Power of Events

Report on the findings from the Spirit of 2012 archive about the impact of events on social cohesion and connection

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SPIRIT OF 2012
INVESTING IN HAPPINESS

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Spirit of 2012 funded over 230 projects between 2013-2023 including a wide variety of events. The events in the archive cut across arts and culture, sport and physical activity, and volunteering, and are an important source of data about how many of these events have created a lasting impact for people and places across the UK. Spirit also funded research into different aspects of their grant-making strategy.

This report synthesises learning from Spirit's archive and other relevant literature to encourage and support event organisers to maximise their benefits to social cohesion and connection. Twenty-eight projects were selected from the extensive archive for the learning they provide on **what makes an event that results in people feeling more connected to their communities and that builds social cohesion**.

The literature reviewed for the report falls into four broad themes. The first clarifies what is meant by social cohesion and how it is measured. The second defines different elements of social capital, understood in this report as an element of social cohesion. The third theme is the literature bringing together how events contribute to social cohesion. The fourth theme is the relevant literature on volunteering, as volunteers are often a core resource for both events planning and delivery.

Belong uses a working definition of social cohesion: Social cohesion happens when people from different backgrounds meet, mix and get along. The work of cohesion and integration is about developing neighbourhoods, workplaces, institutions and social spaces where difference is welcomed and celebrated. It is about creating places where empathy and curiosity about people 'not like me' are encouraged. When this happens, we can move beyond narratives of 'us' and 'them' towards ideas of kindness, trust and social cohesion between groups.

Another way of thinking about cohesion and integration is that it is the 'social glue' in the places where we live, work and socialise. Its presence means that we get on with and trust our neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances. We feel safe and connected to others – a sense of belonging. We often only notice this vital 'social glue' by its absence.

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The report has been developed in close collaboration with Spirit of 2021 staff who know the projects well. It has also benefited from feedback from an Advisory Panel drawn from government, academics from four different disciplines, Spirit of 2012 staff and another major funder, community organisations and think-tanks. We are very grateful for all the insights and learning that have been shared in the course of completing the research.

Recommendations linked to understanding people and place

Being clear about the aim of an event and involving local people in the design is paramount. It is also important for the aims to be realistic within the time and budget available. The archive highlights how projects with less developed networks and available infrastructure needed far longer lead times to achieve similar levels of success compared to projects that had already established these. Resources, both human and financial are required to provide the training and upskilling necessary to ensure quality connections are built.

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We recommend that:

i) co-design approaches are used to ensure buy-in from local communities and groups;

ii) funders encourage time to be spent building networks where these are under-developed through additional funding with mentoring opportunities for less experienced groups; and

iii) budgets are available for upskilling to embrace social cohesion aims with all those involved in delivery.

Recommendations linked to evaluation methods

Integral to the planning process is to be clear how an event, or series of events are going to be evaluated. Evaluation is not something that can be left to the end. It is important to know at an early stage what data needs to be collected and in what format/s. Measuring an event's effectiveness in building social cohesion is crucial in order to capture the wider benefits to communities.

We recommend that:

i) all events are evaluated using measurement techniques that are fully accessible e.g. for disabled people or people with English as a second language and monitoring is designed to capture the wider community benefits and organic developments that contribute to social cohesion;

ii) steps towards bridging divides and encouragement to connect with decision-makers, both at the local and national levels, are recorded and evaluated as part of the potential wider gains of events;

iii)   more process evaluation is conducted so that the way in which skilled and experienced community event organisers work can be more fully appreciated and understood;

iv)   funders provide support and guidance in different methods of evaluation to maximise the social value of events.

Recommendations relating to volunteers/participants/audiences

Organisers will need to consider whether the event has scope for different levels of involvement and commitment to widen participation beyond existing volunteers, e.g. one-off community helpers alongside staff and volunteers. Some events may be able to accommodate a large amount of flexibility in when volunteers attend, even if there are more formal routes to becoming trained as a volunteer. Event organisers also need to consider whether there is scope to actively promote social connection throughout the event, e.g. volunteers with the skills to introduce and support people from different backgrounds. Also, the time, day and location will need to be considered for its appropriateness in engaging whichever group(s) are being brought together.

We recommend:

i)   exploring barriers to participation and how they can be overcome is carried out at both design and delivery stages and that this involves both economic and physical barriers;

ii)   organisers consider how they can include people who want to 'help out' rather than volunteer, or volunteer but on a flexible basis;

iii)   recording whether an event is being accessed by those who need it most in any particular location;

iv)   building into events safe spaces for interactions across difference.

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Recommendations relating to creating a legacy

Spirit of 2012 has demonstrated that it is very concerned with creating a legacy from the events and research funded. Opening their archive is part of maximising the usefulness of the learning the archive contains. An amazing array of work has been completed by a wonderfully diverse range of providers. A great deal of training has been done that can be useful. Excellent partnership working has been developed.

We recommend:

i)   that other funding bodies open their archive to share learning;

ii) training and peer networks developed through events are encouraged to build in social connections and supported to do so;

iii) the partnerships developed are supported and built into the infrastructure of each locality so that the relationships and knowledge can be passed on and developed;

iv) events that contribute to building and supporting cultural memory that is relevant to all the communities of a place need to be encouraged.

Methodology

The 28 projects analysed ranged from large programmes such as £2.85m for Hull City of Culture (2017), a portion of which went to the volunteering programme, involving volunteers in thousands of events, cultural activities, installations & exhibitions of all different sizes across the city. To smaller community events such as a community carnival and gala in Crook, County Durham bringing local people together to celebrate the Coronation of King Charles III through their own creative ideas.

The findings emerged through a systematic process of qualitative analysis. We were able to utilise existing report insights and good practice tools as well as the data contained in the archive. In particular, for the focus on social connection, we have been able to draw on social capital theory, which has a nuanced understanding of the importance of bonding, bridging and linking. This theory was applied to the events and the same process was applied to social cohesion principles and outcomes. Also, a workshop helped to refine the framework that was emerging from bringing social cohesion theory together with the themes that were emerging from the data.

Bonding - the social connections between people and groups who feel themselves to be more alike than different from each other

Bridging – the social connections between people, groups and different services and groups of volunteers

Linking - the connections and access people and groups have to having their voices and opinions heard, being able to influence important decisions locally, and being able to make change happen by acting with others.

Key Findings - understanding place and people

- It is important to involve local people and consider methods of communication, include protected access budgets and allow time for informal conversations.

- Allowing co-creation to happen at different stages, in different ways/formats, and with different constellations of people across the development and delivery can achieve a greater sense of belonging and identity with the event.

- Including a wide range of organisations, for instance faith groups, community centres, libraries, schools, community radio stations, the police, and local arts organisations can result in great gains for social cohesion and connection.

- Allow time to build networks, especially where these are under-developed.

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- Collectively organising an event is a great way of forming partnerships that help strengthen their delivery across other work and building bridges between different communities. It can result in high levels of trust, and a clear commitment to continue working together.

- Event organisers need to be aware of the expertise, experience and resourcing needed to make implementation consistent and reliable.

- Well organised events engage emotions, build connections, support learning and contribute to shared values that help build a positive identity of living in a particular place.

- A focus on social cohesion and connection can strengthen democratic processes. Events with these aims in mind can encourage people along a path of greater engagement in their wider communities, contributing to care for the future.

Key Findings - evaluating for social cohesion

- Having a guide for all the different data collection methods needed to build a holistic evaluation of the event can help with consistency.

- Reflective conversations about who an organisation conceives of as target beneficiaries, and what that means about the sorts of social connection goals they have helps to maximise benefits to cohesion.

- Having all sides represented and included in events where there are deep, entrenched divides is both essential and challenging.

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- Evaluation of community events depends on clarity of purpose and processes, which requires an explicit theory of change of how an intervention is likely or understood to contribute to the intended outcomes.

- There is always a balance to be found between encouraging small events to happen and building in too many administrative considerations that may discourage people from getting something organised. In most cases, holding an event, even if it lacks many of the preparation, evaluation and reporting issues referred to in this report, is better than not holding an event at all.

- Implementation and process evaluation is needed to draw out the learning about relationships built through event organising.

Key Findings – Impact of the event on volunteers/participants/audiences

- There are significant barriers to participation. Those with disabilities, poor mental health, low income or from an ethnic minority, etc. may need extra input - such as cohort-specific recruitment efforts – to encourage them to attend.

- Funding devolved to local groups running local events demonstrates that people at the local level are being trusted to spend the money wisely.

- Using open spaces for events in ways that allow local residents to benefit as well as specific interest groups is a key part of the challenge of maximising the social cohesion benefits.

- More diversity within project delivery teams and amongst commissioned artists, etc. is important, so they are reflective of the audience that they are seeking to engage.

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- A more open ticketing approach may lead to events attracting audiences that would not get the most benefit from the event, for instance some people may feel more confident to show up even though it might appear on the surface to be open to all.

- Community events associated with a national moment like Eurovision are a powerful tool for fostering feelings of community.

- Events are a great way for people to commit a limited amount of time, allowing them to engage in their local community and encourage social responsibility and the values associated with giving something to the community.

- Events can be specifically designed with spaces for people to mix informally, whether by the way space is laid out at a festival or through repeated events where participants can gradually get to know each other. The skills needed by volunteers to facilitate expansions in social capital at events should not be underestimated.

Key Findings - Creating a legacy

- A lot of the venues used for community events are in the same place as local services and therefore there can be many cross-over benefits. Events can activate the use of a building for more ongoing activities and can supplement the programmes offered by local services.

- Utilising local bodies to coordinate grant-making processes can lead to more effective distribution because unlike other funding streams which are often coordinated by organisations further removed from the local area, they understand the local community and its needs.

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- Funding bodies can play an important role by encouraging projects to consider the wider social cohesion benefits, as well as themselves using application processes and criteria for funding that enable social cohesion through project design, ethos, and delivery.

- Being encouraged to form peer networks that will continue long into the future will support ongoing social cohesion.

- Networks with central administration can provide practical support in the form of regular meetings to share plans and coordinate activity, act as a press office for local events, and update a website profiling all the events happening nationally. This can be particularly valuable for small, grassroots organisations.

- National coordinating bodies promoting an annual event can raise the profile of everyday activities that contribute to social cohesion and connection.

- Events that involve third-sector organisations linking with local councils exemplify the collaborative spirit necessary for effective community engagement.

- Failing to engage with local networks (and potential partners) leads to missed opportunities to embed the work and learnings from a local event at a wider level.

- Linking volunteers to a community partner after an event can support their continued engagement and can contribute to building trust, fostering collaboration, and empowering communities to shape their collective futures by making links with larger and more influential structures and organisations.

- Building links with local businesses can link with local concerns, such as the need to revitalise a high street.

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1. Introduction

Spirit of 2012 was established as an independent Trust by the National Lottery Community Fund in 2013 to build on the legacy of the London 2012 Games. Over the next decade, Spirit funded their grant recipients to evaluate and share learning, and alongside their delivery work they provided funding for independent evaluations as well as bringing together evidence themselves. Much of this content – but not all – sits on their **website**.

Spirit funded over 230 projects including a wide variety of events. These ranged from those involving physical activity, the arts, and volunteering. All grant holders were able to spend up to 10% on evaluation, although not all explicitly focused on community connection as part of their evaluation.

Spirit also funded research into different aspects of their grant-making strategy. The events in the archive cut across arts and culture, sport and physical activity, volunteering, and are an important source of data about how many of these events have created a lasting impact for people and places across the UK.

As Spirit looks ahead to closure in 2025, the charity has opened up its rich archive to learning partners who can help to see this evidence from a new perspective, and also use alongside their own evidence and learning to create new content that will be used by their organisations, networks and audiences. In this way, ownership of Spirit's learning will be transferred to these partners to ensure a lasting legacy beyond the life of the fund.

Belong became a Learning Partner of Spirit of 2012 in January 2024 as part of Spirit's closure plan. Throughout 2024-25, Belong is working with Spirit and other partners to share learning about the impact of events on social connection and cohesion. **Belong** - the Cohesion and Integration Network is the UK's leading membership organisation on social cohesion. We work with local government, private sector and civil society organisations to develop, implement and evaluate work that brings people together across difference and builds stronger communities.

Belong's approach to becoming a learning partner has been to work with Spirit of 2012 with an ethos of partnership working, inquiry, and deep collaboration to extend the impact and reach of the expertise, learning and knowledge that Spirit has amassed. In this report, Belong has synthesised learning from Spirit's archive and other relevant literature to:

- develop and disseminate new content based on the findings in this report;

- integrate insights from Spirit's work into Belong's existing resources and content;

- create a framework for events so that they are planned/delivered/evaluated/etc. in ways that support social cohesion and placemaking planning;

- and to advance knowledge for practitioners, funders, policy makers and academics.

Belong is building on Spirit's legacy by substantially enriching what Belong already offers to our existing audiences and networks and increasing Belong's reach and impact across new target audiences. We have adopted the approach taken in the Spirit of 2012 Inquiry into how events can build connected, happy and

thriving communities. We have treated events as vehicles for change in themselves, whatever the delivery mechanism, when thinking about their impact on local social connection and social cohesion. The process of selecting the reports and evaluations to include in the analysis was very much a collaboration with Spirit of 2012 staff. They were also involved in commenting on drafts and bringing their considerable knowledge built up over the past decade of the projects and reports they have funded and commissioned. The report has also benefited from feedback from an Advisory Panel drawn from government, academics from four different disciplines, Spirit of 2012 staff and another major funder, community organisations and think-tanks. We are very grateful for all the insights and learning that has been shared in the course of completing the research.

This report is divided into eight sections. After this introductory section, Section 2 reviews both the academic and grey literature on how events can contribute to building social cohesion and links these to the findings from Belong's **Beyond Us and Them** (2021) and Belong's **Power of Connection through Volunteering** (2023 and 2024) research. Section 3 details the methodology that was applied in analysing the archive. The overarching question that guided the analysis was **"What can we learn about the impact of events on social connection and cohesion from these reports?"** Sections 4-7 discuss the findings, divided into: what the archive tells us about the importance of place and the people who live there; learnings it provides on evaluating events for their contribution to social cohesion; the impacts of events on volunteers, participants and audiences; and the legacy events can leave behind. Section 8 draws conclusions and alerts the reader to the online resource that is being created based on this report, together with the contributions from other Spirit of 2012 learning partners.

Spirit of Rugby. Credit RFU Collection via Getty Images

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2. Literature review

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first clarifies what is meant by social cohesion and how it is measured. The second section defines different elements of social capital, understood in this report as an element of social cohesion. The third section reviews the literature on how events contribute to social cohesion. The fourth section details the relevant literature on volunteering, as volunteers are often a core resource for both events planning and delivery.

2.1 What is social cohesion?

While there are common threads, the definition of social cohesion continues to be contested (see Bernard, 1999; Bottoni, 2018a, 2018b; Chan et al., 2006; Ramsey, 2012; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). A landscape review of social cohesion literature (Baylis et al., 2019) identified 8 key components based on a range of definitions of social cohesion in the literature. The first three components, regarded as 'social components' include (i) sense of belonging, (ii) homogeneity of values and (iii) attitudes and regard for diversity. Components four and five are considered 'political dimensions' of social cohesion and are (iv) participation or collaboration, and (v) rules and institutions which rely on consensus. Components six and seven are equality based and include (vi) wealth/income equality and (vii) equal access to resources. The final component is (viii) personal and collective autonomy, which links closely to component three 'regard for diversity'.

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As well as social cohesion not being clearly defined and conceptualised in the academic and policy fields, it has also not been measured consistently. While being an important government policy during much of the last 23 years, since the Cantle and Denham reports in 2001, it has eluded any defined set of measures. The British Academy's (BA) recent Cohesive Societies (2019) programme adopted a multidisciplinary focus involving a steering group and experts from across the entire Academy (Humanities and Social Sciences). A central purpose was to move beyond specific discussions around current issues (e.g. social integration, impacts of Brexit), and to distil the central conceptual features of cohesion. The programme involved multiple workshops, including roundtables convened by the Centre for Science and Policy, and yielded literature and policy reviews (Baylis et al., 2019; Donoghue & Bourke, 2019), as well as a review of the role of faith and

belief (Pennington, 2020). To determine what needs to be measured it is helpful to consider the five central elements that emerged from the BA's work:

- identity and belonging

- the social economy

- meaning and mechanisms of social responsibility

- cultural memory and tradition

- and care for the future

Therefore, this provides guidance for the analysis that follows in this report. The report also draws on a framework developed for looking at the contribution of the arts to building social cohesion. The following mediators help to explain the kinds of changes that might be taking place when people engage in the arts. These may lead to kinder attitudes and behaviours, making people more willing to accept others who are different (Broadwood, 2012). We have applied these more broadly across different types of events. They are:

Emotions – the arts can engage people's emotions directly and powerfully and in doing so can spark feelings, such as empathy, that are key for influencing kindness

Connections – arts experiences can bring people together and have the potential to create immediate strong connections between individuals and groups

Learning – the arts can create opportunities for people to learn from and about each other and the world

Values – many arts experiences involve a deep exploration of human values which are key to determining how people live together and behave towards each other

Social identity theory demonstrates that we like people most and are most likely to help them if they belong to our social groups (Abrams, 2010; Abrams and Vasiljevic, 2014). Events may provide opportunities to reframe our notion of the groups we believe we belong to. Events that involve people in doing, making, participating or witnessing experiences together may develop bridging social capital, strengthening individual and group relations.

The measurement of social impact is also closely related to the above social cohesion measures and tools have been developed for use by both large and small organisations (OECD, 2024), making its application more accessible to event organisers (e.g. Social Impact Navigator, Center for Social Impact Strategy, Social Impact Toolbox). Impact mapping encourages organisations to identify the various internal and external stakeholders affected by the events and spell out the impacts expected for each (VisibleNetwork; Rockwool Foundation, 2020), either by consulting directly with stakeholders or exploiting existing evidence. Through this approach, an organisation can analyse how it fits into the wider social economy. However, impact mapping generally cannot pinpoint the causal links between the implemented event(s) and the expected impacts, and

is therefore better suited to defining the change strategy at the organisational level rather than the wider systems level. Similar approaches, like the "story of change" model, place greater emphasis on explaining why stakeholder groups and expected impacts are included in the change strategy.

The guiding principles for successfully building social cohesion in communities were developed as a part of Belong's Beyond Us and Them Research project which was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted in partnership with the University of Kent. The Beyond Us and Them (2021) research project was a comprehensive longitudinal study (May 2020 – May 2022) investigating the impact of COVID-19 on our social relations. A key finding from that study was that local areas that had invested in social cohesion programmes demonstrated higher levels of social connection, neighbourliness, trust in local institutions and services, much higher levels of volunteering, more positive attitudes towards migrants and higher levels of subjective wellbeing. These investments were often in the form of neighbourhood and/or town and citywide events and building on the legacy from such events in terms of the networks they promote and support. Events can help to legitimise diverse cultural identities and facilitate positive connections between people brought together for a shared purpose (Koutrlikou, 2012).

2.2 Social capital as a key element of social cohesion

Social cohesion is frequently discussed alongside or interchangeably with the term social capital (Horsham et al., 2024). Social capital also has various definitions (see Putnam, 1994; Claridge, 2018; and Cook, 2022 for reviews). Broadly, social capital describes connections between people, categorised as bonding (within-group connections), bridging (between-group connections), and linking (connections to people of greater power or institutional authority).

Importantly, social capital does not necessarily result in social cohesion. A society can consist of many groups with strong social capital within them, but no inter-group inclusion (akin to the 'dark side' of social cohesion mentioned in Ramsey, 2012). Harmonious cohesion involves a level of respect for others, while rivalrous cohesion can involve hostility towards the out-group (Abrams, 2010). For instance, fans of a particular football club can have high levels of cohesion which is not extended to fans of another club. The same can be true at the neighbourhood level. Thus, whilst certainly a constituent of social cohesion, social capital in isolation is not a sufficient indication of social cohesion within a community. Additionally, some events can be alienating to others in the neighbourhood, for instance when sections of a park are blocked off for a festival (e.g. Smith, 2023).

2.2.1 Bonding social capital

Bonding social capital describes the connections within a group or community and is often, though not necessarily, linked to the community's degree of homogeneity - members having similar characteristics, attitudes, and resources (Claridge, 2018). Members of groups characterised by high bonding capital will typically be highly interconnected with frequent interactions. Bonding capital confers several benefits, including emotional support and the fostering of reciprocal norms associated with trust (Claridge, 2018). However, bonding capital can also be associated with negative outcomes due to its high levels of exclusivity. Networks with high levels of bonding capital may develop higher levels of prejudice and discrimination,

intergroup conflict and competition and consequently, this can be detrimental to social cohesion (Belong, 2023, Claridge, 2018; What Works Wellbeing, 2022).

2.2.2 Bridging social capital

Bridging social capital describes the connections between communities which are separated by divisions such as race, class, or religion (Claridge, 2018). People experiencing high levels of bridging capital may possess high levels of shared interests or goals despite stark differences in their social identity (Belong, 2023; Pelling and High, 2005). The notion of bridging capital is strongly tied to the UK's concepts of community integration and cohesion, and various policies introduced since the early 2000s have aimed to increase bridging cohesion between communities within the UK.

The benefits of bridging capital are generally considered far greater than those of bonding capital (Putnam, 2000), helping individuals gain social mobility, power, and new opportunities (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Stone and Hughes, 2002). It increases tolerance for diversity through increased intergroup contact and levels of trust (Lundåsen, 2022; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Schmid et al., 2014). Nonetheless, contact is not necessarily equally beneficial for all parties (Hässler et al., 2020; Tausch et al., 2015) and must be carefully navigated if it is to produce lasting and positive relationships. Consequently, there is a need for communities to have a balance of bonding and bridging capital to maximise community development and social cohesion (Kearney, 2003). What connects bridging and bonding social capital is that both are generally regarded as being horizontal forms of social capital (Woolcock and Naryan, 2000), by laterally connecting people of similar status and power.

2.2.3 Linking capital

Vertical social capital is also an important constituent of social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006). Whilst bridging capital may include vertical aspects (Claridge, 2018), vertical connections are more commonly termed 'linking capital'. Linking social capital describes the connections between individuals who are interacting across power gradients within their society (Belong, 2023; Szreter and Woolock, 2004). An example of linking social capital would be the relationships that develop between community-based organisations and funding partners. Linking capital is critical to the development of communities (Flora, 1998). Linking capital may also extend bridging capital by involving networks and connections between individuals or groups in public agencies, businesses, legal institutions, or political groups (Healy, 2002). The vertical bridging between minority and majority groups of differing levels of power, becomes 'linking' when these power differences are more explicit (Claridge, 2018). Linking social capital can then offer similar benefits to bridging capital by enabling the acquisition of resources (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004; Stone and Hughes, 2002). Many events include partnerships between small organisations and large institutions, such as Councils and national sports and arts bodies.

Linking social capital is also important for strengthening democratic processes and combating the sense of alienation and isolation many feel. Having no sense of voice and agency is detrimental to social cohesion (Clarke and Stokes, 2014). Events are important for building the skills and confidence of those involved, where they can feel part of something bigger than themselves.

2.3 Benefits of events to social cohesion

Events can encourage social interactions between people from different backgrounds and bring diverse people into the same space. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis that positive contact between different groups leads to greater tolerance is now widely accepted. More recently, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) analysed over 500 studies across 38 nations, 94% of which found that increased contact led to lower levels of prejudice. Events are a key way to programme possibilities for people to meet across difference. Interaction in many spaces, such as parks and city centre spaces, may be minimal on an everyday basis. However, events can be moments when people feel much more connected to others from different cultural backgrounds (Neal et al., 2015; Peters, 2010; Powers et al., 2022).

Research on festivals indicates that the positive effects are more likely to occur if events are loosely organised, giving space for conversations to arise and staged in peripheral locations where people might not otherwise go (Fincher et al., 2014). Measures intended to impose order can reduce the diversity of uses and users of an event. Festivals which include "loose spaces" which "allow for the chance encounter, the spontaneous event, the enjoyment of diversity and the discovery of the unexpected" (Franck and Stevens, 2007:4) offer more opportunity for people to meet away from the spectacles they have come to experience. The layout as well as the programming of events can influence how people can interact positively with each other. For instance, having spaces between stages where people can sit and chat and meet others informally

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can help build social cohesion between different groups attending an event (Hassanli et al., 2020; Smith and Ertem, 2023). This resonates with research on social cohesion which speaks of the need to acknowledge that there will be unexpected outcomes and an element of surprise at an event which cannot be planned for (Wilson and Darling, 2016).

Co-designed events, for instance where an event is organised by an events specialist working together with representatives from the local community, allow for participatory, co-creative and open design processes that can overcome some of the limitations of highly organised events. This approach goes beyond consultation by building and deepening equal collaboration between citizens affected by, or attempting to resolve, a particular challenge (Sunlight Foundation, 2024). Users are involved as 'experts' of their own experience and become central to the design process. Co-production can also ameliorate some of the disadvantages of highly organised events in their ability to contribute to social cohesion. Co-production refers to a way of working where event organisers and local people work together to reach a collective outcome, such as a neighbourhood carnival or event held in a youth centre. Festivals can also be a powerful tool for building social cohesion and regional identity where there are elements that are co-produced with local people (Jaeger and Mykletun, 2013; Wilson et al., 2017; Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2019).

However, there is an ongoing debate about whether superficial, fleeting encounters such as at a carnival or special event, make any significant difference (Valentine, 2013). Exactly what is meant by 'meaningful interactions' and how they can be achieved at events has not been clearly defined. Rather, there is a range of activities that appear to have a positive impact on people's ability to get along with each other and there is also a potentially darker side to the ways people regard each other when they meet, where differences can result in polarisations and fragmentation (Amin, 2012; Valentine, 2013; Webster et al, 2005). People will tend to keep their interactions at an event to the people they came with, and so even if the overall attendance at the event is diverse, they may not have any significant contact with other groups by attending (Gobster, 2002). Efforts need to be made to consciously encourage conversations that support attitudes of acceptance of difference, through all the official messaging about the event and the opportunities for people to interact at the event. However, there will still be the possibility of less positive experiences, either from other event goers' hostile attitudes or through lack of thought placed on accessibility and a sense of welcome.

For some event organisers social cohesion is a by-product which they may or may not be planning to achieve. Many different types of events have been found to be effective at improving relations between different groups, but there are also examples of events being ineffective. The literature suggests that it is less the type of intervention that matters, but aspects of how it is designed and delivered in practice. The following are important: using a mix of different actors and delivery mechanisms to reach different parts of the community; local input into the design of interventions; strong local leadership; deep and well-established relationships with community leaders and civil society organisations; and the right skills and capacity for community events to succeed in their objectives.

Five local authorities were designated funding as pilot Integration Areas between 2019-22. The schemes were very successful in meeting their objectives and made a significant impact on the towns and cities where they were implemented. Each area included many events in their programme and, in some instances, conducted process evaluations. For instance, Bradford Council supported 23 core projects and 60 smaller projects. The city showed an increase from 45.7% to 58.1% on the Police and Crime Commissioner Survey (2019-

2021) indicator of how well people get on with each other which is more than a 10% increase; prior to the integration funding, this was actually declining. Larger projects funded by Bradford Council benefitted from a bespoke Theory of Change, developed through applying the logic model methodology with whichever community partners were involved in delivery. Despite being difficult times during the pandemic, Bradford for Everyone (2022) ran regular online events for sharing learning and networking as well as online check-ins to update on progress. The design of the logic models helped to keep partners in the initiative moving in the same direction by providing a common language and point of reference. When more social mixing was allowed, events ranged from small neighbourhood-based litter picking initiatives to large scale arts events that celebrated the cultural diversity of the city and surrounding areas.

There is currently a shortage of information about the causal factors involved in building social cohesion through events. However, there is currently a paradigm shift happening within the funding of cultural events with greater expectation that they contribute to social outcomes (Scott et al., 2024) . If funders are interested in wider social outcomes that build connection and social cohesion, then event organisers will need to demonstrate participation in its fullest form, as the basis for understanding if inclusivity and equity are being achieved. The evaluations of larger events such as the UK Cities of Culture are well placed to bring more understanding of how to achieve wider outcomes that benefit communities.

Cultural events that celebrate minority cultures produce material and symbolic representations of marginalised groups that can make people from these groups feel more welcome in, and more attached to, a particular space. For instance, if people do not see people who look like themselves using a particular park they will not use it (Low, 2013), so programming can allow marginalised or less visible communities to "self-identify" (Glover, 2015). Events are one of a number of ways of making public spaces more inclusive, alongside the naming of spaces and monuments (Low, 2013). Existing research tends to focus on the ways events are experienced, but the planning and organisation of programming are important too. Creating events that serve disadvantaged people requires them to be planned with all the different communities, including disabled, older and minority residents (Hoover and Lim, 2021). Participatory design approaches need to include co-produced programming, as staging dedicated activities on behalf of marginalised groups may be patronising and tokenistic if the particular groups being targeted are not involved in organising them.

To harvest the most gains for social cohesion from events, it is important to ensure that social cohesion outcomes are included in the criteria used to judge the merits of proposals (Smith, Osborn and Vodicka, 2024). When an event is specifically designed to highlight the talents and contribution of a group that is stigmatised or marginalised, for instance disabled people or people speaking a specific language, the individual benefits for those belonging to one of those communities may be the primary purpose. However, it is still important to consider how intersectional issues are being addressed. For instance, are minoritised ethnic groups equally able to access an event for disabled participants? Or, are sexual minorities equally welcomed at an event for speakers of a particular language?

Even when focused on inclusion, programming can result in excluding some groups as some potential participants are deterred by symbolic, financial, and physical barriers associated with organised events and activities. These may exacerbate existing barriers, for example: intrapersonal constraints (lack of perceived belonging); interpersonal constraints (e.g. limited social networks); or structural constraints (e.g. time and money). Furthermore, events and activities can provide defensive measures deliberately designed to exclude

certain groups by privileging others (Glover, 2020). In other words, they are a convenient way to deter "undesirables" (Madden, 2010). For instance, the location may be inaccessible for those who do not have a car, the ticket prices may be prohibitive, or there may be an expensive dress code. Programming is another form of control, and intensive programming can be regarded as the antithesis of accessible, open space (Mitchell, 2017). There is always a balance to be struck between being well-organised and being over-organised in a way that takes away room for spontaneous exchanges between people from different backgrounds. For instance, if participants are expected to rush from one activity to another without any down time and opportunity for conversations that can build connection.

Overusing a particular space for events and making it unavailable to local people is also a problem in some venues and locations. For instance, certain parks in London are particularly well designed for holding outdoor events in the summer months. However, hiring out park space to event organisers is increasingly resisted by local residents who feel they are no longer able to use it (Smith, 2021). Without careful consultation, local residents can feel alienated by spaces being blocked off and barriers placed in the way of their regular activities. This can reduce tolerance and cohesion, especially if the park ends up damaged through a large number of people using it for a short time and perhaps not returning it to the state they found it.

Impact evaluations by design are not well placed to shed light on why an event did or did not successfully build social cohesion (Hesketh et al., 2023). Process evaluations would be better able to do this. Process evaluations typically examine aspects related to delivery and implementation processes such as whether it was delivered as planned and whether it reached the people it was intended to. Process evaluations are also concerned with how an intervention has an effect on participants, organisations, and communities, including their response to the intervention and its influence on determinants of outcomes (OHID, 2018). For example, whether it changed the identified negative attitudes, communication skills, or community engagement. Contextual factors are really important and may include an individual's characteristics, family, social network, organisation, such as a school, or local community. For example, a process evaluation could investigate whether the event worked better for older or younger people or in particular neighbourhood. Good community development processes and associated outcomes represent in themselves a theory of change (McArdle and Murray, 2021). Too often, the skilled work of bringing people together successfully across difference is overlooked in favour of counting how many people came through the door.

2.4 Volunteering at events

Many events would not happen without the active involvement of volunteers. So, this section provides a brief review of the literature about the motivations and contribution to social cohesion that volunteering provides. Volunteering has been explored in both social policy and academic literature and this section includes what is known about the motivation of volunteers and differences between formal and non-formal ways of volunteering. It examines the impact of programmes designed to support social cohesion on volunteering levels and the relationship between the two. It also discusses the changes in levels and types of volunteering in recent years.

The 'civil society paradigm' (Lyons et al., 1998; Paine et al., 2010; Rochester, 2006), which focuses on organisation-based volunteering, dominates much of the literature. In this paradigm, volunteers are

characterised as possessing altruistic drives to improve their local communities and/or environments. Large scale event volunteering programmes tend to involve being recruited to an organisation and motivation may be more linked to wanting to be involved in a particular event. However, the ways in which volunteering is enacted in the UK appears to be changing. As noted by the Institute for Volunteering Research (Ramsey, 2012), policy changes in the UK are not only increasing the necessity of volunteering (e.g. the Work Programme and the National Citizenship Service), but also developing new ways to reward volunteering (e.g. university degree modules and corporate sponsorship initiatives). These additional routes into volunteering are not captured well by definitions and measures that only address altruism and intrinsic motivations. Moreover, the civil society paradigm also overlooks the importance of informal volunteering behaviours, i.e. helping behaviours outside of any organisational structures.

Edinburgh Volunteers. Credit Peter Dibdin

This distinction between formal and informal has become more blurred and unhelpful for analysis purposes in recent times. (e.g. Thomson, 2002). There are some events where volunteers wear uniforms and receive extensive training and support and most research has focused on formal volunteering, whether uniformed or not. Research that disregards informal volunteering excludes micro-volunteering and episodic volunteering which is how a lot of events are supported (Saxton et al., 2007; Paine et al., 2010), and means research may easily underestimate the community impacts of volunteering activity at events (Rochester, 2006). The Home Office (2003) and Volunteer Development Agency (2001) find rates of informal volunteering in Great Britain and Northern Ireland are almost twice that of formal volunteering. The Community Life Survey 2020/2021 (UK Government, 2021) revealed that whilst formal volunteering rates were at their lowest since the survey commenced in 2013, informal volunteering rates were at their highest, with 33% of respondents taking part in informal volunteering at least once a month. These changes in volunteering rates are relatively unsurprising in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to formal volunteering opportunities were reduced (Dederichs, 2022). Recent research (NCVO, 2023) finds that formal volunteering levels are not recovering to pre-pandemic levels, and the increase in informal volunteering has not continued. This represents a challenge for event organisers relying on volunteers.

Belong (2021) found that volunteering rates were higher during the pandemic in areas that had invested in social cohesion. The networking and links between local activists and local government structures had already been established and developed prior to the lockdowns. The results showed that at a particular point during the lockdowns: people were twice as likely to volunteer compared to people living elsewhere; people enjoyed a higher sense of neighbourliness (9.9% higher); there was a higher level of trust in local government's response to Covid-19 (8.2% higher); and importantly, people maintained positive attitudes about migrants to

the UK. Funding through the Area Integration Programme in the five locations was discontinued with resulting cuts in investment in social cohesion. This will likely impact on rates of volunteering for events in those areas that experienced the higher levels during the pandemic.

Subsequent research into the connection between volunteering and social cohesion has found a virtuous circle, where higher levels of volunteering result in higher levels of social cohesion and vice versa (Belong, 2023a and 2023b). The first report analysed the literature linking volunteering with social cohesion. The second report involved quantitative research and corroborates a virtuous circle between volunteering and social cohesion (Belong, 2023b, Davies et al., 2024). A team from the University of Kent, working in partnership with Belong, analysed three large-scale surveys assessing the relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, and the factors that may encourage or hinder them. The three surveys covered a combined total of approximately 77,000 respondents and covered time periods from 2014-2021. The key findings are:

- **Types of cohesion.** Different forms of social cohesion have different relationships with volunteering. Horizontal cohesion (or bridging social capital) has a bidirectional relationship with volunteering. Volunteering is associated with subsequently greater feelings of cohesion and greater cohesion is associated with a subsequently higher likelihood of volunteering. Vertical cohesion (linking social capital) has a unidirectional relationship with volunteering. Volunteering is associated with subsequent feelings of cohesion, but initial feelings of vertical cohesion do not anticipate higher volunteering.

- **Levels of social cohesion.** Levels of cohesion differed significantly between different places (locations) and there was also substantial variation in feelings of cohesion amongst individuals within any given place. The relationship between social cohesion and volunteering tended to be uniform and stable between different locations. However, more granular levels of locality (i.e., local authority districts) showed more variability across locations than larger geographic areas (e.g., regions).

- **Demographic differences.** There was no consistent evidence for differences in rates of volunteering based on gender, age, faith, ethnicity, or disability. Whilst these differences were present in data from some surveys, they were absent in others. Moreover, even within the same survey over time some demographic differences were present in some time points but were absent at other time points.

- **Barriers to volunteering.** Time constraints were the most frequently cited barrier to volunteering, particularly external work commitments or childcare. Data also suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic inhibited or prevented some forms of volunteering, as people limited their social contact.

- **Types of volunteering.** Different forms of volunteering had different strengths of relationship with social cohesion. Although both formal and informal volunteering had a significant positive impact on cohesion, formal volunteering had a larger impact. Different domains of volunteering affected feelings of social cohesion differently. For example, people who volunteered to support others (related to improving their local neighbourhood) reported higher levels of social cohesion. However, people who volunteered in areas related to harm prevention (animal welfare or reducing prejudice and discrimination) reported lower levels of social cohesion.

Volunteering rates are generally underestimated because of differences in people's perceptions of what counts as volunteering. Many who engage in volunteering behaviours, such as coaching a local sports team, report that they do not volunteer (Rooney et al., 2004), meaning informal volunteering rates may be under-reported. Many community groups also feel that the term 'volunteering' does not reflect the work that they do (Briggs et al., 2013). Consequently, it is clearly important to consider both formal and informal volunteering when evaluating the impact of events.

2.5 Online events

Relatively little research is available on the relationship between online events and social cohesion. From its inception, social media was widely seen as an opportunity to promote inter-connections at many different levels and to enable global exchange. It promised to break down barriers between different communities and nations and enable almost every conceivable personal and professional interest to flourish on an entirely new scale. During the lockdown period many events turned to online methods to enable people to still meet and get to know people across difference.

However, in terms of cohesion, Cantle (2022) has identified some very particular and insidious threats:

- the open nature of social media has enabled an abusive and extremist narrative to be created on a global scale, with such behaviour becoming normalised

- the prevalence of misinformation (or fake news) in social media creates ever greater difficulties

- the way in which social media has led to the development of virtual 'echo chambers', which not only reinforce but also heighten the initial fears and prejudices expressed

A recent systematic review of the literature linking social media with social cohesion (Sahharon et al., 2023) indicates that online events, especially when they become prolonged over time, are very good at building all the elements associated with social cohesion. However, the studies do not make a distinction between in-group and wider social cohesion. The challenge for social cohesion is to find ways to break down the virtual segregation and create more varied contacts and viewpoints, or at least, to find ways in which the virtual segregation is compensated for by other forms of contact. The impact of social media is very variable. It is segmented and targeted at particular groups and has a disproportionate impact upon different communities and demographics. Online events need to counteract these tendencies towards in-group cohesion at the expense of those considered the 'other' and provide a safe space for people, in all their diversity, to feel welcome. In a similar way to in person events, online events will be targeted at people with a particular interest. Building in a consideration of how intersectional belonging works online is still in its infancy, with online events capable of fanning the flames of division rather than unity.

3. Methodological approaches

There are three sections on methodological approaches. The first section clarifies the scope of the research by focusing on the guiding research question. The second section describes the approach to the analysis and the third section discusses the challenges and limitations of the methodological approach.

3.1 The guiding research question

The guiding research question for this research was "What can we learn about the impact of events on social connection and cohesion from these reports?" 28 projects were selected from the extensive archive for the learning they provide on what makes an event that results in people feeling more connected to their communities and that builds social cohesion. These were selected through an iterative process, drawing on Spirit of 2012 Director of Policy and Impact's extensive knowledge of the projects for the initial selection. Bearing in mind the research question, she was able to pull evaluations and reports from the extensive archive, comprising over 230 projects to choose from. The list of project evaluations and reports analysed is at the end of this document in Appendix 1.

The process of analysing the content flagged up gaps in the ability of the initial projects to cover all areas of social cohesion. It was also really important to discuss what we were finding with Spirit of 2012 team members, to ensure we had understood the hopes and expectations of what we would be able to find in the archive. Spirit benefits from having a staff team that has been relatively stable over a long time and therefore have been involved in constructing their organisational realities and know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions (Gioia et al., 2012). Utilising a grounded theory approach and matching that with Belong's expertise in social cohesion, we created additional columns in the first-order analysis. As is usual for this style of analysis, this first-order analysis, which tries to adhere to the terms used in the reports, made little attempt to distil categories, so the number of categories was relatively large. Over time the broader categories became more apparent and developed in the list in Table 3A.

We then brought this long list down to a manageable number of themes in the second-order analysis by applying a theoretical framework (see Table 3B) to the material that had been extracted from the first-order analysis. We then went back for more data to fill some gaps. For instance, we thought it likely that the reports would provide some useful information about the physical geography of events if they were in locations that only some people had easy access to. Spirit of 2012 added some more reports to help us ascertain whether this was indeed an important consideration when planning and running events.

We also went to additional data, including from the Beyond Us and Them (2021) and Power of Connection (2023) materials developed by Belong that guided the development of the research and toolkits to see if there were any national measures we needed to add to get a rounded understanding of the impact of events on social cohesion and connection. The publications by The British Academy (2019) through their Cohesive Societies programme also provided information to guide both the evaluation and reports chosen and how they were analysed.

We were then able to supplement the analysis through organising a webinar which included presentations and discussion with five people from organisations funded by a particular Spirit programme (Moments to Connect). These included three additional projects and two additional research papers. The findings from this webinar were both incorporated into the analysis and formed the basis of a short introductory learning resource on how to build social cohesion and connection into events.

3.2 The analysis

3.2.1 First-order analysis

The process of choosing the reports and evaluations to analyse and the qualitative analysis itself ran in parallel with a first order analysis helping to identify the gaps from the projects chosen for the purpose of answering the research question (Gioia et al., 2012). The initial or first order analysis involved creating categories from the first half of the evaluations and reports chosen from the archive. This developed into the following list when further reports were added and aggregated into the smallest number of categories:

Table 3A - first order categories of analysis

- **Scale** (local, regional, national. Big/small event. Series or 1-off event) & **Scope** (target audience/participant group, project type)

- **Benefits** to **those taking part**

- **Barriers / Challenges**

- **Increased involvement/Social Cohesion**

- **Wellbeing** outcomes that support connection

- **Project Outcomes & Impacts**

- **Key Lessons & Learnings**

- **Longevity** or **Legacy** of an **initiative** (e.g. has it made a difference in the long-term even if the event was one-off, or was it just a blip?)

3.2.2 Second-order analysis

The second order analysis moved the findings into the theoretical realm and linked them to accumulated knowledge about elements that are important for building social cohesion. In highlighting the elements linked to social cohesion, we were able to utilise knowledge gained through research developed by Belong in partnership with the University of Kent. Key research projects drawn on for defining what is meant by social cohesion were the Beyond Us and Them (2021) research that took place during the Covid pandemic and the literature review

and causal connections extracted from analysis of three large scale surveys conducted for the development of the Power of Connection (Belong, 2023). Belong was also able to utilise existing report insights and good practice tools[1]. In particular, for the focus on social connection, we have been able to draw on social capital theory, which has a nuanced understanding of the importance of bonding, bridging and linking. How these manifest when applied to events is described and then discussed. The same process was applied to social cohesion principles and outcomes and the findings are elaborated on in the sections that follow.

A workshop was held to refine the framework that was emerging from bringing social cohesion theory together with the second-order themes that were emerging from the data. In essence, all the above categories can be synthesised down into the following broad impact areas:

Table 3B - second order categories for analysis

PLACE Themes:

Using the demographic data

Knowing the services to hand

Partnership working

Knowledge of the physical geography

History and culture

Online communities (and hybrid)

PEOPLE Themes:

Bonding

Bridging

Linking

Other non-colour-coded themes that emerged from both social cohesion theory and the data:

Funding/partnership arrangements; Setup differences including co-design/co-production; Culmination events or ongoing; Groups deliberately working alongside each other across difference; Volunteers at events v other types of volunteering; legacy/longevity; individual Impacts e.g. greater confidence, skills development; process outcomes.

Playing Out. Credit Warwick Arts Centre

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1 Belong has a close working relationship with the Centre for the Study of Group Processes in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Professor Dominic Abrams has extensive experience in the areas of equality and human rights, prejudice, discrimination, social attitudes and social change across the life course. His expertise spans social and developmental psychology and gerontology and uses a wide range of methods, ranging from laboratory and field experiments to national and international surveys.

3.3 Challenges and limitations of the research

By asking the team at Spirit to select the projects which would give the best information about events, the analysis may have been skewed towards ones that were either favourites or stood out for particular reasons that may have meant that some useful information has been omitted from the analysis. This was mitigated to some extent by applying the second-order analysis and requesting further documentation.

Also, the fact that many of the projects had to move to online delivery, due to the pandemic, may have reduced the amount of useful information that could have been analysed had the events remained in person as many had intended. Overall, although a lot of the planning had to move online, the events largely took place in person The analysis includes a section on the value of online events in building social cohesion as much was learnt about when virtual events could replace in person events. However, there was inevitably a loss in many situations from the events having to move online.

 Some of the reports we reviewed were about projects where the planning and delivery of events was part of, but not the full scope, of the project. It is not fully possible to isolate the role of events in contributing to social cohesion compared to other elements of the project. The quality of the evaluations overall was very varied, with many conducted internally and often conducted by people without a background in social cohesion. Whilst the majority included a stated aim to improve social connection, this meant different things in different contexts and was measured in different ways. Also, they were by and large impact evaluations and did not shed light on the processes involved in building trust and sense of belonging. Additionally, the scale of events was very varied with no meaningful way of analysing whether we should expect different outcomes from events of a wide variety of scales.

The team at Belong conducting the analysis only had limited expertise in many of the aspects related to events. This was mitigated by the input from an Advisory Panel who met to review progress at various points during the development of this report. The Advisory Panel included academics from both social cohesion and event related disciplines, funders and delivery agencies in both England and Northern Ireland. Their combined expertise has been invaluable in helping to shape every stage, from selecting relevant projects and developing the literature review, to designing the analysis and strengthening the analysis and discussion that follows in the next four sections. Each of the findings sections also include recommendations for future practice.

4. Findings - understanding place and people

Considering the wider benefits of understanding the place and people where an event is happening is fundamental to building social cohesion and connection that will be sustainable over time. The places people identify with play a large part in how much they are motivated to maintain and improve that place. Conversely, a place that is unable to provide a sense of shared ownership, attributes, or traditions to be proud of is unlikely to be one that offers people a positive sense of identity. Events can play a key role in promoting a positive sense of place and have enormous potential to create new bonds between people. This may be between a group of friends who attend an event or the much longer-term relationships built through volunteering to help plan and run an event. Where events repeat over time, bonds can be built between audiences/participants, such as sports events where the same athletes build friendships, even where they are in competition with each other.

This section is about the findings and insights that have emerged from analysis of the Spirit archive relating to place and people. There are five sub-sections. Section 4.1 starts with what the archive can tell us about the importance of involving local people through co-design and co-production methods. Section 4.2 analyses the different time scales needed to build networks successfully. Section 4.3 discusses the evidence found regarding the importance of skills to ensure quality connections are built. Section 4.4 examines the implications of the findings for building a positive sense of identity and belonging. Section 4.5 provides recommendations related to place and people drawn from the analysis.

4.1 Importance of involving local people

Co-created by disabled and non-disabled children, young people, and artists, the **Making Routes Festival** provides a helpful example of the ways in which events can approach and improve accessibility for volunteers and attendees. This hyper-local, inclusive arts festival in South London created an accessibility audit for the Festival in order to chart the different forms of visitor access available before and during the events. This information was also included in the Festival invitations. They also used images and text to represent information to support different sensory preferences and communication needs. They concluded that using accessible methods of communication and sharing of information from the start was key to enabling more equitable and supportive participation. This learning is applicable to all events - not just those specifically involving disabled people.

Other events started with very loose delivery models, taking a more open, and co-created approach. For example, the **WOW (Women of the World) Festivals** involved participants as co-creators to drive the content and character of the events that took place in five cities across the UK. There was an element of conscious programming to involve disabled women at every stage. This resulted in an average 21.6% of disabled speakers across the five 2018 Festivals. There was also a protected 'Access Budget' for Festivals and Think Ins - working with venues and programmers to add additional access where needed - for example BSL interpreters, larger print programmes, audio description. This was balanced with bespoke approaches that developed from the people who came forward to help organise the festivals, each one having its own flavour.

There were important differences between these two event programmes. Making Routes was a partnership between three organisations - South London Gallery, Battersea Arts Centre and Oasis Play. South London Gallery and Battersea Arts Centre were looking to become more inclusive to disabled children and their families who live in the surrounding area by working in partnership through the festival through the partnership with an expert community organisation, Oasis Play (the grant holder). With WOW, The Southbank Centre took an established, successful model of WOW festivals which had been running in central London for a number of years, and worked out how to adapt it and make it locally relevant in five smaller cities. To be successful, they needed to involve local people who could provide the sense of belonging and knowledge of each city.

Another project that took a participatory approach was the **Windrush 75 Festival** involving two co-created, day-long events celebrating the 75th anniversary of the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush to Britain created through the partnership between the National Maritime Museum and the Caribbean Social Forum. This project provides an example of what they termed, a 'distributed model of co-creation', meaning that co-creation happened at different stages, in different ways/formats, and with different constellations of people across the development and delivery of the Festival.

Caring City, a programme strand within Coventry's UK City of Culture, embedded associate producers into four community organisations ('hosts') to develop and deliver community projects across the city. Working with groups they described as seldom-heard and bringing about social change through a cultural programme that would benefit social cohesion for beneficiaries was an integral part of the programme. Embedding engagement at a hyper-local level, the 'co-creation' approach saw city communities including faith groups, community centres, libraries, schools, community radio stations, the police, and local arts organisations all help to shape and design the creative programme. Within endline data from beneficiaries, there was positive movement towards increased empowerment to participate in a range of events, including cultural events, and finding opportunities to volunteer within their communities. Their indicators showed social cohesion at higher levels than the city average. Communicating these findings in a consistent way will help build the case for the importance of events in supporting social connection.

4.2 Time needed to build networks

The contribution that an event or series of events could make to social cohesion varied considerably depending on how well-embedded the event delivery organisation was within the community, and what the timescales were for achieving impact. There was considerable variation in the starting points for events and different organisations' approaches to delivery.

Spirit of 2012 made some grants to capacity and network building organisations who do not deliver events themselves, but support community organisations and volunteers to put on activities in their own communities: for example the /Together Coalition's **Thank You Day** pilot, British Future's **Windrush 75 Network** and Jo Cox Foundation's **Great Get Togethers**. For the most part, these grant holders do not have in-depth local knowledge in all of the locations they are working, but instead work with local groups who organise events in their neighbourhood/town/city. In these cases, the central organisation provided the support and infrastructure (e.g. the overarching idea and focus, skills development for the organisers, building

networks for them to support themselves, branding, templates, advice, etc.). They let local stakeholders organise and deliver the event(s) in whichever ways met their needs. Being connected to a national initiative meant that local initiatives benefited from the brand recognition and additional support.

Breaking Boundaries was a four-year programme working in five English cities to deliver activities around the inspiration of the Cricket World Cups of 2017 (women's) and 2019 (men's). The lead delivery organisations, Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals, worked with partner organisations in each area to develop a fuller understanding of each community and their cohesion issues. Their project evaluation noted the importance of time being available before a project began to develop a fuller understanding of each community and their cohesion issues. This involved a co-creation/participatory approach where relationships between a small number of participating groups were strengthened prior to embarking on the project design. They noted that in places this took a very long time to establish.

In some cases, for example the Moments to Connect funding round, grant holders received funding only a few months ahead of their intended event date, giving a short lead time to prepare the event. In these cases, grant holders needed to have strong existing community connections to draw on and had limited opportunity to build new ones within the timeframe. The organisers of the **Year of the King** parade and gala in a small northern town made an important point about lead in times:

> *"Our major learning from the project was concerned with the timescale. We were able to deliver our project, but not as we had originally intended. Our proposed level of partnership working was not feasible in the time we had, and so we relied on some key pre-existing relationships to ensure participation. Had we had more time before the workshops were due to commence, we would have secured the participation of many more schools and community groups for the Parade and Gala."*

Jack Burton, Jack Drum Arts

The evaluation of **Fourteen** found that for communities selected on their needs, the relative lack of the community's preparedness, a lack of community infrastructure and/or the time to develop a community plan were key challenges for implementing the programme. In comparison, in communities identified as ready and prepared for **Fourteen**, good infrastructure and their ability to implement the programme and community vision were noted as strengths. It is important that funders recognise the different results that can be expected from organisations working in contexts where there are already well-established connections and those working areas that do not have these in place.

Through collectively organising an event, the organisations are forming partnerships that help strengthen their delivery across other work and this can build bridges between different communities. For instance the **WOW Festivals** helped organisations establish strategic partnerships with regional and national charities, fostering long-term local change. **EmpowHER** committed additional organisations to recruit young people with disabilities, thereby reducing barriers to participation. **The Great Get Togethers** encouraged a collaborative partnership model involving diverse organisations, fostering cooperation on local social issues. **Inspire** was delivered in partnership with national and regional youth organisations and enhanced the legitimacy of youth projects through national recognition and additional grants. **14-NOW** worked with community partners to

Edinburgh Volunteers. Credit Peter Dibdin

Playing Out. Credit Warwick Arts Centre

address localised community needs, forming partnerships for longer-term impact and sustainability. And the **Playing Out in Canley** initiative transitioned from individual organisations with a desire to collaborate, to a cohesive group with strong partnership bonds, high levels of trust, and a clear commitment to continue working together.

> *"Playing Out built on two under-utilised strengths of the community: there was creativity bubbling away behind people's front doors, and they have Warwick Arts Centre on their doorstep. This project brought those two things together and now the creativity is radiating around the neighbourhood. I've seen some of the widest grins and heard the heartiest of laughs, and we've also played a role for people who fell on hard times."*

Playing Out in Canley evaluation

4.3 Building the skills for inclusive working and empowerment

The **FestivalsConnect** research notes that festivals in particular are complex and multi-faceted events. It calls for both individual and community considerations to be 'baked' into conception, planning and delivery (see Mamattah, McGillivray and McPherson, 2024 and Iannetta, Finch and Baldock, 2023). It finds that involving those participants or audiences expected to benefit from a festival or event in the inception and planning phases is imperative, not just at the point of delivery or consumption. The findings of their research emphasise the importance of event organisers having the right people 'in the room' from the outset. It also notes that events need to be cognisant of the availability of expertise, experience and resourcing that make implementation inconsistent and variable. It emphasises that resources are required. Human capital provides access to expertise and experience, while financial capital is necessary to ensure organisers and their partners can adapt and invest in delivering inclusive and accessible experiences.

The **FestivalsConnect** focus is on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and how these can be supported by events. While social cohesion is concerned with the ongoing relationships in a community/town/city, in the

context of events there is a lot of overlap between the aims of EDI and social cohesion. EDI places a greater emphasis on the individual benefits and evaluations are often concerned with numbers of people involved in an event who go on to paid employment and also on the wellbeing of individuals. Social cohesion is more concerned with the community benefits and those outcomes that impact on the sense of belonging and identity with a place and the relationships built in that place. Therefore, there is clearly an overlap with social cohesion in the areas of EDI that are concerned with wider community benefit.

Spirit funded **Eurolearn,** the education programme that formed an integral part of the activities linked to the Eurovision Song Contest when it was held in Liverpool in 2023, as well as providing 50% of the funding for the wider community and wellbeing evaluation of Eurovision 2023. Research conducted and analysed by a team at the University of Liverpool (Corcoran, 2023) included surveys, obtaining both baseline and post event data. Almost 1400 Liverpool residents took part in the baseline survey with smaller numbers completing two follow-up surveys. Additionally, the team held one-to-one and group interviews. The results showed that people valued the opportunities to build connections and create opportunities in a space that values inclusivity. The research also showed that effective connections were essential for successfully delivering this wide range of activities where volunteers made new friends and felt valued for their work. These results were achieved through skilled support to ensure a positive outcome. Had the efforts to involve Ukrainian refugees in celebrating their culture in community level events not been successful, given that Liverpool was hosting the Eurovision Song Contest in the place of Ukraine, it may well have had very negative effects on community relations. More emphasis in evaluations on the processes involved in building successful community level events that are welcoming and respectful of different cultures and that build positive relationships is still needed, rather than just focusing on the outcomes and practical impacts of an event.

4.4 Implications of findings for identity and belonging

The literature on social cohesion finds that identity and belonging are a key factor for achieving social cohesion. These can be both place-based and focused on the connections between people. Events were found to have an important role in developing a positive sense of place, particularly when they purposefully involve local people at every stage of design. Many events in Spirit's archive were more narrowly targeted to meet the needs of a specific group, for example disabled people interested in a particular sport. Such events are likely less useful for building social cohesion as they are not bringing people together across difference but are very important for building Equality, Diversity and Inclusion through their benefits to individuals (bonding social capital). Social cohesion is strengthened when different groups are brought together with respect for difference (bridging social capital). Stepping stones are often needed to achieve this and spaces for disadvantaged groups to build their confidence and sense of empowerment can be an important part of the journey towards equity.

Throughout, the evaluations and project reports included statistics and quotes about how much individuals had gained from their involvement in many of the events. They gained skills and experience and built up their confidence in ways that will serve them well in the future. In terms of a legacy that builds social cohesion, these individual gains were often channelled into social action and using their newfound confidence to voice the needs of their local community (linking social capital).

On the ground capacity and length of involvement with different communities meant that different projects were at very different starting points. Training for volunteers enabled many people to become involved in ways they would have felt unable to and peer networks often helped to keep these connections alive after the funding was over or as a project moved into a different phase.

Care for the future was another theme associated with promoting social cohesion highlighted by the British Academy (2019) study. All the events analysed from the Spirit archive were concerned to a greater or lesser extent with raising people's sense of wanting to care for the future. Creative programmes were co-created by faith groups, community centres, libraries, schools, community radio stations, the police, and local arts organisations. The programmes engaged emotions, built connections, supported learning and contributed to shared values being promoted in the city. These were all identified in the literature (Broadwood, 2012) as attributes of well-managed events. Indeed, Scott et al. (2021) argue that a paradigm shift is occurring in methods and concepts for evidencing the social value of cultural events. Having care for the future as a stated outcome of events could be part of that paradigm shift.

The archive is peppered with compelling examples related to social cohesion and connection to decision-makers, also known as linking social capital. For instance, **Inspire 2022** reported that 78% of the young people who participated had never led on social action before with 88% of the young people saying they would participate in social action again. Similarly, **14-NOW** reported an increase of 30% between baseline and endline measures across the three years, where participants felt they could challenge the ideas and perceptions of their community. These findings demonstrate how a focus on social cohesion and connection can strengthen democratic processes and how events with these aims in mind can encourage people along a path of greater engagement in their wider communities, contributing to care for the future.

4.5 Recommendations

Being clear about the aim of an event and involving local people in the design is paramount. It is also important for the aims to be realistic within the time and budget available. The archive highlights how projects with less developed networks and available infrastructure needed far longer lead times to achieve similar levels of success compared to projects that had already established these. Resources, both human and financial are required to provide the training and upskilling necessary to ensure quality connections are built.

We recommend that:

i)   co-design approaches are used to ensure buy-in from local communities and groups;

ii)   funders encourage time to be spent building networks where these are under-developed through additional funding with mentoring opportunities for less experienced groups; and

iii) budgets are available for upskilling to embrace social cohesion aims with all those involved in delivery.

5. Findings - evaluating for social cohesion

The archive includes many high-quality evaluations but the quality was patchy, even when allowing for the different scales of events. Some large events had evaluation budgets running to £100,000+ whereas smaller event evaluations were often done with little resource. Even though all Spirit's grant holders could spend up to 10% on evaluation, the individual community events that make up a bigger grant might not have had a dedicated resource to draw on. This prompted Spirit to commission a guide to aid grantees to design evaluations for their individual projects (McPherson et al., 2021). The guide was designed specifically to understand the social impact of community events and emphasises that evaluations help organisers of all sizes and types of event to:

- reflect on their event, and understand what happened

- explore why things happened the way they did – what choices were made and what was unexpected

- think about what they learned and how that can help when planning future events

- share what they learned with others such as funders, fellow event organisers, their community and stakeholders (people with an interest in the event)

- make the case for these events to be run in the future

The evaluation framework devised by McPherson et al. also includes ways of evaluating impacts at the individual level. While many of these are more EDI focused than those focused on the shared connection level, they are closely interconnected. Indeed, a recent research report on the value of community sports clubs (Access Sport, 2024) not only highlights the benefits to individuals joining them, but also encourages funders to recognise that a sense of belonging and community are fundamental to unlocking the wider transformational benefits of being part of something where there are shared interests. This involves building wider understanding of community engagement and sense of belonging outcomes across programmes and embedding the measurement of related outcomes into evaluation frameworks.

As part of the archive, Spirit together with the Local Trust funded research into the **Social Value of Community Events** (see Smith et al., 2021). This included an evaluation framework which has dimensions at both the shared and individual level. The three identified at the shared level are:

- Pride in place / civic pride / place attachment / place visibility

- Sense of community / belonging / identity / cohesion / togetherness / connectivity / social capital / trust / inter-group relations

- Involvement and participation / things to do / chance to meet people / capacity building

The research concluded that valuable EDI outcomes will only flow from a carefully considered articulation of purpose, vision, organisation and reflection and that this needs to guide the evaluation from the outset. There is considerable overlap between these dimensions at the shared level and the framework devised by Belong to evaluate the findings from the archive that builds understanding of how events can contribute to social cohesion and connection. The following sections consider different aspects of evaluation. Section 5.1 discusses the quality of measurement techniques. Section 5.2 discusses how building connection across divides can be built into evaluations. Section 5.3 discusses the importance of capturing the processes involved in staging an event and section 5.4 discusses how different types of evaluation are needed to show different aspects of the contribution of events to building social connection and cohesion. Section 5.5 provides recommendations.

5.1 Quality of measurement techniques

The utilisation of quantitative data in social cohesion projects and events plays a pivotal role in understanding communities and identifying factors influencing social cohesion levels. Looking at demographic data helps event organisers to identify the different groups in a particular place. It also helps to know what services are available so they can connect people to them if needed and involve them in the event as appropriate. A knowledge of the physical geography helps organisers to understand some of the practical barriers people might face. The history and culture of a particular location may impact on how well different groups get along together. There will usually be some public buildings or spaces that bring people together and areas where these are not so available.

Hull City of Culture tracked and gathered quantitative data over the course of the year, revealing audience representation patterns and gaps in attendance. For instance, whilst they successfully engaged with thousands of people from many different backgrounds, they found that there was under-representation among young adults aged 16-34, BAME groups, and people in the most socio-economically deprived category - indicating potential areas for improvement (University of Hull, 2018). Examples like **Hull City of Culture** and **Caring City** benefited not only from being large, resourced initiatives, but also the fact that there was a strong pre-existing infrastructure and a legacy of insight beginning to be established from previous UK Cities of Culture and their methods and use of demographics. The small and medium events and projects did not have the same level of infrastructure or resources to track the demographic data, highlighting a challenge for event organisers.

When looking through the extensive archive of Spirit of 2012 event reports, it quickly became apparent how complex and varied the scale (e.g. geographic spread, size of the initiative, frequency of activity, etc.) and delivery models (e.g. providing support vs. direct delivery, levels of participation, etc.) were across the initiatives. The scale category proved to be more complex than initially anticipated. Initiatives could have a large geographic spread - for example the **Spirit of Rugby** events took place in fifteen cities across England, but were smaller-scale in terms of the activities themselves. Some events were large-scale in terms of the size of the event itself - e.g. many activities and high numbers of attendees - but only took place in one city (for example, **Hull City of Culture** and **Eurovision Liverpool 2023**). Another impacting factor in the set-up of these events was their frequency and duration. Some initiatives involved a series of events over a short-term - for example the young volunteers and people with dementia in the **Sporting Memories** project met for short sessions over a 6-week period. Similarly, **EmpowHER** involved women for around 30 hours of social action, including events. And some initiatives, like **14-NOW** based in Northern Ireland - involved a mixture of one-off

events and a series of activities of different sizes (small to medium). In the case of **Inspire 2022** - a youth-led, hyper-local events-based social action programme that took place across all four nations - being connected to a national programme provided credibility to the events. These examples illustrate the complexity of scale in the range and mixture of the breadth and depth differences between and within the project set-ups. Constant reminders are needed that no one size fits all and the diversity of approaches to project set-up needs to be celebrated. However, much of the potential learning was lost due to data capture methods that did not record some of the nuances, for instance where there might be Indian and Pakistani heritage young people coming together across difference. If their monitoring only had a box to tick for South Asian, then the learnings from that coming together are in danger of being overlooked.

Capturing, using, and presenting quantitative data also presents various challenges. **Fourteen** included inner-city and rural locations and everything in between. Programmes operating at this geographical scale and with this nature of dispersal need to provide effective mechanisms for sharing practice and lessons learnt throughout the delivery of events as part of the programme. This can be very challenging when the issues faced vary so much. For instance, the initial anxiety through having to move events online experienced by some of the **EmpowHER** participants was mitigated over time for some, and the experience of moving the project online led them to conclude that one way in which a programme can be designed to "address low wellbeing through social action" is to "consider using online or blended delivery approaches in creative ways in order to connect young people regionally". Supplementing quantitative data with qualitative data can provide information about the quality of the relationships built through the events.

The above examples outline some of the challenges and pitfalls involved in capturing, using, and reporting data. Evaluations need to be based on a clear framework from the start, although translating the framework into data collection can still be a challenge. Having a guide for all the different data collection methods needed to build a holistic evaluation of the event helps with consistency. Quantitative data will need to be supplemented with qualitative data that is better suited to capturing the mood and affect of an event - whether there was a feel-good factor around spending time with others who were not like themselves and feeling more a part of their community as well as the personal gains in terms of skills, confidence and experience.

5.2 Building connection across divides

Spirit of 2012 funded a variety of projects and events aimed at bridging divides and fostering social cohesion by bringing people from different communities together. Our analysis of the Spirit of 2012 archive highlighted many instances of where and how this bridging took place and the resulting impacts.

In 2019, **inFocus** conducted research into the approach grant holders took to identifying 'target beneficiaries' of Spirit projects funded between 2014 and 2017. They collected qualitative data from 38 organisations, mainly grantees plus three funders. They identified a proportion of the funded projects as specifically connecting across difference, particularly those bringing disabled people into contact with non-disabled people. The research was not specifically looking at events, but they encouraged reflective conversations about who an organisation conceives of as target beneficiaries, and what that means about the sorts of social connection goals they have. Although their report does not specifically mention bonding and bridging, they encourage organisations to include these in their planning.

Some initiatives really stood out in terms of their explicit aim to bring people together from different, and sometimes opposing, communities in order to bridge the divide. **Our Lives Our Legacy** and **14-NOW** took place in Northern Ireland and engaged people from Catholic, Protestant, and mixed communities. **14-NOW**, which built on the success of **Fourteen**, emphasised the importance of forming friendships across communities and creating safe spaces for connections to flourish. These, and other initiatives, highlighted how representation in places of conflict - having all sides represented and included in events - is both essential, and challenging, as well as how crucial bringing together people from different communities and 'sides' is to begin to build more understanding and social cohesion. Whilst the Northern Ireland context is unique, there are also broader lessons for other UK contexts where there are polarisations between different groups within the local community.

Friendships across communities where there are tensions will have a lasting legacy in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding involves communities and organisations deciding on what institutional and capacity strengthening they need to better manage internal divisions lest they devolve into violence (Plan for Peace, 2024). Even when there were no explicit tensions, many of the events were able to include people who would have otherwise been excluded from participation. **InFocus** (2019) raised an important challenge to keep a relentless focus on meeting the needs of the people most in need. They voiced concern that some participants would have been able to access support in other ways, whereas others would have no other alternative. Spirit took on this challenge in the focus of its programmes and especially through the Moments to Connect programme, linking with key national moments and making them relevant to communities that may well have felt disconnected.

Breaking Boundaries also sought to address existing challenges in social cohesion by deliberately facilitating social mixing between diverse community groups - for example visits to faith centres and other activities that sought to ensure participants had a stronger sense of the festivals, traditions, and issues faced by communities outside their own - thereby promoting improved understanding and connection.

Some projects faced existing challenges resulting from different stakeholder groups being used to working independently. However, event organisers like Breaking Boundaries improved partnership working by bringing

Playing Out. Credit Warwick Arts Centre

Year of the King. Credit Jack Drum Arts

together partners who had not previously worked together to address those past tensions and overcome readiness and infrastructure challenges. In this way, trust was established and nurtured and sometimes led to substantial ongoing structural changes. These are referred to again in the section on ensuring a legacy of greater connection across difference (Section 7) . In order to maximise the learnings for social connection, it is important to utilise measurement techniques that indicate whether trust has been built through the process of organising and running the event.
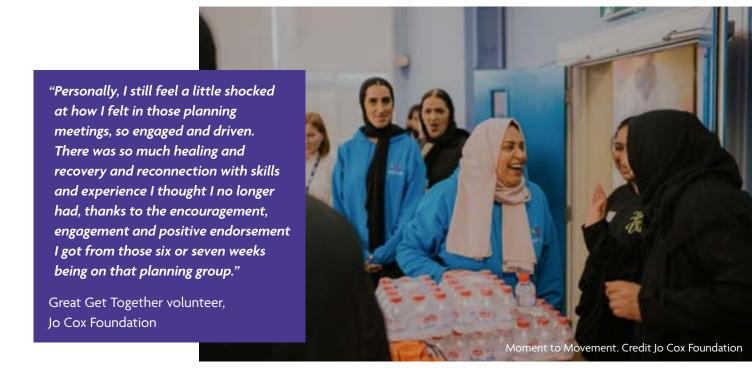
5.3 Capturing the processes

As every event has a different starting point, reaching common ground in agreeing and implementing models for demonstrating impact has the potential to benefit all. Evaluation of community events depends on this clarity of purpose and processes, which requires an explicit theory of change of how an intervention is likely or understood to contribute to the intended outcomes. Smaller organisations may require help with developing their theory of change that needs to include not only the nuts and bolts of delivering the event itself, but also how it fits into and contributes to the local ecosystem. The ecosystem model includes a simple five pillar evaluation framework that could be used across both major and local events, to provide consistent measurement of the cumulative impact value of events in the UK over time. The evaluation framework is rooted in a UK vision for major events that: promote excellence, ambition, and pride at local and UK-wide levels; connect new alliances and partnerships necessary for successful delivery and impact value; enable innovation and accelerate progress towards economic, social, cultural, and environmental (Neelands et al., 2024).

As well as a shared measurement framework, event organisers would benefit from greater access to process evaluations and more informal knowledge sharing opportunities about how events can increase social cohesion. However good the planning is for an event, sometimes there is just a fortuitous coming together of different factors that, if recorded, can add useful information for future event organisers. For instance, the **Year of the King** organisers created a spreadsheet with a list of roles. They then engaged with stakeholders and the wider community to see who wanted to get involved.

> *"We had one volunteer who came with her grandchildren. I saw her in the workshops and realised she was capable and enthusiastic. I told her what was coming next in the project and told her I thought her knowledge and enthusiasm would be crucial and really valuable. I told her what was coming next in the project and that her knowledge and enthusiasm would be crucial and really valuable."*

Jack Burton, Jack Drum Arts

To be open to change and incorporating new elements and the individual enthusiasms of the volunteers is an important attribute, as long as these changes still help to achieve the core aims of the event. This spontaneous happenstance can increase social cohesion through ways and means it is hard to predict in advance. However, they would not happen without an event that brings people together. Testimonies like the one below underscore the transformative power of these initiatives, highlighting the profound personal growth and reconnection fostered through active participation.

"Personally, I still feel a little shocked at how I felt in those planning meetings, so engaged and driven. There was so much healing and recovery and reconnection with skills and experience I thought I no longer had, thanks to the encouragement, engagement and positive endorsement I got from those six or seven weeks being on that planning group."

Great Get Together volunteer,
Jo Cox Foundation

Moment to Movement. Credit Jo Cox Foundation

Similarly, the **WOW Festivals** brought together women from diverse and marginalised backgrounds to share experiences and skills as they organised a festival together, ultimately promoting inclusivity and understanding across demographics. The **From Moment to Movement** research sought to identify common features of three grant holders' approaches to creating longer term change using events. It grouped participants into 'activators' and 'supporters'. They observed that you will tend to have a group of core change makers, and then a group who are supportive of the aims and aspirations, but will give less time / be less engaged. It may be helpful to build this into the early planning stages and to focus more resources on those that will leave a lasting legacy.

WOW Festival 'activators' started out attending the first year of an annual event, and then moved into supporting the organisation of the event (e.g. as a volunteer or performer) in subsequent years. They would potentially continue to link with local institutions and build trust that their voices mattered. Indeed there is a strong example of this with the WOW Bradford teenagers who went on to form their own collective, Speakers Corner. Additionally, the research found that a 'celebratory and joyous' atmosphere enabled people to be more relaxed and receptive to taking part in learning. However, often there was a leadership gap once an event was over and the funding had dried up. This could impact negatively on trust building and leave people demotivated.

The **Making Routes Festival** actively promoted social cohesion by bringing people together across differences, encouraging participation, and building social connections. The impacts of participating and attending events include an increase in people's confidence and connections with others, which helps to build friendships and a deeper sense of belonging to a wider community. Therefore, there is a close connection between individual benefits and community benefits. The **Making Routes Festival** opened up connections and understandings between local arts and play organisations and local disabled and non-disabled people.

People reported feeling welcome at each of the Festival sites - held in locations that many had never visited (a gallery, theatre space and community garden). The evaluation methods enabled these findings to be recorded where they may have been missed if the evaluation had omitted a focus on the process people went through to get to the end result of putting on the event.

For larger events, core roles will be carried out by staff. However, both large and small events will likely use volunteers on the day of the events. **Hull's UK City of Culture** events during 2017 involved over 2,400 volunteers who contributed 337,000 hours of social action, equivalent to 38.5 years. For one in five of those volunteers, it was their first experience of volunteering. The evaluation noted:

"volunteering has been one of the most successful aspects of the Hull 2017 programme in terms of community development and building social capital and community cohesion".

Cultural Transformations: the impacts of Hull UK City of Culture 2017

Year of the King. Credit Jack Drum Arts

The presence of statistics does not always lead to a clearer understanding if the data used is not specific enough to an event's needs. For example, the **Thank You Day Community Connector Pilot** was part of a large national initiative, but very devolved at the point of delivery. This meant that there was a lack of systematically collected data at the local event level, and that when statistics on the initiative were given, they were based on data from a national poll, therefore not representative of or specific to the different event locations. There is always a balance to be found between encouraging small events to happen and building in too many administrative considerations that may discourage people from getting something organised. In most cases, holding an event, even if it lacks many of the preparation, evaluation and reporting issues referred to in this report, is better than not holding an event at all. It may be a starting point for much more in the future. However, it is also important to be aware of the ways in which people can feel less connected if an event is organised in ways that created barriers to participation or where people lacked a sense of belonging.

The **Windrush 75 Festival** evaluation outlines the advantages of having carefully planned elements to an event combined with opportunities for spontaneous fun:

"Activities at the Festival which purposefully built-in opportunities to connect with others were particularly effective at building social cohesion, particularly across the generations. These were both "formal" opportunities through programmed activities - such as Games Without Wires – and "informal" opportunities through atmosphere-creating activities - such as impromptu line dancing

to steel-pan music. With every co-creator being from the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, opportunities to connect to the Windrush Generation and their descendants were layered across the Festival's conception, activities, atmosphere and delivery."

Windrush 75 Festival evaluation

Engaging volunteers in the planning and getting people to turn up to events using social media was another way of organising that might not have been planned from the start, as highlighted by **Playing Out in Canley** which explored different ways of communicating the project across print, digital, and word of mouth. They discovered that the highest attendance came when reminders for workshops were posted on the day via Facebook. Social media continues to be highly effective as a communicator of events. However, while online meetings may be a useful replacement for the planning stages, the power of meeting in person in a shared space that is inclusive and engenders a sense of belonging is hard to recreate.

5.4 Types of evaluation

Gains at both the community and individual levels often go hand in hand. Statistics provide evidence of the importance for longer term democratic processes of encouraging linking social capital. However, the measurement frameworks were not systematically in place to ensure that these wider gains could be recorded. To be able to provide proof of the linking social capital as well as the bonding and bridging social capital and gains to individuals can be useful to future funding applications as funders increasingly embrace a paradigm shift towards recognising the social value of events. However, there are so many variables that impact on wider democratic processes and people's sense of belonging, each event needs to be understood within its own context. This makes comparisons between places where an event happened and where there was no event very hard to judge.

Impact evaluations tend not to be well placed to shed light on why an intervention did or did not work, and whether who delivered it matters. Implementation and process evaluation is needed to draw out this learning. The archive contains many stories of the difference that projects have made to people's lives and communities. The causal factors relating to when an intervention, such as an event, will be successful in building social cohesion and when it may be counterproductive needs further study.

With no nationally recognised measures of social cohesion, there is no consistency in how successes relating to social cohesion are monitored and evaluated. There is a lot more work to be done, by both practitioners and academics, to draw out all the lessons that can be learnt for future event organisers. However, the evidence is clear that there is an urgency in (re)-building trust in institutions and democratic processes. Inclusive events, and in particular those with an express aim of bringing people together across difference, are undoubtedly important tools to build both bridging and linking social capital. The bridging through events brings people together in fun, creative ways that can lead to lasting relationships and attitudinal and behavioural shifts. Events which strengthen people's sense of having a voice and provide mechanisms to influence decision-makers can be fundamental to building a positive identity for a place and demonstrating care for the future that can leave lasting impacts both individually and collectively.

Event organisers need to be both ambitious and opportunistic and evaluation methods need to be able to capture both. These two characteristics created unanticipated opportunities for activities and new partnerships. This included at the group level, for instance a more vibrant **Windrush 75 Festival** at the National Maritime Museum by close partnership working with the Caribbean Social Forum. It also included at the community level, for instance the **Year of the King** organisers were able to spot that a volunteer had all the qualities necessary to become a key person in their organising team, full of local contacts and knowledge. These more process oriented observations were not systematically included in evaluations which were often more focused on the final impact than the narrative of how people become involved and the qualities of the relationships that led to success and supported an ongoing legacy. A different type of evaluation would be better at capturing these elements.

5.5 Recommendations

Integral to the planning process is to be clear how an event, or series of events are going to be evaluated. Evaluation is not something that can be left to the end. It is important to know at an early stage what data needs to be collected and in what format/s. Measuring an event's effectiveness in building social cohesion is crucial in order to capture the wider benefits to communities.

We recommend that:

i)   all events are evaluated using measurement techniques that are fully accessible e.g. for disabled people or people with English as a second language and monitoring is designed to capture the wider community benefits and organic developments that contribute to social cohesion;

ii)   steps towards bridging divides and encouragement to connect with decision-makers, both at the local and national levels, are recorded and evaluated as part of the potential wider gains of events;

iii) more process evaluation is conducted so that the way in which skilled and experienced community event organisers work can be more fully appreciated and understood;

iv)   funders provide support and guidance in different methods of evaluation to maximise the social value of events.

6. Findings - Impact of the event on volunteers/participants/ audiences

Community events will almost inevitably rely on volunteers and Belong's (2023) research shows that there is a virtuous circle between volunteering and social cohesion, with each encouraging the other. Volunteers can become involved at every stage of the event cycle and if appropriately trained and supported will be able to contribute to building bonding, bridging and linking social capital that will help to ensure that the event feels welcoming to all. Participants in events get actively involved, and this can be an experience that builds or undermines social cohesion, depending on the experience that people get. Audiences can also feel included in an event, even if marginal to its organising, and this will impact on the legacy of any particular event. Larger events are often livestreamed and this enables people to feel part of something even if staying at home to view it. The **FestivalsConnect** research (Mamattah et al., 2024) emphasises how important it is that organisers adopt systematic approaches to volunteer training and establish codes of conduct to be upheld throughout an event.

This section looks particularly at the findings relating to the potential gains of volunteering, active participation and audience enjoyment. Section 6.1 discusses findings related to barriers to participation. Section 6.2 analyses how recognising and adapting practices to enable less formal types of 'helping out' behaviours can support social cohesion. Section 6.3 focuses on addressing imbalances through designing programming to meet different needs and acknowledging that some marginalised groups need to be specifically catered for. Section 6.4 demonstrates the need to create safe spaces for positive interactions across difference to take place. Section 6.5 addresses how events can help build social responsibility and Section 6.6 provides recommendations.

6.1 Barriers to participation

EmpowHER, a learning programme for young women and girls which included organising events, utilised data on personal characteristics to target marginalised populations who were often excluded, such as those with disabilities, poor mental health, and low income (among other characteristics that are highlighted earlier in the report). Understanding these demographics enabled tailored strategies to address barriers to engagement effectively. Despite challenges like pandemic-related disruptions, events aimed at enhancing engagement - such as cohort-specific recruitment efforts - demonstrated successful outcomes. Ultimately, demographic insights enable event organisers to refine engagement and marketing strategies, fostering more inclusive and impactful community participation.

The environment where an event takes place can be a barrier to participation. The **Windrush 75 Festival** took place in the National Maritime Museum (NMM), which is one part of the Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG). The concerted effort that the museum made to connect with the local community of Caribbean descent brought people into the space that they would have thought of as excluding them previously.

"Being at RMG, it had an impact. A museum is a place you go with an intent. It's a different mindset, going there. Although the events are similar to other Windrush things – the spoken word, and singing and dancing. But the museum environment is about learning, and that's what makes it different. For me, I loved the vibe and environment at RMG."

Co-creator, Caribbean Social Forum

The quote highlights how the location and environment breaks down barriers to entering the space. In this case, the museum environment had a different 'vibe' and was seen as a 'learning environment' that led to a different mindset for the visitor - different from other events with similar Windrush-focused activities that were not located in a museum.

The **Thank You Day Community Connectors Pilot** involved local people organising hyperlocal community events that took place across ten areas in the UK (including England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland). The Thank You Day organisers sought to explore the impact of direct grants to local community groups, allowing them to develop activities and events that were relevant and appropriate to them within a given framework. In addition to this, they also wanted to ascertain the importance and impact of bringing people together at a hyperlocal level while still linked to a national event. Trust has been identified as one of the key elements necessary to build social cohesion and these local events demonstrate that people at the local level are being trusted to spend the money wisely. The evaluation showed that allowing local people to make the funding decisions also built links between different groups, breaking down barriers between them.

Our Lives, Our Legacy. Credit Connor Quinn

The physical geography of an area can make a big difference to how easily people are able to meet others who are not like themselves. Sometimes a valley can separate two communities, or steep hills can make it hard to attend events which may be quite close. A neighbourhood may benefit from having a park that is well maintained and where everyone feels safe to spend time, or it may have spaces that do not feel safe. There may be a river that people can access and walk along, or there may be busy roads, making it harder to go places on foot. Whether there are local facilities like shops, cafes, and pubs all make a difference to people's sense of belonging to an area and engaging these businesses in an event such as a carnival can bring the community together. **Playing Out in Canley** was deliberately focused on bringing local residents on the village side of a fence in more contact with a university based Arts Centre on the other side. A large part of the organisers' learning focused on a parade through the village and the logistics around road closures, traffic management, security and keeping people safe. This learning has been built on with each successive annual parade. Additionally, the **Volunteer Support Pot** found those from rural locations could struggle to access opportunities because of transport limitations and the cost of getting to an event venue . Creative ways can be found to reduce the barriers to participation as much as possible.

British Future's **Seizing the Moment** report examined how major events can bridge divides and promote contact between people from different backgrounds. The need for more shared open spaces, such as parks and gardens, where events can be held and people can meet and mix, was seen as a top-three priority by 48% of respondents surveyed. Using these spaces for events in ways that allow local residents to benefit as well as specific interest groups is a key part of the challenge of maximising the social cohesion benefits. Gains in terms of social cohesion and connectedness for the audience and participants has to be balanced with the needs of the local residents, who may find physical barriers preventing them from accessing a park or woodland area while the event is on. Ensuring there are budgets available to restore an area to at least how it was before the event, if not better than before needs to be built into the post-event planning.

6.2 Creating space for 'helping out' behaviours

Neighbourly Lab received funding from Spirit of 2012 to carry out research to understand how people across the UK help out in their local community, especially in the context of national moments like the King's Coronation. They explored what 'helping out' looks like from the experience of those taking part in it, and what can be done to encourage more people to get involved, therefore increasing social connection. They uncovered how volunteering organisations can look at volunteer recruitment and their volunteering infrastructure through a different lens and to think about 'helping out' behaviours rather than formal volunteering. They noted that millions of people stepped to help others through hyper local support networks during the pandemic. They also noted that many of these networks have continued to function, supporting people through the cost of living crisis. Across the four nations as a whole, the rate of people formally volunteering has been declining. Volunteering organisations are having to think about how they can get more people to give their time, and to think of different ways to motivate and recruit volunteers.

Their research drew out distinctions between those who wanted more formal volunteer roles and those who wanted to help out on occasion:

> *"Through our research project we found that community helpers want to help but don't want to work up to being a formal volunteer. People's volunteering journeys aren't always linear. Volunteering infrastructure needs to be set up in a flexible way. Community volunteers are happy to dip in and out and not become overly committed. Volunteer recruitment strategies should also emphasise that by helping out you are contributing to your local area and emphasise the sense of belonging that involvement can bring."*

Marnie Freeman, Neighbourly Lab

With events often happening on a one-off basis, or a short series of events, the benefits to event organisers of being able to support those who want to help out at an event and provide appropriate training to the level of involvement required just for that event becomes increasingly important to recognise and cater for. The national statistics on volunteering were not replicated during the pandemic in areas that had been designated as integration areas and supported with funding from central government to build strategies and programmes to build cohesion and integration. Formal volunteering levels were consistently higher in all the integration areas. This created a win-win situation for both the volunteers at an individual level and the community at the wider level. Individually, the volunteers gained skills, experience and confidence together with a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. The wider community benefited from volunteer programmes that could support more marginalised people to access services supported by volunteers and by having better linking and information gathering about community needs by the local authority.

6.3 Addressing imbalances

Often an event will be targeted for a marginalised group to participate and/or attend as audience members. In order to work towards equity between different people who may face greater or lesser challenges in accessing mainstream provision, it is imperative to cater for different social groups, especially in relation to communities that have traditionally been harder to engage in activities. The Hull City of Culture evaluation noted the need for more diversity within project delivery teams and amongst commissioned artists, so they are reflective of the audience that they are seeking to engage.

The power-differentials, such as between large, often well-funded national organisations working with small, local, often underfunded organisations has to also be considered. Windrush 75 Festival is an example that worked well. Sensitivity needs to be shown towards smaller groups that often rely on volunteers or people working part-time. Through establishing respectful ways of working together, the stability of the established National Maritime Museum helped bring the voices and experiences of people from the Windrush generation and their children and grandchildren into the mainstream space.

"I've been taking my daughter to museums every month since she was two. This is the first time she has felt like what she sees in a museum is for her and about her own history. She is now 40 years old."

Windrush 75 Festival attendee

inFocus (2019) noted that if activities are well managed, combining people together from different backgrounds can build understanding between individuals, developing friendships and relationships that they would not have made outside of the event team. Understanding across difference could be generated, in part, by event organisers recognising the different contributions that individuals from different backgrounds could make. A more open approach to engaging with target audiences also enabled grantees to expand their reach and get out to new audiences.

However, this more open approach to event recruitment also brought challenges. There was a concern that a more open approach was leading them to attract audiences that would not get the most benefit from the project, for instance through free ticketing where some people may feel more confident to show up even though it might appear on the surface open to all. Also, if the event organiser is looking to involve as wide a range of individuals as possible, including those with more complex needs, activities and the marketing of the event need to be very carefully designed to make sure that participants feel confident that they will have a positive experience.

6.4 Creating safe spaces within events

Our analysis of the Spirit archive highlighted ways in which event organisers sought to enable participation and improve accessibility for volunteers and attendees of events on the day itself. For example, in **Sporting Memories** young volunteers organised events held with older people with dementia. Volunteers contributed to event planning through a variety of methods including event design focus groups, daily shift insight forms, online feedback surveys, and social media discussion groups. By focusing on people-led design, volunteers reported having an increased sense of agency, and that their contribution to shaping the events was of central importance. In **EmpowHER,** a large-scale, co-designed learning programme involving young women and girls and delivered in youth clubs, the importance of ensuring safe spaces at events celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage was highlighted. They addressed this by encouraging a relaxed atmosphere and hosting single gender events limited in size.

The **Eurovision 2023** community and wellbeing strand evaluation by the University of Liverpool (Corcoran, 2023) found that those from minoritised communities felt that Eurovision had created safe spaces for expression. There was a strong sense of hope that the many activities would have a long-lasting legacy, both in impact on participants and in encouraging investment in future community engagement events. Community events associated with a national moment like Eurovision are a powerful tool for fostering feelings of community. **EuroLearn** and the linked Eurostreet and Eurogrant initiatives provide a blueprint for increasing the impact of large-scale events beyond economic value through the addition to the Eurovision Song Contest of linked community level events.

Spirit of 2012 funded public opinion research as well as grants for projects and events, including the **Seizing the Moment** report. This report analysed a survey conducted on the day after the Jubilee celebrations in 2022. The sample size was 2,018 UK adults, including a boosted sample of 505 people from an ethnic minority background. The survey was conducted online and the results weighted to be representative of the UK adult population. From the sample surveyed, 63% agreed that local events, both at neighbourhood level and at village, town or city level, were good at bringing people together who were from different backgrounds. Events that appealed to people of all ages, to help bring families together, were the most popular type of event (appealed to 57% of respondents). These statistics demonstrate an appetite among the general population for events that celebrate the UK's multicultural and diverse society.

6.5 Encouraging social responsibility

Giving people a strong sense of purpose contributes to building meaning and ensuring that there are mechanisms for encouraging social responsibility. The literature shows that events can be a powerful way of building a sense of shared purpose. The **FestivalsConnect** research conducted by the University of the West of Scotland points out that resources are needed to invest in volunteers so they can adapt and learn to become more inclusive. Community events will inevitably rely on volunteers and the literature shows that volunteering is an excellent way to build meaning and encourage social responsibility. The involvement of such large numbers of volunteers contributed to social cohesion through ways identified in the literature. The virtuous circle between volunteering and social cohesion can be palpable in the good feelings often generated by events.

With informal volunteering being much harder to measure but more prevalent, the additional information provided by **Neighbourly Lab** through their research into 'helping out' rather than formal volunteering is a useful addition to the literature. Events are a great way for people to commit a limited amount of time, allowing them to engage in their local community and encourage social responsibility and the values associated with giving something to the community.

The gains to social capital have been documented in the findings and these are closely related to the legacy that the projects have created. Almost all the reports mentioned the value of new friendships and deepening bonds. The importance of safe spaces for participants to explore new ways of understanding people who they had not had much contact with previously was evident through many of the reports. Events could

Spirit of Rugby. Credit RFU Collection via Getty Images

be specifically designed with this in mind, whether by the way space was laid out at a festival or through repeated events where participants could gradually get to know each other better. The skills needed to facilitate such expansions in social capital should not be underestimated.

6.6 Recommendations

Most events designed to build social cohesion will use volunteers. Organisers will need to consider whether the event has scope for different levels of involvement and commitment to widen participation beyond existing volunteers, e.g. one-off community helpers alongside staff and volunteers. Some events may be able to accommodate a large amount of flexibility in when volunteers attend, even if there are more formal routes to becoming trained as a volunteer. Event organisers will also need to consider whether there is scope to actively promote social connection throughout the event, e.g. volunteers with the skills to introduce and support people from different backgrounds. Also, the time, day and location will need to be considered for its appropriateness in engaging whichever group(s) are being brought together. For example, an easily accessible venue, times and dates suitable for people who work or have caring commitments. It is also important to avoid events clashing with religious festivals. Safe spaces can allow explorations across difference to occur naturally.

We recommend:

i)   exploring barriers to participation and how they can be overcome is carried out at both design and delivery stages and that this involves both economic and physical barriers;

ii)   organisers consider how they can include people who want to 'help out' rather than volunteer, or volunteer but on a flexible basis;

iii) recording whether an event is being accessed by those who need it most in any particular location;

iv)   building into events safe spaces for interactions across difference.

Edinburgh Volunteers. Credit Peter Dibdin

7. Findings - Creating a legacy

Events can help people feel more connected to a particular place, whether it is close to home, or the place where the service they utilise is being delivered. Understanding a local place and the other organisations, services, agencies, key buildings, and meeting places can help promote other events and existing services, signpost people to the services they need, and also attract new volunteers and participants. Whether these people stay engaged in making their locality a better place to live depends on a range of factors. Better understanding of these factors will help future event planners to use the leverage of the event to strengthen social cohesion.

This section examines in section 7.1 how event organisers can learn from experience. Section 7.2 discusses findings related to creating lasting networks and building peer learning opportunities. Section 7.3 analyses how partnerships that have been built are sustained into the future. Section 7.4 discusses how to ensure diverse histories, cultures and identities can be harnessed by events for the future benefit of those who live there. Section 7.5 examines how events can strengthen each individual's sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, town, city and/or rural location. Section 7.6 provides recommendations linked to the legacy of events.

7.1 Learning from experience

Schools, playgroups, nurseries, day centres for older people and people with learning disabilities, health centres, children's centres, gyms and other sports facilities, libraries are some of the services that may be available locally. The list of services where people can mix and develop sustained contact over time is different depending on where an event is taking place. Approaches to social cohesion have developed over time and some services have adapted more than others and may have actively created opportunities for people from different backgrounds to mix together. Involving local services in the development, delivery, and/or funding process of events has been found to be beneficial on multiple levels. A lot of the venues used for community events are in the same place as local services and therefore there can be many cross-over benefits. The events can activate the use of a building for more ongoing activities and can supplement the programmes offered by local services.

Fourteen, a large national programme that made funding available to fourteen areas across the UK via a flexible grants model and included events, provides an example of linking local services to funding. They found that utilising local bodies to coordinate the grant making process led to more effective distribution because unlike other funding streams which are often coordinated by organisations further removed from the local area, they understood the local community and its needs. A key strength of **14-NOW** and its development, which was focused on Northern Ireland, is how they worked with organisations and services 'on the ground' that understood the needs of communities, meaning that partners and providers were able to clearly articulate the (often particularly localised) needs of their communities and how activities addressed these needs. Likewise, **EmpowHER** created stronger and/or new links with local agencies and youth services which helped them to better understand the cultural factors and barriers preventing engagement, and to also ensure that the topics covered in the sessions were relatable and appropriate for the group. Social action events followed from these sessions and they were able to have a lasting legacy linked to the women's

suffrage and rights movements. Linking with local services also means that event organisers can ask these organisations to signpost and encourage their users to take up the opportunities provided by their event. This can work both ways, to increase the levels of engagement with local services and to expand the diversity of event volunteers/participants/audiences.

Funding bodies can play an important role by encouraging projects to consider the wider social cohesion benefits, as well as themselves using application processes and criteria for funding that enable social cohesion through project design, ethos, and delivery. From **Moment to Movement** was a research project led by Spirit of 2012 and inFocus that partnered with the Jo Cox Foundation, Springboard Opportunities and WOW Women of the World. The report highlighted how these event organisers had been able to impact funders and policymakers by emphasising the power of events to bring people together and to make events spaces for connection. Having policymakers and funders understand the social value of supporting events that build connection and social cohesion, as well as the role that funding strategies can play in supporting change and social cohesion, is crucial. These projects also highlighted how important it is to deepen the

Moment to Movement. Credit Jo Cox Foundation

understanding of those in positions of power, of how we can support people, particularly those who do not currently take part in community activities, to engage.

The archive highlighted several examples of the detrimental impacts from having to move to online engagement and delivery. Throughout this analysis, we have mainly studied events and projects that took place in physical locations, and the impacts that in-person connection, participation, etc. have had on individuals and communities. However, events and community participation can also occur online. The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing mass shift from in-person to online for everything, including many of the events in the archive, presented new challenges and opportunities. There have remained stages of the event planning and delivery cycle that can be done virtually, bringing more equity in involvement for some groups, including disabled people and those living in more remote locations. However, as the examples that follow demonstrate, there are massive gains to social cohesion by in person events where, not only the planning and delivery of events can purposefully build in social cohesion opportunities, but also where the unexpected and spontaneous can happen.

7.2 Creating lasting networks/peer learning opportunities

Initiatives like the **Edinburgh Festival City Volunteers**, chose to prioritise quality engagement over volume, enabling deeper, people-centred impacts. The benefits to the individuals were wide-ranging and included many who had not previously had the opportunity to engage with arts, sports and culture. This formed an introduction to peer networks that will continue long into the future and therefore will support social cohesion. Significant bonding outcomes were also observed in projects like the **Spirit of Rugby** and **Breaking Boundaries**, where participants reported meeting new people and developing supportive networks. Similarly, **WOW Festivals** supported the formation of ongoing groups, such as feminist events and book clubs, fostering lasting connections and friendships within communities. Overall, the Spirit of 2012 archive demonstrates a commitment to nurturing bonds and promoting social cohesion through meaningful engagement and collaborative activities.

For the **Windrush 75 Network** and **Thank You Day Community Connectors**, training and peer networks were found to be important when building long-term sustainability into volunteer projects. The **Windrush 75 Network** supported by British Future has now become the Windrush 100 Network as there are currently over 500 local groups involved across the UK. The network facilitates peer conversations between groups, so that they can learn from each other's experiences. The centralised support provides the capacity to deepen the public conversation about race in Britain, and press for future change. British Future also provide practical support in the form of regular meetings to share plans and coordinate activity, acting as a de facto press office for the event, and updating a website profiling all events happening to mark the event.

> *"The network gave larger, mainstream organisations the confidence to engage with the anniversary without fear of getting dragged into 'culture war' skirmishes. Coordination and support, especially with communications, was seen as important for smaller grassroots organisations."*

Steve Ballinger, British Future

Thank You Day continues to be coordinated by the /together network which has partnered with other networks as diverse as Playing Out, Royal Voluntary Service, Warm Welcome Spaces and BBPA, the voice of brewers and pubs. **Thank You Day** brings together millions of people across the UK to celebrate and give thanks to those that go above and beyond, raising the profile of everyday activities that contribute to social cohesion and connection. Who and how to give thanks takes many different forms and is an opportunity to thank the people at street level, within a block of flats and all those local legends, such as the volunteers, teachers and carers who go the extra mile.

7.3 Sustaining partnerships

The benefits of working in partnership to strengthen an event has been a theme running throughout this findings section. Partnership working in the long term helps to showcase the positive community impact, address gaps and leads to improved partnership working over time. The projects within the Spirit of 2012 archive collectively embody the essence of linking social capital, fostering connections, and empowering

communities to enact change collaboratively so that they have an impact that is greater than the benefits of the events themselves. **Fourteen**, through its catalytic small grants, ignited community activity. The investment in the programme has clearly led to a tangible change in community support infrastructure in the vast majority of participant communities. Relationships have been created, partnerships established and attitudes changed. The programme established a momentum that in many areas, six months after closure, still showed little sign of abating. Initiatives like **Sporting Memories** and **Edinburgh Festival City Volunteers** prioritised people-led design, engaging volunteers from diverse backgrounds (including people who previously have not engaged or had the opportunity to connect to arts and culture), and expanding their involvement from local to international scales. Edinburgh Festival City Volunteers effectively leveraged community agency partnerships to recruit and support volunteers, enhancing project effectiveness. The Edinburgh initiative resulted in a new volunteering code of practice that was subsequently incorporated into city-wide guidelines for volunteering by the local council. Similarly, **Emerge** facilitated new links between arts festivals and community partners, raising the profile of arts activities and opening up dialogue within each of the eight localities around the provision of arts activities for children, young people and local families. These projects involved numerous third-sector organisations linking with local councils, exemplifying the collaborative spirit necessary for effective community engagement.

In the **Windrush 75 Festival**, the National Maritime Museum (NMM) - a large, well-known museum, formed a primary partnership with the Caribbean Social Forum (CSF) - a smaller, local organisation that acted as an intermediary and connected the museum to communities they had previously not engaged. Thanks to the success of this primary partnership - developed over time, high levels of trust, and effective communication - new essential partnerships for NMM and the eventual success of the event were enabled and brokered. The festival has become an annual event. However, the archive also highlighted instances where a national partner failed to engage with local networks (and potential partners), leading to a missed opportunity to embed the work and learnings from a local event at that wider level.

Grant-funded youth-led projects like **Inspire 2022**, supported and empowered young people to lead social action, amplifying their voices in decision-making processes and nurturing their appetite for engaging with democratic processes, such as engaging with local councillors. Learning from the **Breaking Boundaries** events was used to support the drafting of the first specific sport and physical activity cohesion strategy in Slough. In Birmingham, community partners have been linked to volunteering opportunities at Edgbaston Stadium to support their continued engagement. Together, these initiatives epitomise the importance of linking social capital in building trust, fostering collaboration, and empowering communities to shape their collective futures by making links with larger and more influential structures and organisations.

Knowing and engaging with the services in an area was also helpful in the delivery of events. The quote from the evaluation of **Playing Out in Canley** highlights how in their case, local services and organisations had previously only ever worked alone and how bringing them together led to even better outcomes for them as organisations, and for their community.

"The impact of the Playing Out project in Canley over the last three years has been huge. In the past different institutions and community groups have planned activities separately and these have been very positive for the area. But by working together we have been able to plan more effectively, supporting each other's activities and building a better understanding of what we all do. The biggest impact has probably been in facilitating communication - which has then led to more co-operative planning. The Canley Newsletter has given us all a real understanding of just how much goes on in Canley and has been a wonderful resource to all of us. I'm sure that the legacy of the project will be that greater understanding of how we can cooperate and work together for the good of the people of Canley."

Karen Curran, Canley Community Church Worker

7.4 Ongoing sense of history/culture/identity/belonging

The history and culture of a particular location may impact on the harmony between different groups, as well as the kinds of events that are held there. Events can be organised specifically to highlight or remember certain historical events or focused around a particular culture. There may be a history of people being left out, excluded, marginalised – perhaps when an industry closed or people from a different ethnicity or religion came to live in the area. There may be a strong traditional culture linked to living in an area, perhaps linked to being members of a trade union or working in a particular trade. People moving from other countries bring elements of their culture with them. All these local differences have an impact on how people feel about living in an area. The archive provides examples of how history and culture impacted on events (for example as a driver or starting point for planning and evaluation), and how events in turn impacted participants and their perceptions and experiences of history and culture going forward.

Several of the initiatives discussed throughout this report utilised history and culture as a driver, starting point, or lens for their planning and evaluation. For example, the **Our Lives Our Legacy** used the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement as a starting point and driver for their project. They brought together young people from divided communities across Belfast and explored the legacy of the N. Ireland conflict through their lived experiences. The larger scale **14-NOW** was also driven by the legacy of the religious conflict, holding community events and longer-term projects over three years in three communities of varying faiths across N. Ireland. The impacts of these events will provide benefits long into the future and have contributed to the process of peacebuilding for the next generation.

"It can be tough for people to open up as they can be influenced by their communities and made to feel afraid/suspicious of others."

Our Lives Our Legacy participant

Our Lives, Our Legacy. Credit Connor Quinn

The **EmpowHER** initiative highlighted that it was important to understand the cultural factors and barriers preventing engagement when planning events and projects. The learning the participants gained through participating in the sessions and events that resulted from them has opened their eyes to the struggles that women went through to get the vote and will encourage them to use the democratic processes to achieve change in the future. The **Windrush 75 Festival** report highlighted the importance of taking a co-created approach to planning and delivery when thinking about authenticity and impact. Had the interactions between the museum staff and the Caribbean Social Forum not brought a shared understanding of what was needed, this could have negatively impacted relationships going forward and been a set back. However, as the following quote demonstrates, trust and understanding was built and will continue to have positive outcomes in the future as the museum plans to make Windrush celebrations an annual event:

> *"For participants and co-creation partners alike, the co-creation behind the Festival and Project gave a level of authenticity to both. This is vital for an event that explores the history and experiences of individuals and communities who have been marginalised or discriminated against".*

Windrush 75 Festival evaluation

It is clear that the history and culture of a place can have a big impact on how and why events are developed, delivered, and evaluated. But these events themselves have also been found to impact the people who they engaged. For example, almost two thirds (65.6%) of residents felt that their knowledge of Hull's history or heritage had increased as a result of the **Hull City of Culture**. This will have significant positive benefits into the future as people feel that greater sense of being embedded in the life of a city as it changes over time.

The **Seizing the Moment** report found that more events that provide insights and experiences of different cultures and traditions was the third most popular choice among people surveyed, with this option ranked by 46% in their top three priorities. This was the clearest priority among respondents from an ethnic minority background, 57% of whom listed it in their top three. It was also more popular among those educated to degree level or above; and among people with more liberal politics. These findings have implications for social cohesion and are part of the reason why it is so important to know the neighbourhood/town/city where the event is being held so that messaging about the event can be appropriate to the context and be part of building a positive legacy for the future.

7.5 Ongoing community links

Links were developed between a wide range of different types of service and organisation. In some cases links were built with local businesses. For instance, the **Emerge** festival engaged with shopkeepers interested in revitalising their high street. Another legacy from events is that volunteers who participated in the events often wanted to continue to volunteer. For instance, **Breaking Boundaries** led to people volunteering at a nearby stadium on a more regular basis. And the majority of **EmpowerHER** participants expressed interest in continuing to take part in social action, through volunteering, fundraising and campaigning. Another legacy was in structural improvements to volunteering, e.g. **Edinburgh Festival City Volunteers** contributed to a new code of practice for volunteering in the city.

Where there are opportunities to develop peer networks these can be a very effective way of creating a legacy from short-term funding. For instance, **Thank You Day** has developed into multiple types of events driven through a number of strong partnerships with organisations with complementary aims, from children's play to strengthening volunteering to involving local pubs. In a similar manner to the **Windrush 100 Network** which brings local groups together through shared meetings, publicity and campaign messages, these peer networks can catalyse new innovations and possibilities. These not only support the social economy which in itself helps build social cohesion, but also highlight important social issues and bring people together to celebrate in years to come.

While concern was voiced that big expensive events were inappropriate during a cost of living crisis, this appeared to only be a concern for a minority of people surveyed in the **Seizing the Moment** report. The **Eurolearn** events provide a blueprint for how big events can build in community focused events as part of the wider programme. The smaller town or village focused events provide many learnings about how to build the engagement of local people in ways where they can come together and collectively build a positive identity for a place, for relatively small amounts of money.

A further legacy is through all the partnerships developed. **Emerge** reported that the experience of delivering a festival had helped them demonstrate the need and demand for place-led festivals involving young people. They will be taking their learning into future projects and opening up dialogue within each locality around the provision of arts activities for children, young people and local families. Similarly, **Inspire 2022** developed new partnerships with other organisations to further embed youth social action in their communities. These partnerships created in all four nations and across a wide range of target beneficiaries will continue to develop opportunities and relationships across difference long into the future.

7.6 Recommendations

Spirit of 2012 has demonstrated that it is very concerned with creating a legacy from the events and research funded. Opening their archive is part of maximising the usefulness of the learning the archive contains. An amazing array of work has been completed by a wonderfully diverse range of providers. A great deal of training has been done that can be useful. Excellent partnership working has been developed.

We recommend:

i) that other funding bodies open their archive to share learning;

ii) training and peer networks developed through events are encouraged to build in social connections and supported to do so;

iii) the partnerships developed are supported and built into the infrastructure of each locality so that the relationships and knowledge can be passed on and developed;

iv) events that contribute to building and supporting cultural memory that is relevant to all the communities of a place need to be encouraged.

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8. Conclusion

The research documented in this report set out to discover what can be learnt about the impact of events of social connection and cohesion from the Spirit archive. Qualitative analysis was applied to 28 reports, selected for the high likelihood that they would offer information that can build the evidence base. These were a combination of reports on projects and the additional information from six research reports that had been funded or written by Spirit over the past decade. The findings contain a large amount of data that contributes to understanding the connection between events and their impact on social connection and cohesion.

The Spirit archive is a very useful legacy in its own right. The learning on what it can tell us about the ability of events to build social connection and cohesion is detailed in this report. This report will sit alongside an online learning resource that will make the fundings more accessible to a wider range of people and form part of a series of resources about the power of different activities to build social cohesion. It also sits alongside a brief how-to guide on how to build social cohesion into events developed out of a webinar held in June 2024 highlighting the learning from the Moments to Connect projects funded by Spirit. The other learning partners working with Spirit to maximise the learnings from the archive are Loughborough University and Pro Bono Economics with complementary materials created as part of the legacy.

Breaking Boundaries. Credit Sporting Equals

The Spirit of 2012 archive demonstrates a strong commitment to bridging divides, fostering understanding, and promoting inclusivity within communities through diverse projects and activities.

Having policymakers and funders that understand the value of supporting events that build connection and social cohesion, as well as the role that funding strategies can play in supporting change and social cohesion, is crucial. This report contributes to the knowledge base for those in positions of power, regarding how events can play a key role in strengthening people's sense of belonging and the positive identity of a place. It emphasises, particularly, the power of events to engage those who do not currently take part in community activities. We need to better understand the wider impact of events in breaking down divisions and building up a sense of identity and belonging, whatever people's backgrounds and abilities are. This report contributes to knowledge about the role of events in building social cohesion and connection.

The findings from the project reports and evaluations join a growing body of knowledge about the links between events and how they are conceived, planned and run and how to build social cohesion into the very fabric of every stage of the process. It finds that evaluations needed to be appropriate to the size of the grants awarded and therefore can encompass wide variation. Even within projects of a similar size there was still huge variation in the quality of the evaluations with the best ensuring that there were suitable monitoring and evaluation frameworks prior to the commencement (or at least in the early stages of the delivery). Greater clarity of measurement frameworks that can be applied across widely differing events will support the evidence base going forward. However, the variety of events is a great strength of the archive, providing rich findings from across the four nations with projects focused on community arts, sports, peacebuilding, celebrating diverse cultures, the unique identities of different places and much more.

The recommendations are to be taken forward by a range of stakeholders, including government departments, funding bodies, arts and sports development organisations, local authorities and larger charities. The learning resource linked to these findings will be more accessible to local organisations and groups who will be guided in how to build social cohesion goals within their event planning and evaluation. A short how-to guide has also been produced based on the findings from a small selection of projects that have also been included in this more in depth study.

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Appendix 1 - List of all the documents analysed

* grant amount listed is from Spirit of 2012. In most cases Spirit of 2012 were the sole funder of the project described; for details of match funding please following links to the website.

Project evaluation reports analysed	
14-NOW (Springboard) £450,000 between 2018 - 2021 A three-year extended impact grant to the Fourteen project in NI (see below), 14-Now involved community representatives in Monkstown, Creggan and Limavady directly allocating funding to local projects. A "community builder" worked to better connect local organisations and projects with each other. End of project evaluation produced by InFocus. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/fourteen-fourteen-now-evalution/	**Breaking Boundaries (Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals)** £1.8m between 2018 - 2022 Inspired by the 2017 and 2019 Cricket World Cups, this project intentionally brought together young people and families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds around a shared love of cricket and other sports. The project ran in five English cities. End of project evaluation produced by Wavehill. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/youth-sport-trust-breaking-boundaries/
Caring City (Coventry City of Culture Trust) £1.25m 2019-2022 One of the three major programmes of Coventry's year as UK City of Culture, Caring City embedded cultural producers from the Trust into four community organisations to co-produce work with their service users, ranging from a music and spoken word festival, an Arts and Homelessness season and a new play. End of project evaluation produced by The University of Warwick. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/coventry-city-of-culture/	**Edinburgh Festival City Volunteers (Festivals Edinburgh and Volunteer Edinburgh)** £50,000 2018 Festivals Edinburgh supported 109 residents into volunteering across the summer's festivals, with a specific emphasis on removing barriers to participation. End of project evaluation produced by Festivals Edinburgh. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/festival-city-volunteers/

Emerge (The Mighty Creatives) £1m 2016- 2018 The Mighty Creative worked with emerging artists, schools and youth centres to produce summer arts festivals in twelve Midlands towns, inspired by the work of Shakespeare. End of project evaluation produced by Wavehill. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/emerge-report/	**EmpowHER (UK Youth in partnership with the British Red Cross and the Young Women's Trust)** £2.56m 2018-2021 To mark the centenary of women's suffrage, this project sought to improve the wellbeing of young women and girls through increasing their involvement in social action. It supported girls between 10-20 to learn about the work of the British Red Cross, women's rights and other forms of social injustice. Girls then designed their own social action projects to make a difference in their communities. Evaluations produced by UK Youth. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/empowher-project-evaluation/
Eurovision 2023 (Liverpool City Council) £200,000 2023 Spirit's funding supported the wraparound education programme for Eurovision 2023, which took place in primary and secondary schools across the Liverpool City Region, and was a first in Eurovision history. It also funded the wellbeing evaluation of Eurovision 2023, which included a household survey of Liverpool residents. Evaluation by the University of Liverpool. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/eurovision-2023/	**Fourteen (UKCF and Springboard)** £3.5m 2015-2018 To mark the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games, this grant provided fourteen communities across the UK with £250,000 in funding to dedicate to local priorities, designed to increase community engagement and participation in social activities. The majority of locations chose to build in community events as a core part of their delivery. Evaluations produced by Wavehill. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/fourteen-fourteen-now-evalution/
Hull City of Culture (Hull 2017) volunteer programme Spirit of 2012 was a principal funder of Hull 2017 with a £2.85m grant, a portion of which went to the volunteering programme. This involved volunteers in thousands of events, cultural activities, installations & exhibitions of all different sizes across the city. 'Hero Report' produced by in-house Hull 2017 team to mark the end of City of Culture year. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/hull-city-of-culture/	**Inspire 2022 (UK Youth)** £1.7m including £.0.5m from the #iwillFund To mark the bumper year of major events taking place in the UK across 2022 and 2023, Inspire 2022 supported young people (9-25 year olds) across the UK to put on their own events for their wider community. End of project evaluation produced by UK Youth. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/inspire-2022/

Making Routes Festival (Oasis Play)	The Great Get Togethers (Jo Cox Foundation)
£188,126 2015-2017	£997,000 2019-2023
An inclusive 3-day arts festival & celebration of visual arts, theatre, and play co-created by disabled & non-disabled children, young people, and artists held in Lambeth. Oasis Play worked with the South London Gallery and Battersea Arts Centre to open up their venues to new audiences.	The Great Get Togethers were national campaigns in January and June each year, to inspire community events across the country, providing grassroots organisations and volunteers with support, capacity building and a networks to help put on their own community events.
End of project reports produced by Oasis Play. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/making-routes/	End of project evaluation produced by the Jo Cox Foundation. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/jo-cox-foundation-moment-to-movement/
Our Lives Our Legacy (Springboard)	**Playing Out (Warwick Arts Centre)**
£60,000 2023	£200,000 2021-2024
A cross-community project working with fifteen young people to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. It culminated in an event bringing together people of all ages to explore what the anniversary means to people today, developed by the fifteen young participants.	A partnership between neighbours Warwick Arts Centre and Canley Residents Association to develop activities connected to the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games. The partners organised an annual community parade which grew year on year between 2021 and 2023.
Interactive end of project report produced by InFocus. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/springboard-moments-to-connect-our-lives-our-legacy/	Evaluation produced by Warwick Arts Centre https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/warwick-arts-centre-playing-out/
Spirit of Rugby (RFU)	**Sporting Memories Foundation**
£696,165 2015-2017	£86,625 2014-2016
To celebrate the 2015 Rugby World Cup, this project involved young volunteers & Rugby Football Union project staff in 15 cities. They co-developed a mix of one-off events and regular activities to inspire communities who had not previously engaged in rugby.	Across three grants Spirit of 2012 funded Sporting Memories to bring together young people with older people with dementia through events and activities themed around sport, including the Tour De Yorkshire and Rio 2016.
Evaluation conducted by Sheffield Hallam https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/spirit-of-rugby/	Depth case study conducted by Infocus https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/sporting-memories/

Thank You Day Community Connector Pilot (Together Coalition)

£50,000 2021

In this pilot, activities and events run by local volunteers in 10 locations across all 4 nations of the UK were organised to take place either in parks, fields, or community centres & cafes around the theme 'Thank You'.

Evaluations by Neighbourly Lab and the Together Coalition. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/thank-you-day-community-connector/

Volunteer Support Pot (Volunteer Scotland)

£197,000 2014

The Volunteer Support Pot made individual grants to people who wanted to volunteer in the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games held in Glasgow in 2014 but faced hardships or exceptional costs associated with rurality, low income, caring responsibilities or disabilities. The grant also supported Volunteer Scotland to signpost people to ongoing opportunities post-Games.

End of project report by Volunteer Scotland.

https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/open-ceremonies/

Windrush 75: The Spirit of Windrush (the National Maritime Museum)

£47,060 2023

A partnership between the National Maritime Museum in London and the Caribbean Social Forum to create a two day event celebrating the 75th anniversary of the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush to Britain.

External evaluation produced by Lizzie Hilton.

https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/national-maritime-museum-moments-to-connect-the-spirit-of-windrush/

Windrush 75: Shared Past, Shared Future (British Future)

£30,000 2023

British Future convened the Windrush 75 network to support organisations and individuals seeking to mark the 75th anniversary of HMT Empire Windrush. Spirit's funding supported polling, a research report and the development of a toolkit on how best to mark the day to promote social cohesion.

https://spiritof2012.org.uk/funding/projects/moments-to-connect-windrush-75/

WOW (Women of the World) Festivals (The Southbank Centre)

£742,708 2016-2019

To mark the centenary of women's suffrage, this grant supported the Southbank Centre to adapt and role out its Women of the World Festival in 5 cities – Perth, Exeter, Bradford, Cardiff and Norwich. Local women and girls co-developed the content and character of each programme.

End of project evaluation report produced by The Southbank Centre.

https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/wow-report/

Year of the King (Jack Drum Arts)

£58,475 2023

Year of the King was a community carnival and gala in Crook, County Durham, bringing local people together to celebrate the Coronation of King Charles III through their own creative ideas.

Evaluation produced by Wavehill. https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/jack-drum-arts-moments-to-connect-year-of-the-king/

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Research Reports Analysed
Eurovision 2023: Community and Wellbeing Strand by University of Liverpool
FestivalsConnect by University of the West of Scotland
From Moment to Movement by inFocus
How can Spirit of 2012 reach project beneficiaries most effectively by inFocus
Reimagining Volunteering: The role of 'Community Helpers' by Neighbourly Lab
Seizing the Moment: why events matter for social connection and shared identity by British Future
Social Value of Community Events by University of the West of Scotland