/what-is-relationship-centred-practice/

7   For more information on *Building Belonging*, visit: https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/blog/building-belonging

Our Building Connection series

This paper is the second publication in The Cares Family's Building Connection series.

In *Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*[8], we explored how the government could shape that strategy – which it pledged to bring forward in its Levelling Up White Paper[9] – to direct investment towards and support the construction of the forms of social infrastructure which individual communities need most. Through that paper, we called on the government to work with successful civic innovators to identify transferable building blocks of existing connecting institutions and incorporate this learning into shareable resources and toolkits – an approach which overlaps significantly with that taken in this paper.

Later this year, we will publish *Building Connection: A Manifesto* – a third paper drawing together the policy thinking that we have undertaken in recent years into a plan which we believe the next government, of whatever political stripe, should enact in order to strengthen our social fabric.

We hope that, taken together, these three papers set out a number of compelling policy ideas and approaches through which policymakers might support people of all backgrounds and generations to feel both a greater sense of connection and a part of the rapidly changing communities around them.

8   The Cares Family (2023), *Building Connection: The Promise of a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships*

9   Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022), Levelling Up the United Kingdom:
     https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

Executive
Summary

Within this paper we set out ten techniques and approaches designed to foster meaningful connection between people from different generations, backgrounds and experiences.

These demonstrate that creating meaningful connection requires intention, focus and skill, and that there are deliberate steps we can take when bringing people together.

The techniques all fall within two broad principles that underpin The Cares Family's work, and which we believe lie at the heart of meaningful connection. These are:

1. **Authenticity**: by 'bringing their true self' to an interaction with another person, people can feel seen by and form a genuine connection with that person.

2. **Reciprocity**: each person must feel that they are benefiting from engaging with one another and are equally responsible to one another. Connecting well is a fundamentally mutual endeavour.

Over the course of the report, we explore each principle in turn, and why it has been identified as important through The Cares Family's programmes.

We hear from members of staff involved in delivering Love Your Neighbour, Social Clubs and Outreach who draw on first-hand experience, and from civic innovators who have built social connection in their own communities. Most importantly, we also hear from some of the younger people and older people who are part of The Cares Family.

Though we firmly believe that no one organisation has a monopoly on knowledge about social connection, a first main aim of this report is for these techniques to add to the evidence base regarding the most effective ways to build meaningful connection.

A second main aim is for policy-makers to be encouraged by the learnings shared in the paper to help fuel the development of connecting institutions across the country. The social disconnection crisis currently experienced by communities makes this political backing more important than ever.

The ten techniques presented in this report can be summarised as follows:

Authenticity

1 **Go out and find disconnection**: be where people are, stay curious and open minded, look around and say hello: disconnection hides in plain sight.

2 **Take your time and keep your word**: connection requires trust, which can't be rushed. Invest your time, be consistent, stay in contact and do what you say you will.

3 **Create spaces intended for connection**: positioning your spaces as primarily for connection makes people more ready to connect.

4 **Curate the space**: design comfortable and welcoming spaces putting people at ease and encouraging conversation.

5 **Inspire self-expression**: be yourself and create safe environments in which people feel they can be themselves.

6 **Embrace storytelling as your superpower**: draw on peoples' stories to motivate, inspire and deepen understanding of others' experiences.

Reciprocity

7 **Encourage people to engage as equals:** dispel the impression that older people are 'recipients' of 'help' from younger people.

8 **Make "Come as you are" your only requirement:** don't allow skillset to become a barrier. Promote unity through trying and sometimes failing together.

9 **Lean on the power of place:** centre places for their shared meaning helping to build a sense of belonging.

10 **Nurture people's agency:** support people to realise their own value noticing and emphasising the contribution they make and the qualities they bring.

Authenticity

Authenticity is largely subjective but can best be defined, in our view, as "*acting according to one's true self*"[10]. If people don't 'bring their true self' to an interaction with another person, they effectively preclude the possibility of 'feeling seen' by – and thus of forging a genuine connection with – that person.

There are six techniques and approaches which team members from across our local charities draw on and employ – both intuitively and purposefully – to support older and younger people to engage with one another in a way which reveals or channels their true selves.

1. Go out and find disconnection

Be where people are, stay curious and open minded, look around and say hello: disconnection hides in plain sight.

Those who would most benefit from our activities are sometimes unlikely to be aware of or looking for opportunities to connect with others. Staff, therefore, reported that it was necessary to search for people proactively in order to find people experiencing disconnection.

To achieve this, our teams discussed how they go out into their communities several times a week, visiting cafés, supermarkets, GP surgeries and other spaces where they could speak to younger and older people directly about our work. Simultaneously, they develop local networks, by partnering with other community organisations or by building an online presence through social media, through which the opportunities to meet different groups of people arise:

"*You'll start understanding where there are other pockets of opportunity. Often, it's who you can meet, who might have a wider reach and can meet more people. We create webs of outreach.*"

Given older people are less likely to have their own networks – such as work colleagues or through social media – by which they could come across a local Cares community, it is unsurprising that staff tended to focus on these strategies predominantly in the context of older people. However, Outreach and Engagement Coordinators were also keen to highlight that while some younger people may sign up "*organically*" – often those who sign up to volunteer in a the more traditional sense – they also planned how to reach other groups of younger people and considered barriers they may face to joining.

More generally, staff noted that time must be dedicated to planning and reflecting on Outreach: for example, by spending time understanding who their local programmes are or aren't engaging, or by reflecting on which outreach initiatives have been fruitful or not. As such, finding people who are disconnected is an everchanging and evolving area of work that must respond to needs identified by each local team.

This notion of adaptability was repeated by staff when they discussed meeting and talking to new people. These conversations are guided by who they are speaking to, and staff will take time to understand the circumstances and interests of new people, tailoring their own messaging around this:

"*It's very much based on listening to what they have to say, what their specific experiences are, and then maybe trying to link that to something that they've said. Say they have said they've just come back from going for a walk in the park, or something like that, I try to link what we do to what they're saying, and try to make it as targeted to that as possible.*"

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10   Velleman, D J (2006), *Self to Self: Selected Essays*

Through these conversations our teams can identify which activity – whether a certain type of Social Club, or one-to-one interactions like those on Love Your Neighbour – will appeal to and benefit the person they are speaking to. Similarly, staff noted that they needed to remain flexible following these initial interactions too:

"It's just recognising that, that journey is going to be different for everyone, and actually investing that time, because I've definitely worked with people where it's taken four years to get them along to something, and not many organisations would spend that time – but I think that's what really makes the difference, and that's what really builds that trust and relationship with us."

Essentially, finding disconnected people to connect with each other involves working proactively and adaptably on two levels: a macro-level (in communities and the networks within them); and a micro-level (meeting individual people and bringing them into activities on their own terms).

2. Take your time and keep your word

Connection requires trust, which can't be rushed. Invest your time, be consistent, stay in contact and do what you say you will.

As one member of staff noted, "*it's the scariest thing to ask someone to do, to just walk into a room with strangers and introduce yourself and just get stuck in.*"

This apprehension can often serve as the biggest barrier to people feeling able to be their true selves and forging connections with others. A recurring theme in the workshops was the importance of building trust with people both prior to and as they join an activity to ensure they feel safe (in addition to also having more formal processes and policies in place aimed at creating a safe and welcoming environment).

Staff identified the importance of taking the time to speak to people they met during activities and investing in learning more about them through these conversations. Our Outreach teams reported that they sometimes purposefully divert conversations with new people away from discussing loneliness or what activities we offer, and instead focus on building rapport with someone.

And while people often don't agree to join an activity after this initial interaction with a local charity, staff felt they regularly used the information from these first exchanges in future interactions, whether this be in telephone calls, emails or letters, encouraging the people they met to feel heard. Continued communication with someone following their first interaction also allows staff to strengthen trust by demonstrating accountability:

"*If you say you're going to call, call. If you say you're going send a letter, send the letter. If you forget and something happens, call and be like, 'oh gosh, I said I was going to send that letter. I'm sorry, I've just put it in the post now. I haven't forgotten you.'*"

Arguably, members of staff working on Outreach were describing how they in fact aim to build an authentic connection with a new neighbour themselves, on a human level rather than merely institutionally. Once this connection has been made, staff could subsequently point that person in the direction of the activities on offer:

"*And so, if they say, 'oh no, it's not for me,' I'd be like, 'well, you've just spoken to me, and I'll be there', or 'people like me will be there. People like you will be there. You'll have a lovely time because I'm having a lovely time right now.'*"

The connections staff make with people, therefore, can serve both as encouragement and as a guide for people to understand the connections they will make with other people.

A number of Outreach and Engagement Coordinators, however, emphasised that building trust can be hard. Frequently, they meet people experiencing serious challenges in their lives, or others who feel let down by community services. Unsurprisingly, staff cited the need to be patient in such circumstances, recognising that time was better invested in maintaining the connection they had forged with someone than trying to convince them to join something that may feel like the last thing they need at that time. By staying in touch with people periodically – whether over the course of a few weeks or a few years – they are able to sustain their initial connections, and further develop trust by supporting people, if possible, with the challenges they are experiencing, through signposting and referrals to other organisations for example. However, staff reported that managing expectations was key in these situations:

"I would never say 'we can' and 'we can't'. I would always say, 'do you know what? I'll have a little look and let's see where we go.'"

Similarly, several of The Cares Family team were candid about the need to reflect on the limits of their role and what the organisation could do practically to help people who may be experiencing barriers to joining a Social Club or the Love Your Neighbour programme. Again, honesty – about whether they were the best person or organisation to be supporting the person – was key:

"The difference we can make is magical, but we can't solve everything, and I think it's really important to recognise what place we have and the difference we can make."

Not everyone we meet is ready to find connection through our programmes. Nevertheless, the possibility of them doing so is increased by the ongoing investment staff make in building trust and the connections that grow from it. There is, of course, a risk that these relationships create dependency: that the person sees the connection they have made with a member of staff – rather than the opportunity for connection with others – as the benefit we have to offer them. However, our teams showed an awareness of the need to ultimately support people to join activities once they were ready to, and to slowly give precedence to the new connections they were forging with other people in our communities:

"Eventually in outreach, in your role or in your relationship with that neighbour, you're aiming to start to get further and further out of the way, as they build other connections."

3. Create spaces intended for connection

Positioning your spaces as primarily for connection makes people more ready to connect.

One theme that arose repeatedly during these workshops was the way in which the physical act of creating a space which people understand to be primarily for social connection (whether a Social Club venue or an older person's home) can encourage people to adopt a receptive and responsive mindset. In other words, proactively creating those spaces is itself a hugely important part of how The Cares Family seeks to foster authentic engagement across generations, backgrounds and experiences.

In this, mutual accountability is again key. One long-standing member of The Cares Family team, who was involved in leading the creation of our programmes said that they always felt that older people became and stayed part of the community because they wanted the idea of intergenerational connection to thrive. In other words, people showed up in activities because they believed it was important to hold space for intergenerational relationships to flourish.

In this sense, while it is *how* The Cares Family does what it does that we believe in most, the fact that our work happens *at all* in local communities plays an important role in the restoration of hope.

"I think the people are great, good fun and easy to talk to or listen to whichever is more required… but the environment that is created by staff really helps facilitate this and enables the people to be themselves and come out of their shells in a safe environment."

A younger person taking part in a Social Club

4. Curate the space

Design comfortable and welcoming spaces putting people at ease and encouraging conversation.

To some extent, intergenerational programmes are by their very nature conducive to open and sincere engagement. During one of our workshops, a member of the East London Cares team explained that younger people often seek to get involved because they have identified contact with older people to be something that's missing from their life. The team member in question said that younger people describe feeling this way for a number of reasons, but that they often express a sense that spending time with older people can be comforting:

"*I think… if you're maybe not feeling rooted in place, or you are in a period of transition where you just moved somewhere, maybe you are kind of instinctively going to try and get that feeling of stability elsewhere. And maybe that is the roots you have with your family or the relationships in your life, and you try and replicate that as best you can, where you are.*"

This comment further points to the way in which common forms of intergenerational relationship – including familial bonds – can provide something of a model for interactions between older and younger people, in turn lending them a sense of ease, comfort and belonging. Other team members noted that younger people often perceive their interactions with older people to be governed by different "*social rules*" to those they share with people of their own age – meaning that they're more likely to "*put away their smartphones and really be present*" during the time they spend with older people.

Those team members who organise and run Social Clubs also emphasised, however, that they seek to actively facilitate authentic engagement of this sort in a variety of ways.

At a very basic level, the activities which they structure clubs around can provide a focal point for and encourage dialogue: "You're sharing a new experience, and you're doing this wine tasting and you've got food, and things like that open up different channels with new people." It's also true that building clubs around forms of activity that people understand and are familiar with can ease the awkwardness of meeting new people:

"*It's really nice having the pub quiz because… it's something that people do recognise as like, 'Oh yeah, a pub quiz. I know that!' And they know that there's nothing that they really need to prepare and that everybody's just going to turn up. And we always [say] teams will be formed on arrival so that everybody knows it's not like they have to come with a group of people or anything.*"

Social Club Coordinators said that they think carefully about how well particular older and younger people might get on with one another – pairing shy individuals together, for instance, to prevent one party or another from being talked over. Others said that they "*try to always remain responsive'* to each person's experience of a Social Club, interjecting in conversations and making introductions accordingly. Others still pointed to the more formal role they sometimes play in leading or facilitating Social Club activities, asserting that "you have to… create space, because inclusion is allowing the quietest person in the room to have as much of a platform as the loudest person in the room."

Social Club Coordinators additionally highlighted their central role in creating convivial atmospheres in which people are able to laugh together – which has been shown to promote group bonding[11] – and in "*setting a tone*" by responding to people' contributions to group discussions openly and thoughtfully. This method, and the general importance of The Cares Family staff in bringing people together and creating a welcoming environment, was also highlighted in the 2019 independent evaluation of The Cares Family's work conducted by social researchers Renaisi[12].

11   Kurtz, L E, and Algoe, S B, 'When Sharing a Laugh Means Sharing More: Testing the Role of Shared Laughter on Short-Term Interpersonal Consequences', *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 2016

12   Renaisi (2019), *Final Report: North London Cares and South London Cares Evaluation*: https://southloncares.org.uk/assets/uploads/docs/Full-Report.pdf

5. Inspire self-expression

Be yourself and create safe environments in which people feel they can be themselves.

Although staff who work on the Love Your Neighbour programme typically have less direct involvement in exchanges between older and younger people (beyond brokering their first interaction and supporting their friendships from afar), they also alluded to several techniques and tactics through which they seek to encourage people to engage authentically. Several of these team members noted that one of the key ways in which they encourage people to share their 'full selves' with one another is by creating opportunities for them to express themselves.

They pointed, as an example, to the way in which The Cares Family has in recent years begun asking people to provide a description of themselves for use in communications with potential matches, whereas staff previously produced these on people' behalf. One said that these pen profiles – people' descriptions of their own personalities and experiences and the things they like doing – sometimes surprise staff, but that this goes to show the value of this approach: "*that's how they want to be represented – that's their authentic self – and they get to choose.*" Another remarked that: "*it's empowering to let people speak for themselves about themselves from the get-go.*"

Team members who lead and support the delivery of both programmes further emphasised that they seek to create environments of tolerance and trust in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves. In part, they said, this comes down to "*treating people like adults*" and being willing to engage in candid exchanges of views:

"*We're an organisation that doesn't patronise older people. This is for me what that means – presenting people with information [about] which you think: 'you might not [agree with] this, and I don't actually know how you're going to respond to it, but I trust that you understand what this environment is – so even if it's not something that you agree with, you'll take it in.'*"

A number of team members did, though, go on to express a sense that encouraging candour isn't always the right approach, noting that some relationships between older and younger people could break down if they were to speak entirely honestly with one another about their views and beliefs. One pointed out that people can and do "*support one another genuinely*" even where "*there are no-go areas in their friendship*", which serves as a reminder that authenticity shouldn't be understood as synonymous with full and frank honesty or complete openness. Instead, as per the definition set out above, it is a matter of behaving congruently with one's instincts, feelings and values.

The academic and writer Brené Brown has described authenticity as *"the practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are"*[13] . Brown posits that it is often a fear of being vulnerable – of exposing those parts of ourselves that we fear might be judged or rejected by others – that prevents us following this practice. Certainly, this is one of the themes which arose most frequently during the workshops which we held on this topic, in which staff spoke about their role in *"role-modelling vulnerability"* – including through being willing to take calculated risks during group conversations and *"letting ourselves be seen"*.

One Social Club Coordinator noted that, sometimes, they'll organise activities to enable people to develop a level of comfort and confidence in engaging and sharing with one another, before prompting them to discuss more personal aspects of their lives. They described this approach as one which recognises that there are '*degrees of vulnerability*'. Another team member similarly explained that she had been inspired by her experience of working with the RECLAIM charity, which seeks to work through '*layers of depth with people*' over time, and said she sought to emulate this practice through her work at Manchester Cares.

"Once you start off with a little bit of vulnerability and sharing a bit about yourself, people will lean in further. But if everyone does it together, you find out so much about each other just in that initial conversation. So, Roots is very much about: how do we have those little moments where we encourage people to share a little bit more of themselves every time? So it might be that we start off talking about the labels; then we'll start off talking about our schooling; we might compare what our bedrooms looked like as a kid; who our best friend was when we were ten. Then in the following weeks we might start talking about other things, like what food we like – what it says about our history, our heritage, our culture. Moving on, the next week, we might talk about politics or hope or optimism or disappointment – or we talk about our families. So, it's just, week-by-week, incrementally increasing that level of disclosure."

Ruth Ibegbuna, founder of the RECLAIM Project, The Roots Programme, and Rekindle

"We could all say what we've done in our life, and the art of conversation is not a thing from the past it is a thing that's there to be used. That's one thing I like about Cares, you can come there and be open, you can talk to anyone."

An older person taking part in a Social Club

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13   Brown, B (2010), *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*

6. Embrace storytelling as your superpower

Draw on peoples' stories to motivate, inspire and deepen understanding of others' experiences.

Storytelling is a key feature of bringing older and younger people new to our local charities into activities. Outreach and Engagement Coordinators reported how they subtly invite people to join activities through conversations in which they ask them to share their own stories, for example, about their experience of the area they live in, and by sharing their own, for example, through a story from a Social Club shared on social media. While on one level this use of storytelling helps build rapport and trust, on another level it prepares new people for the centrality of sharing and hearing others stories and life experiences at Social Clubs or in one-to-one friendships.

During the workshops in which we explored this theme, one team member described our Social Clubs as "*primarily a space to share and hear other people's stories and life experiences*". Several others spoke about the importance of creating a relaxed and secure environment in which people can feel comfortable exchanging stories, noting that this helps to build their confidence in engaging with one another.

A number of Social Club Coordinators highlighted the way in which certain Social Club formats are purposefully designed to invite the sharing of stories. At 'Desert Island Discs' sessions, for instance, people are asked to share a song which means something to them, often leading naturally to the recounting of memories and experiences. At 'show and tell' clubs, meanwhile, they are asked to speak about an object from their home – providing a window into their personal lives and histories in way that feels natural rather than forced or obtrusive. Even craft activities can be designed to enable people to tell a part of their personal stories – one team member spoke about a Social Club in which they "*were creating rosettes about a woman who had meant something really important to them in their life – so you're both making something and talking about that personal experience*".

Love Your Neighbour Coordinators additionally noted that a great many of the written prompts which they provide help stimulate conversation encourage the sharing of stories – for example, they might be prompted to discuss their "*first memories of Manchester*".

When asked why storytelling sits at the heart of The Cares Family's organisational approach, team members said that hearing about one another's lives provides older and younger people with an insight into experiences and worldviews which are different to their own. They also stressed that hearing older peoples' stories (especially about when they were younger) can help younger people to see past age and can cause them to reconsider the stereotypes and biases which they might have absorbed from the media or cultural forces regarding older people. But they placed particular emphasis on the way in which hearing one another's stories in person can allow people to uncover commonalities which might otherwise remain hidden, in turn helping to relate to one another more fully. One said that even "*micro-similarities*", such as having an annoying sibling, can provide a basis for warm and intimate engagement.

> "*I think the Social Clubs are really special. They provide an opportunity to bond with members of your community who you would never normally meet...I love hearing about other people's stories, particularly as they are so different to my own.*"
>
> *A younger person taking part in a Social Club*

Team members moreover spoke about the way in which the act of telling a story can provide something of a "*shortcut to vulnerability*" – enabling people to "*open up to others, but in their own way and on their own terms*".

Some highlighted instances in which particularly powerful recollections or personal testimonies had challenged and changed the perspectives of others in the room. For example, one team member recounted a social club at which an older person had discussed their experience of growing up as a gay man in an era in which homophobia was rife. After the club, several other older people commented that hearing the man's story had "*opened their eyes*". This led the team member in question to reflect on the way in which the act of sharing stories could alter social relations for the better:

"*We've got this environment of trust. What can we do with that? Is it just that we're going to have a nice time or... are we able to do a little more than that, changing perspectives and improving connection in a bigger way? Not just in the moment, when people are sat talking to each other, but improving how they might relate to other people after being in that environment.*"

Stories, therefore, act as a key building block of connection between people. They identify similarities – common bonds – as well as developing a deeper understanding and respect of differences in experiences of life.

> "*It doesn't mean that we're all the same, and it doesn't mean that we should all agree on everything. Because the world would be a very boring place if that was the case. So, whatever our political differences – whatever our different opinions are in life, you know – 'more in common' isn't about dismissing them. It's about embracing those differences. But it's also about finding that common ground. And I think that's a really important philosophy to live by.*"
>
> **Kim Leadbeater, MP for Batley and Spen**

Reciprocity

Each person in an interaction must feel that they are benefiting from engaging with one another and are equally responsible to one another. Connecting well is a fundamentally mutual endeavour.

This is all the more important in situations in which societal attitudes might suggest that one party would stand to benefit more than the other, as is typically the case with older participants in intergenerational programmes. One-sided or unequal relationships diminish older people by casting them as the passive recipients of 'help', incapable of making positive change in their own lives. They also lead younger people to subjugate their own desire for human connection to what they perceive to be the more pressing needs of older people. Connecting well is a fundamentally mutual endeavour.

7. Encourage people to engage as equals

Dispel the impression that older people are 'recipients' of 'help' from younger people.

Team members were quick to point out that this emphasis on mutuality is implicit in the language employed by each of The Cares Family's local charities – we describe people as 'neighbours', not as 'volunteers' or 'clients'. One noted that referring to both age groups as neighbours during Outreach activities provided balance to programmes and made them more welcoming, while another highlighted the importance that this balance is also reflected in how staff communicate with and speak to different people consistently regardless of their age.

Another remarked that a belief in the importance of reciprocity is "*hardwired into our programmes and the language we use*", highlighting that the organisation had made a conscious choice not to describe Love Your Neighbour as a 'befriending programme' because:

"*With befriending programmes, it's very much like [speaking from the perspective of the programme provider:] 'I'm the figure of authority and this is what we're doing – we're going to match up this person to be your friend, they're going to talk to you because you're lonely.' And it just does not feel mutually beneficial at all. The language we use, the way we speak with people from the very start, helps them to understand that we do things differently.*"

Multiple staff members similarly stressed that, from their earliest engagement they seek to dispel the impression that younger people are 'givers' to the older people' 'receivers'. During induction events, they impress upon younger people that – in the words of one team member – "*you're not here to 'befriend' someone. You're here to build a relationship where you're going to give and you're going to take*". Another team member remarked that:

"*We always get people coming to us and saying that they want to help older people or do this kind of cute thing for an older person. Obviously, that's nice, but what we say to people is that it's not really about that – it's about getting to know one another. And [in other cases] older people might be very used to a younger person helping them with practical things, so we remind people all the time that it's not about that either. And we do signpost them to other places where they can get that support, but we hold these spaces for them to actually have meaningful friendships.*"

Love Your Neighbour Coordinators in particular were keen to stress that they don't seek to discourage younger peoples' instinct to offer practical support to older people – but that they do, when conducting check-in calls with people, seek to ensure that any help being provided is part of "*the natural ebb and flow of a friendship*". They noted that they make younger people aware that they should raise any concerns they might have regarding older people' wellbeing to the attention of staff. Indeed, some team members expressed a view that many younger people are able to focus on building friendships with older people exactly because they know that The Cares Family is on hand to provide other forms of support – "*They're the acrobats, we're the safety net.*"

Team members acknowledged that, at the point at which they register to take part in a programme or attend an induction, some younger people have a hard time believing that developing a relationship with an older neighbour is truly likely to be of mutual benefit. One commented that *"no matter how consistent we are in our communication, we can't change that – but connecting with an older neighbour can"*. Certainly, several team members sketched out scenarios in which younger people, having signed up to play a 'volunteer' role, realised organically and over time that spending time with an older neighbour had boosted their own wellbeing considerably.

Social Club Coordinators also described taking small but significant actions within clubs to ensure that people are able to view one another as equals. For example, multiple team members working in that role pointed to the way in which they seek to *'mirror responsibility'* among young and old – asking as many older as younger people to see to it that new arrivals are welcomed warmly or simply to make a round of tea. One explained that even minor prompts of this kind can impact on older and younger people's mindsets in important ways:

"Rather than saying, 'Oh, I'm here to look after this older neighbour and provide them with the tea or get this for them', they actually think 'I bet I'm better than you at Scrabble – let's see how that goes.' And just really just have a fun time. So, it stops the older person from thinking like, 'Oh, I'm in a service right now and I'm being provided for' – that energy just goes."

"Cohesion goes on without it always being apparent. So, you have this thing that brings people together and, actually, it doesn't matter that someone's got a different colour of skin, or someone might be gay, or someone might be in a wheelchair. It doesn't matter, does it? Because we're all eating cake together, or we're all singing together, or we're all doing it… So, I think having those platforms and the opportunities for people to come together is really, really important."

Kim Leadbeater, MP for Batley and Spen

But the point which Social Club Coordinators returned to most frequently in seeking to explain how their programme primes people to connect as peers was the simple fact that Social Clubs are designed to be enjoyed equally by older and younger people. They noted that, in planning Social Clubs, they consciously reject lazy assumptions about what people would enjoy doing on the basis of age – instead operating on the basis that older and younger people have *"an equal capacity for fun"*:

"We don't do bingo, and we don't do knitting. And that's something that we do differently to other organisations – we're offering new experiences for people, but things that you wouldn't necessarily associate with older people. We always use this line in our inductions – just because someone's turned 65 doesn't mean they suddenly lose their sense of humour, or they suddenly lose the want to do normal things that you would do with your friends."

Another team member provided a particularly effective example of this approach when she said that:

"We did a tequila tasting in the first couple of months at Liverpool Cares, and I remember people being like, 'Did they want to go tequila tasting!?' And I was like, 'Of course they did! Who wouldn't?' I think it's just different, totally different to what other people are doing."

"Something that I am strict on and is an important part of GoodGym is that, whenever you say GoodGym, you mean the community of people that do it. GoodGym isn't an organisation that is helped out by some amazing volunteers who walk around and cycle – GoodGym is that community. And I think it's really important and that I do tell all staff when they work with GoodGym is that we are the sort of support team. Or we are subservient to that community – we're there to do the difficult things that make that community run smoothly."

Ivo Gormley, CEO and Founder of GoodGym

In describing the practical impact of structuring Social Clubs around these sorts of activities, staff emphasised that it leads younger people to reconsider their perceptions of and attitudes towards older people and gives rise to an atmosphere of equality. There are, after all, no 'service providers' and 'beneficiaries' in pub quizzes or discos[14] .

"I guess we always started from this ambition of... our role as an organisation wasn't to deliver a service – it was to make it as easy as possible for families to help each other. And it's a really important distinction, because it meant that all of our focus was on how we were building the relationships between families, how we were strengthening those connections. And really, I guess, creating environments where people could just meet people, as fellow human beings; and there was an awful lot of work that went into that."

"One of the things we said at the end of [an interaction with] any family who've been visiting us to get stuff is: 'when you're finished with this stuff, feel free to bring it back', which just underlined that reciprocal thing – that people are just being part of a cycle of support, rather than being given to by these generous benefactors."

Sophia Parker, Founder of Little Village

Another point which arose repeatedly was the way in which Social Club Coordinators seek themselves to engage with people as peers. One member of the Liverpool Cares team used an example involving a colleague to explain how this adds to a sense that, in social clubs, everyone's equal:

"You've got this ready-made little crew and there's loads of inside jokes, and I remember people saying, like, 'Abbie's quizzes are always really hard!' And there's banter between the people and Abbie's bantering back and... It's just really friendly. It's not like we're delivering a service. It's genuine friendship."

"I mean there's a real effort made not to do the traditional elderly activities like bingo or the type of stuff you would have found in day centres or whatever. I like the fact that it does focus on stuff that is something both older people and younger people will enjoy."

An older person taking part in a Social Club

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14   Some Social Clubs are designed in response to specific requests for practical support from older people. Through our technology workshops, for instance, younger people help older people to operate smartphones and laptops. But team members with experience of delivering these workshops said that, even though the younger people who take part are *"recognisably volunteers"*, they *"still walk away feeling that they've learned something and gained something too"* as interactions often *"begin transactional but slip into laughter"*. There is they said, *"still balance in the experience"*, even if these clubs are *"necessarily more service-like"* than others.

8. Make "Come as you are" your only requirement

Don't allow skillset to become a barrier. Promote unity through trying and sometimes failing together.

Social Club Coordinators also outlined various ways in which the activities that clubs are structured around can more directly encourage people to engage with one another as equals.

Some said that they consciously design Social Clubs to enable people of all ages to feel they can contribute. For example, one team member described how they would seek to ensure that pub quiz clubs included some questions to which older people were more likely to know the answer and some which were more suited to younger people:

"There was a Manchester round. So, obviously, people were using their local knowledge, which really brings people together. And then there were questions that different people of different ages would know, like about a club that was open in the seventies, or whenever it was – it sounded amazing! And, yeah, I think all of that just allows people to feel like they're bringing their strengths to the activity and also gets them talking because they're like, 'Oh, yeah, I know this one!'"

Some noted that team activities which push people out of their comfort zone – like improvised comedy – can lead people to experience a sense of unity.

This is in part because finding an activity challenging can be a levelling experience:

"There was something in us being very calculating about making those activities very equal for everyone in terms of the skillset level... I often used to put on things where I knew there was a high chance that everyone would be rubbish at it. So that then you can make a joke out of it – you can take the piss out of an older person or a younger person. Everyone felt that they were in it together trying to master something that was quite tricky, and then some older people would shine in those. And, in the end, we would – it would just make for an equal environment."

Others emphasised that a key rule in designing Social Clubs is that they should require enthusiasm more than skill on the part of people, as this promotes a sense of inclusivity and equality. One Liverpool Cares team member used the example of 'singalongs', which are open to everyone and intended to be fun, as opposed to choirs, which require people to be able to sing beautifully:

"I think what worked well about that was that it wasn't a choir – it was a singalong. And we had a guy playing piano, so it was live – it wasn't like recorded music. And it was in a bar, so it wasn't in a hall that felt a bit echoey. And we aren't good singers, so if anyone wanted to come along, we were like 'It's not a choir. You know, you won't be able to harmonise. You're just shouting with lyrics basically. And you'll probably have a drink in your hand'... Enthusiasm's like 15 out of 10 but skill's like two out of 10."

Team members also noted that, at times, we take this approach to the extreme – structuring Social Clubs around activities which require essentially no skill whatsoever. People might, for instance, be invited to select an instrument from a pile placed in the middle of the room and make noise. This strips away perceptions of status and makes everyone involved seem more relatable to one another, while also uniting people in a shared recognition that they're being asked to do something which is somehow a bit silly.

The team member who described the unifying power of 'singalongs' further noted that activities of this sort, through which people are encouraged to affirm their physical presence to and around one another, can be particularly effective in bringing people out of their shells and facilitating equal-status encounters:

"I found that getting people to get loud and sing inevitably builds people's confidence and gets them talking in between – because everyone's having a bit of a giggle, and everyone's getting louder and louder. And you're encouraging people to make noise in a space [where] they wouldn't necessarily have the confidence to do so usually."

Another Social Club Coordinator highlighted the way in which supporting people to speak authentically and honestly about their reasons for taking part in our programmes – and to display a degree of vulnerability in doing so – can itself lead people to become more aware of all that they have in common. This in turn helps them to feel that they are of equal status. The team member in question spoke about the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that everyone, no matter their age, feels lonely, and how there is an inherent equality in that:

"I've found a lot of our younger people being really open in Social Clubs about how much it means to them, how it's the highlight of the week – incredibly sincerely – and I think it's just brought people together even more, because I think people feel like they've got permission to admit that loneliness now, because it has become this thing that everybody's talking about."

Love Your Neighbour Coordinators are, ultimately, comparatively restricted in their ability to shape the conditions under which older and younger people encounter one another. It was, however, clear from the workshops that we held on this topic that they view people providing support to one another on an equal basis to be a key measure of a match's success. One team member working in this role remarked that:

"The point at which my matches succeed is when older and younger people both begin to share the 'not good' stuff. That's when we know they're truly comfortable."

"It began an almost a 10-year fascination of mine in what the science tells us works [in countering division]... And what it told us was intense experiences matter. If people do something together, and it's intense and memorable, you're going to, you're going to win – you're going to be able to do something about division."

**Jon Yates, Founder,
National Citizen Service (NCS) programme**

"A lot of our work is based on 'the common third'. The idea of the common third is that it's an activity that a practitioner and a child engage in as equals and are where they are equally entrusted interested in that specific thing; and that is known as being a really critical way in which you can develop a relationship with children. So, when we assess all of our staff, we ask them about their interests, and we ask them about how they can share those interests with children. The home itself is really conducive to lots of common third activities – there's lots of opportunity for play and for people to do activities within one another."

Emmanuel Akpan-Inwang, Director of Lighthouse

In fact, it could be argued that the emphasis which our local charities place on creating equal-status encounters is among the most important aspects of their work. Authentic and reciprocal relationships are built on empathy and trust, but it's well-evidenced that we are more likely to empathise with and invest trust in those who we perceive to be similar to ourselves. Social psychologists say this is a function of how our species evolved – we developed a preference for engaging with people 'like us' as this facilitated co-operative behaviour within tribes. They refer to this tendency as 'homophily'[15], and it has been shown to shape our attitudes towards people of different generations as well as people from different backgrounds to ourselves[16].

Social psychologists have also demonstrated that homophily's effects can be overcome – when people from different social and cultural groups meet and mix under certain conditions[17] . Specialists in social contact theory have identified engaging on an equal-status basis to be one of these key conditions.

15   McPherson, M, Smith-Lovin, L and Cook, JM, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2001

16   Ibid.

17   Al Ramiah, A, and Hewstone, M, 'Intergroup contact as a tool for reducing, resolving, and preventing intergroup conflict: evidence, limitations, and potential', *American Psychologist*, 2013

More to the point, the other key conditions for cross-group contact which builds trust and counters prejudice are that it should be intense and cooperative. The sorts of encounters which enable authentic and reciprocal engagement are, by their very nature, relatively intense, while The Cares Family's programmes are aimed at fostering habits of mutual support (or cooperation). In other words, while they weren't designed to reflect these academic insights, our programmes have nonetheless evolved to reflect many of the key tenets of social contact theory – and create the kind of social mixing experiences which have been shown to effectively bridge societal divides.

> *"Dependence, which we're trying to sort of get out of our lives is actually incredibly positive for building community. If you think about your best friends, most of them, you would have been through something quite difficult and complicated with, and that will have helped you... helped that friendship to form. And so, I think what GoodGym is is a kind of... It's the sort of quite difficult, nitty gritty challenges – like potentially, you know, me and you trying to get a sofa down from the sixth floor of a block of flats. We are gonna, like, have a difficult time – we're gonna have to rely on each other, to work out how to do it. But we will probably have that... we will have a sort of meaningful connection that lasts for a long time."*

Ivo Gormley, Founder and CEO of GoodGym

9. Lean on the power of place

Centre places for their shared meaning helping to build a sense of belonging.

Another way in which The Cares Family's local charities support older and younger people to look beyond their differences and recognise all that they have in common, and therefore to see themselves as equals, is by centering place-based identity in their programme provision.

One East London Cares team member remarked that drawing peoples' attentions to local places and spaces which they in some way share *"creates this big sort of spiderweb of connection"*; while a Liverpool Cares team member described the way in which that charity seeks to put *"Liverpool at the forefront of everything that we're doing"*. They highlighted pub quiz Social Clubs focused on Merseyside trivia; 'Desert Island Disc' sessions specifically dedicated to music from the city; clubs themed around important local events (like the Grand National); and the way in which Love Your Neighbour matches are sometimes made to reflect people's loyalties to either Liverpool or Everton football clubs. The same team member was keen to underscore, however, that a shared love of the city tends just to *"crop up"* even where it hadn't been *"designed into"* the charity's programmes, commenting that:

"Scousers are mega proud of where they're from. And they love to share it as well – to talk about those little gems of places and feel like someone else is taking pride in their city. So, I do feel like a lot of what we do is just focused on Liverpool primarily. And that's a common ground that people often come together on and immediately talk about, like, 'Oh, but isn't it a really friendly city?' and 'This is where I live' and [exploring] what crossovers there are."

Several team members, though, expressed a view that drawing on place-based identity in this way is likely to generate a feeling of commonality among older and younger people only to the extent that those identities resonate with and have meaning for those people. Liverpool was described as "web-like" by another member of the local Cares team in part because:

"There's a real sense of spirit that comes from defining yourself as a Scouser and being like, 'This is where I live', and 'This is where I've settled'. We hold a lot of joy for our city... Liverpool isn't for me just a place where I live. It's a huge part of my identity and my family history. And I think that reverence that everybody gives the city that we live in helps to create this sense of belonging."

A member of the North London Cares team, on the other hand, said that place-based identities tend to be more defined by the neighbourhoods in which they work, rather than the city as a whole or the local boroughs in which North London Cares operates. People from Hampstead, they said, *"aren't from [the borough of] Camden – they're from Hampstead"*. They added that:

"I find that sometimes people don't think of Camden as the borough they live in. They think of Camden as the hotline they call when something isn't working at their house... And I think sometimes people see the words 'Camden' and 'Islington', and they see them as people that they don't tend to have great experiences with, [through that] bureaucratic system."

Even in instances in which older and younger people don't necessarily feel bonded through sharing a single place-based identity, however, a shared interest in the local area in general can provide a basis for mutually beneficial engagement.

A younger neighbour named Emily, who was 33 when she wrote an article on her experience of moving to Camberwell (in Southwark) for South London Cares' website, recalled that, at the point of doing so, she *"didn't have any connection to its history. I was told it was changing but I didn't exactly know what from."*[18] She explained how taking part in Social Club events run by South London Cares and hearing older people' stories about the area allowed her to *"get to know my new home, and its residents, so much better"*, describing the experience as providing an *"anchor to my community"*.

Indeed, several team members said that younger people, who often don't have deep roots in the areas in which they live, regularly tell staff that learning about older people' experiences allows them to feel that they know, understand and belong within their neighbourhood. Staff identified that highlighting this aspect of programmes, therefore, is key to engaging new people, and in particular younger people. Although younger people are very likely to experience loneliness, it is still often considered a facet of older age, and this may discourage them from joining activities that support building connections with others. However, staff reported that they counter this reluctance by connecting activities to the areas people live in:

"I guess if people are nervous to meet other people, sometimes it's easier to talk about a place than it is to talk about making friends. So, especially with younger people, if the approach doesn't seem right to be talking about building connections with people, it [can be] just, 'oh, you're new to Islington. Do you want to find out more about it here? Like, here's a really cool way that you can do that'."

Staff also noted that a popular form of Social Club is the local history walk, in which guides lead older and younger people on a tour of local landmarks and human histories; and these walks are purposefully designed to allow time for people to share their own recollections of the area along the way.

In turn, they said, having a connection – in the form of a younger friend – to the newly sprung-up office blocks, bars and hipster cafes which can otherwise feel closed off to them helps older people to feel that their place is still theirs, even as it changes.

This further points to another important aspect of The Cares Family's programmes as well as other connecting institutions that we work with including Men on the Edge, Camden and Islington United, Black Country Wellbeing Centre, and Made up Collective – they are built to help people relate to the changing places around them as well as to one another, and to develop a sense of shared belonging[19].

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18   South London Cares, 11 January 2018, '"This community of older and younger people... makes you want to celebrate": tales from 44 social clubs': https://southloncdoncares.org.uk/blog/there-is-something-about-meeting-this-community-of-older-and-younger-people-that-makes-you-want-to-celebrate-tales-from-44-social-clubs

19   This point in fact relates to how shared associations with a place can facilitate authentic (rather than reciprocal) engagement.

It is partly for this reason that, rather than situating all of their activities in the same location, our local charities seek to host Social Clubs in a rotating range of venues. These range from cocktail bars and vegan cafes to community halls, greasy spoons and local pubs which are well established but might cease to exist without the support and custom of newer residents. Crucially, they are typically places which either older or younger people might otherwise be unlikely to visit, or to visit together. A number of team members spoke about how this leads older and younger people alike to feel more comfortable with a greater variety of places and spaces within their local area, with one commenting that:

"I think holding Social Clubs in spaces where we know people might not necessarily feel welcome… It's just a massive part of it. And one of my favourite things is, when we do a Social Club in a certain space, you hear people say, 'I've never been here before, because I wasn't quite sure whether I'd be welcome or not'. Older people might say 'It's full of students or, you know, you walk past and it's a bit rowdy and I don't know who the staff are going to be, and I don't know where the toilets are…' So, for us to go into those places and be like, 'You're welcome anywhere! This is your city too!' Well, then they know who the staff are, they know where the toilets are, they know how it runs. And then they can take their family and friends along or they then feel comfortable to go in on their own and grab a cup of tea in a cafe that, you know, they'd never been to. Or they get on a new bus to somewhere because they've [been there through our] programme."

This is a deeply practical response to the feelings of dislocation and estrangement experienced by younger and older people alike in age of globalisation, gentrification and geographic mobility; but it's important to note that, for most of us, experiencing a sense of belonging within particular settings matters profoundly. Innovative research by academics at the University of Surrey for the National Trust has shown that forging an emotional connection with a physical environment leads us to experience feelings of wellbeing; and that our sense of our own identities is shaped in no small part by the places in which we invest meaning[20]. As our Founder, Alex Smith, said, our places are more than backdrops to our lives; they're *characters* in themselves.

Perhaps it's for this reason that we often come to feel more connected to others when we associate them with a place that matters to us, whether a home, neighbourhood, community space or local business. It follows that connecting with our local area helps us to connect with those we share it with – creating something of a virtuous cycle of belonging and connection.

"Neither the Scouts nor I had any reason to go in that care home until we did something which gave the permission for a load of Beaver Scouts to go in there and sing Christmas carols one year. And, suddenly, that's not [just] a building with loads of old people – you're then connected to the community. Also, I can think about where on another night with the Cubs or the Scouts, I think it was, we went to the local mosque. And that means that we've now made connections with that group there, and the people there who we then bump into down the street. And I think there's something about a sort of social awkwardness in us all that you kind of need a permission to find a reason to connect."

Matt Hyde, Chief Executive of The Scouts

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20   National Trust (2017), *Places that make us*: https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/places-that-make-us.pdf

10. Nurture people's agency

Support people to realise their own value noticing and emphasising the contribution they make and the qualities they bring.

Ultimately, The Cares Family's staff draw on a variety of techniques and approaches to support people to build reciprocal relationships because of a core conviction – a philosophical belief – that they needn't be the passive recipients of 'help' and can instead affect positive change in their own lives and the lives of others. Being a part of a relationship through which we are able to give something to another person shows us that we have value and that we are capable of acting on our own and one another's behalves too.

Equally, numerous team members stressed that some people, particularly those who have become cut off from their community or are experiencing loneliness, need to be carefully supported to realise their own value and, by extension, agency. One team member commented that "*if you don't feel that you have anything to offer to those around you, you tend not to try*". Numerous others described situations in which older people had internalised the effects of isolation and had come to feel that they were too withdrawn, "*boring*" or "*out of practice*" to be of interest or use to others.

Team members, including those who identify and invite people into The Cares Family communities through Outreach, additionally highlighted various ways in which they seek to support people to overcome these feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness rooted in isolation. Some underscored how important it is to convey a sense of interest in people' views and experiences:

"*It's like a way of showing people that actually we've all got something to contribute – even if that's just telling us what the last thing you watched on the telly was, or the best way to make a cup of tea. You know, all those little conversations don't get taken for granted.*"

One team member said that they continuously seek to "*hone in*" on what makes individuals unique and to help them to share those qualities with others.

In fact, a number of team members who deliver Love Your Neighbour and Outreach spoke about how, even at the point of first approaching older people about participating, they seek to emphasise the contribution which they can make to young people's lives. In the words of one:

"*Rather than saying, 'Oh, do you want a volunteer to come and visit you once a week?' we say, 'We have this community of younger people who've recently moved to the area. You've been here for 30 years [or however many years] – you know so much about the area and how it's changed.' So, we talk about what they can give from the very beginning, rather than suggesting 'Here's a service that can help you'. It's crucial and paints a picture of who we are from the very first interaction.*"

Multiple Social Club Coordinators, meanwhile, described the way in which they seek to offer particular support and encouragement to people who they either perceive or know to be less comfortable with certain kinds of group activity. One team member summarised the way in which they work actively to build up people's self-belief as follows:

"*If they've never done, for example, walking football and they're like 'I don't do exercise' or 'I don't do anything active', if you get that bit right, they might come and try the hoolahooping... And it's not about the activity – it's about giving them the confidence to come and try something new, which then gives a sense of confidence and accomplishment and empowerment.*"

A number of team members working in that role also highlighted how demonstrating to people that their input is being taken on board leads them to feel "*like they can contribute – because when they've said, 'I'd love to see a board games club' and then we're actually doing that board games club, that feels important and relevant.*" In recent years, all The Cares Family charities have supported the delivery of neighbour-led clubs – "*so whoever's got something that they want to share, or they're interested in, they can run a club and we support them in doing that*" – because they had noticed the way in which having an impact on their local Social Club programme had positively affected a person's self-esteem, and indeed the diversity of the programme.

This focus on cultivating people' confidence further extends to The Cares Family's work in providing more practical forms of support of older and younger people. Each of our local charity Outreach teams work both to enable people to take part in the charity's programmes and to connect them with other community groups and local services. One member of staff who works within one of these teams commented that, while their work does often involve "*helping people do the things they they're struggling to do or that they're worried about*", they nonetheless make "*a conscious effort to not just do it for them, but [to] help them do it themselves. So, you know, if we're signposting them to a service and we think they're able to, we send them information and they can call and they can sign up [themselves].*"

Each of these examples speaks to the emphasis which The Cares Family places on nurturing people' sense of agency – enabling them to develop the self-belief required to forge genuinely reciprocal bonds with others and to begin to realise their own power.

Conclusion

Over the course of the last twelve years, The Cares Family has helped create meaningful connection between older and younger people in some of the UK's biggest cities. North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares and East London Cares are all rooted in place, bringing people together to build communities in which people feel less lonely, more united and that they belong. This vision has never been more important given our current crisis of social disconnection.

Drawing on The Cares Family's track record this report lays out what we believe works when it comes to creating meaningful connection captured in the principles of authenticity and reciprocity. We have broken this down into ten key practical techniques and approaches that we employ in our work.

These range from going out and finding disconnection and creating spaces intended for connection, through to inspiring self-expression, encouraging people to engage as equals, and nurturing agency. They demonstrate that creating meaningful social connections requires intention, focus and skill.

Through detailing the ways in which meaningful connection can be brought about, we have sought to more carefully define what constitutes a connecting institution – the community initiatives which create positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations.

While the ten techniques have emerged from The Cares Family's own work with older and younger people, we do not believe that any one organisation has a monopoly on knowledge of this topic. Indeed, we believe a plurality of voices need to emerge throughout the country in order to build a more connected age. That is why we have included the voices of civic innovators who have built connection in their own communities throughout this paper.

And it is why we hope this paper will usefully add to the evidence base regarding the most effective approaches towards building connection across difference, and support other organisations to adopt and adapt the techniques to build connection in their own communities through our national Ripple Effect project[21].

It is our hope, too, that policy-makers will be encouraged by the learnings shared in this paper to help fuel the development of connecting institutions. Our *Building Connection: A Manifesto* report will set out more detail on the practical steps politicians of different political stripes can take to strengthen our social fabric and create more connected communities.

The crisis of social disconnection is real and its consequences playing out in communities across the UK. But in prioritising and investing in the conditions for social connection to flourish we can make change. This is evident in the work of the many civic innovators represented here as well as many thousands of others doing brilliant work bringing people together across difference throughout the UK. We hope that our work will help to amplify the case for change and add to the case for investment to power social connection across the UK.

21   For more information on The Cares Family's Ripple Effect work, please see: https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/ripple-effect