



HACKNEY TOWN HALL

Improving Social Connectedness

Lessons learnt from social sector organisations funded by Spirit of 2012

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Introduction to this paper

As an independent Trust established to continue and recreate the spirit of pride, community and empowerment of the London 2012 Olympic Games, Spirit of 2012 has always been focused on funding, evidencing and scaling projects that continue the aims of improving social connectedness for communities across the UK.

Over the last nine years, Spirit has supported many organisations across volunteering, events, sports, and arts/culture to consolidate learning around how projects have improved social connectedness between and within groups and communities. As the country becomes more diverse, it is critical that we mitigate against division and prejudice, and propagate ways for increasing meaningful interactions, finding commonalities, and cultivating understanding and mutual respect.

This paper looks across Spirit's portfolio to explore how different organisations have understood and measured social connectedness, and celebrates what has been collectively achieved to date. This paper also draws out the common mechanisms and enablers that have helped organisations achieve social connectedness outcomes, and poses the remaining barriers to consider for future programmes.

While social connectedness has often been conceptualised differently across organisations, there is consensus that this is a crucial facet in achieving a more inclusive, fair, and happy society. It is consequently important for funders and commissioners to focus on supporting initiatives around social connectedness – especially those that embed good practices outlined below – and reducing the barriers that remain.

How was this paper developed?

This paper draws on documents and reports from Spirit-funded organisations, research funded either wholly or in part by Spirit, and three interviews for developing the case studies featured in the report.

This paper is part of a series of three thematic reports that Renaisi is publishing as part of our independent three-year evaluation of Spirit's work. The other two papers focus on wellbeing and changing perceptions towards disability and impairment. A final report will also be published to summarise the impact and learning across Spirit's three priority outcome areas, and present recommendations for Spirit and the wider sector going forward.

What do we mean by 'social connectedness'?

Although there is no universally agreed definition of social connectedness,¹ we have broadly categorised social connectedness at three levels. We recognise that these categories are not neatly defined or mutually exclusive.

- **Connectedness between communities (inter-community):** different groups have high levels of cross-group understanding and trust, share cross-group friendships

¹ Demireva, Dr Neli, Briefing: Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion, The Migration Observatory (University of Oxford), 13/12/2019

and social ties, positively interact with each other, perceive each other favourably, and work together.

- **Connectedness within the same community (intra-community):** individuals united by a common characteristic (e.g living in the same area) have a collective group ethos and sense of local pride and belonging, and people feel empowered to participate in community affairs.
- **Individual level:** individuals experience low levels of social isolation and have high levels of friendships and social bonds, as well as high individual engagement in society.

These levels are based partly on Social Capital theory, distinguishing **bonding social capital** (social networks between homogeneous groups of people) and **bridging social capital** (social networks between socially heterogeneous groups),² although our interpretation of ‘the same community’ assumes that most groups are not homogenous, but are united by at least one common characteristic.

Our understanding is also partially based on **contact hypothesis**,³ which suggests social connectedness is facilitated through different groups coming into contact, which reduces prejudice and inter-group conflict.⁴ Without contact, societies are segregated, with individuals living ‘parallel lives’ in the same area without meeting or interacting.

Language used on the subject of ‘social connectedness’

The specific language used by Spirit has varied over time and differs between projects. Spirit has chosen to focus this report on ‘social connectedness’ as it is more accessible and less academic than other similar concepts such as social or community cohesion, connection, integration, social capital etc. Some projects also found using less direct language such as ‘coming together,’ ‘fun and friendships,’ or ‘building trust’ was more accessible for participants.

The term ‘community’ was frequently used by Spirit-funded organisations, with the characteristics that defined these communities varying depending on the specifics of projects (age, gender, location, religion etc).

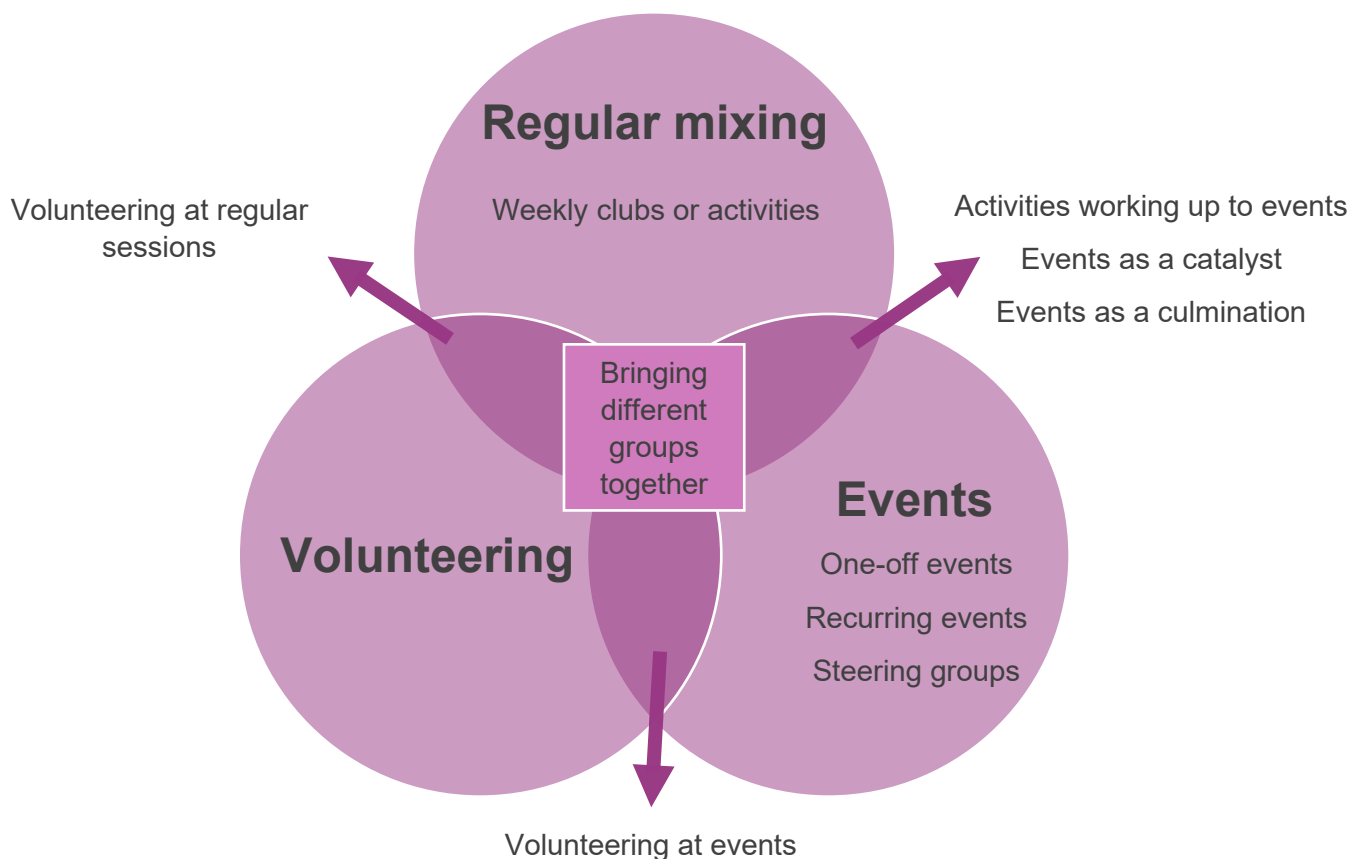
² Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

³ Allport, Gordon, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 1954.

⁴ Everett, Jim, *Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future*, *The Inquisitive Mind* (Issue 17), 2013: <https://www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future>

Activities delivered in projects

Spirit-funded organisations delivered a range of activities to facilitate social connectedness. These activities broadly fall into three categories – **regular mixing**, **events** and **volunteering**, but there is significant overlap between these groupings, as demonstrated by the Venn diagram below.



Regular mixing

The activities delivered by Spirit-funded organisations that fall under this category were typically sports, arts, or explicitly social activities like coffee mornings. These included **regular activities working up to events**, such as the weekly art and music workshops in preparation for the Canley parade in *Playing Out* (delivered by Warwick Arts Centre as part of the *Birmingham 2022 Cultural Programme*). The majority of examples were regular sessions **bringing different groups together**. For example, *Breaking Boundaries* (Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals) delivered regular cricket sessions, dance groups, and coffee and cake groups, to bring together participants from different communities. Some Spirit-funded organisations delivered **weekly clubs or activities for specific groups**, such as *14-NOW* (Springboard) holding youth clubs, or Spirit's *Carers' Music Fund* holding music workshops to reduce loneliness for carers.

Some projects also saw regular mixing by encouraging community organisations to form **partnerships**. For example, *Breaking Boundaries* partnered together similar organisations from different communities to facilitate working together to deliver activities. They also used **steering groups** or **community forums** to involve a variety of community members in leading or co-planning activities or events.

Events

In some cases, Spirit-funded organisations used high-profile, large-scale **one-off events** to facilitate social connectedness, such as the *Thank You Day* (/together) which brought local neighbourhoods together for one day, or *Playing Out*'s parade through Canley involving hundreds of people from all walks of life as participants or spectators. Some focussed on **recurring events**, such as outdoor cinema events, a series of seasonal parties for Halloween or Christmas, and community fairs. For some projects, **events were used as a catalyst** to generate interest in more regular activities, events or volunteering, such as 14-NOW's community events like the Halloween Lantern Parade.

"It's about creating community events, that people come together. And then through that we, as community organisations and volunteers, were able to connect with the local community and see where we could develop more longer-term activities and programmes."
-- Project interview

Events were also a culmination of more regular activities. For instance, *Playing Out*'s parade was the conclusion of months of weekly workshops and community planning sessions, with effort made to celebrate the longer-term efforts of participants.

Volunteering

Some Spirit-funded organisations facilitated community members to get involved as volunteers to deliver activities together. For instance, 14-NOW trained and empowered community members, especially young people, to lead projects, such as providing packages to older people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Spirit-funded organisations also facilitated **volunteering at events**, such as *Playing Out* empowering community members to steward the parade.

Some Spirit-funded organisations also sought to **increase the diversity of volunteers**. Projects such as *Hull Volunteers* (Absolutely Cultured) and *Team Spirit* (England Athletics) aimed to use Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and the 2017 World Championships in Athletics respectively as catalysts to recruit a diverse pool of volunteers. These efforts were another means of bringing people from different backgrounds together and getting people involved in their local community.

Case study 1: Achieving impact through overlapping activities

Playing Out is a listening and storytelling project in Canley, Coventry, co-produced by Canley residents and a collaboration of community partners including Warwick Arts Centre. It focuses on bringing people together and shaping a new narrative for Canley through play and the arts. *Playing Out* uses a combination of volunteering, events, and regular mixing to facilitate social connectedness.

The participants are all Canley residents from a range of backgrounds, ages, and abilities, who would not necessarily otherwise meet each other. It was accessible to all, with modifications put in place so everyone could get involved however they wanted to, for example attending weekly sessions, volunteering their time on the steering group or as a parade steward, or going to events as a spectator.

“We’re trying to go into specific groups like schools, and care homes, to think about who we might be missing that might have more specialist needs... So really thinking about what social connectedness means and how it can be accessible for people in lots of different ways.”

A steering group of seven residents came together to develop a framework of activities and events over the following year. The project then comprised of regular Samba band practices and creative workshops taking place in community venues, care homes and schools. These regular workshops culminated in the 2nd annual Canley Parade, where participants walked, played in the Samba band or danced, and many more residents came out to watch. The Parade ended in a park with a Creative Fun Day, including a Pop-Up Café, music, theatre and creative workshops, attended by 300 residents.

“... I find it hard to put into words as to what it meant and how it felt to walk the streets of Canley with 100 residents and people coming out, opening their windows, standing outside their houses...it was so moving, just the sense of absolute pride. There were lots of individuals that were parading next to people they've never met before, and having this kind of collective experience.”

Playing Out also ran other recurring events, such as an outdoor cinema film-screening, Halloween and Christmas parties, pop-up Cafés and Fetes, and also distributed the Canley Newsletter and delivered art packs to people’s homes. The positive experiences at regular events encouraged people to keep coming, and also participate in other parts of the project like the parade. Longer-term and regular attendance meant deeper relationships and understanding could flourish between participants, and friendships could form.

“A resident called Mick in his 80s, who moved to Canley when he was a child, when there were just 3 roads, and the main road was built by prisoners of war, he talked about those things, along with a family from South Africa that had just arrived...They joined the samba band and were in the parade. So you’ve got those conversations happening where some feel welcome to the community, and somebody who’s been here for a really long time can share their stories.”

Playing Out demonstrates how projects can use a combination of events, regular activities, and volunteering to bring people together and empower local communities such as Canley.

Outcomes achieved by Spirit-funded organisations

Spirit-funded organisations sought to impact social connectedness on two levels:

- **Community-level** impact including both **inter** and **intra-community** impact.
- **Individual-level** impact (the impact on individuals of bringing individuals closer to a community).

Evaluating impact on social connectedness

Spirit-funded organisations sought to evaluate the impact of their projects on social connectedness using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. These typically included discussions and reflection sessions with participants, as well as baseline and endline surveys to measure changes in attitudes towards different groups and involvement in the community.

“We measured perceptions of social cohesion among [project] participants through three metrics [‘Acceptance’, ‘Trust’ and ‘Meeting people’], which young people graded themselves on out of ten before and after the programme: ... Combining these metrics, 62% of [project] participants saw an increase in their perceptions of social cohesion.”

-- Project report

Measuring social connectedness can be difficult due to not having set definitions for many of the key terms.⁵ Measuring changes in attitudes towards different groups is further complicated by the presence of self-report bias, with respondents incentivised to select answers that indicate a lack of prejudice.⁶ Overcoming these difficulties required carefully worded questions that respondents felt comfortable answering.

“The most difficult thing is getting people to answer the questions in the way you want them to answer the questions because they don’t understand social cohesion. community cohesion, social integration. So my biggest learning has been how you break the questions down... ‘have you made friends with people here that you wouldn’t have normally made friends with?’”

-- Project interview

Community-level impact

Intercommunity outcomes

Connectedness **between different communities** was positively impacted in several ways. **Perceptions of other groups** were improved and **stereotypes/misconceptions** were

⁵ Wider Research - Briefing-Immigration-Diversity-and-Social-Cohesion

⁶ Wider Research - Intergroup Contact Theory_ Past, Present, and Future _ In-Mind

challenged by projects facilitating contact between different groups. For example, 14-NOW's recruitment of young people as volunteers helped in overcoming negative perceptions around their responsibility for anti-social behaviour and littering.

"The young people were more confident, so they were able to challenge their peers whenever they went out on the streets... They have started to have a positive outlook on their community. To the community I think they are seen as positive young people now, helping with the clean-ups and food parcels."

-- Project report

Project activities also created a **greater understanding of others** through intercommunity learning. Some of the social action projects on *EmpowHER* (UK Youth) saw young women and girls running educational activities for their male peers on gendered issues.

As well as changes in perceptions, projects also reported **improvements in community cohesion**, meaning there was less conflict and more positive interactions. The *Thank You Day* events were explicitly aimed at creating these positive interactions by creating new behaviour norms around publicly displaying gratitude to others.

"Thank You Day it is not an event, it's a way of life – we want to see it changes in people's behaviour, there's so much negativity, people can be fractious – if they can just say thank you, by showing gratitude that would help. An annual event reinforces that behaviour."

-- Project report

Another behaviour change reported in some projects was an increase in **partnership working across different communities**, with organisations that would never usually work together delivering projects and sharing knowledge. One example would be *Breaking Boundaries* partnering organisations from different communities to deliver project activities.

Intracommunity outcomes

Projects also reported impacts **between the same community**. The communities as defined in these projects were typically non-homogenous in terms of different characteristics but were living in a shared local area.

Project activities led to greater **community empowerment and participation**, allowing community members who would never usually get involved in their local area to do so. Projects such as 14-NOW empowered disenfranchised people such as long-term unemployed individuals or stay-at-home parents to volunteer and have a voice in their local community.

"In each year of [the project] there was an increase from survey baseline to endline in relation to the extent to which participants felt lonely, whether people from different backgrounds got on well in the community, how proud participants felt of their contribution to the community, and how engaged they generally felt with the local community."

-- Project report

Spirit-funded organisations also reported that participants experienced an **increased sense of pride and belonging in the local community** across a range of groups, including different ages, ethnicities, religions and other characteristics. Projects such as *Playing Out*

brought everyone together to celebrate their local area, leading to **a shared group ethos and sense of identity**.

“We were able to establish that individuals have experienced a sense of pride through being part of a vibrant team and contributing to shared effort. Volunteers have commented that they felt ‘worthwhile’ and ‘valuable’ to their team and to Edinburgh.”

-- Project report

Individual level

Individual-level impact included improvements in **wellbeing**, such as the aforementioned **increased confidence to participate and volunteer** in community initiatives. The main wellbeing outcome reported however was the **reduced isolation of vulnerable individuals**, such as older people or people living in rural areas, as they were able to form new social connections through their participation in projects.

“We’ve had experiences with people that they had no social connectedness, they never allowed themselves to be in an environment where they were able to connect with others and we have found that we have sort of taken people from the brink and given them a sense of purpose in their life.”

-- Project interview

Forming these **new relationships** helped in overcoming a sense of living ‘parallel lives’ where individuals with different identities (such as religion, age, nationality or ethnicity) would not come into contact with each other on a regular basis, despite living in the same local area.

“Ladies that you wouldn’t imagine speaking together and having a friendship, even myself... People that you never would’ve seen, having those friendships and are just trying to expand their networks locally. The conversation with them isn’t forced now. They know more about each other’s backgrounds and interests and it’s been nice to see that too.”

-- Project report

Case study 2: Who was impacted?

14-NOW supports community partners to deliver activities and events aimed at bringing people together in three communities in Northern Ireland (Creggan, Monkstown/New Mossley, and Limavady). The project sought to bring people together within the same locality from across different communities, with many diverse participants attending predominantly from economically disadvantaged areas.

Given the history of segregation and social unrest between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland, 14-NOW aimed to facilitate social connectedness between communities and people from different areas or estates who did not usually mix. This happened through events like the Halloween Lantern Parade, Christmas Cohesion and Christmas United event.

“The opportunity to bring those groups [Catholics and Protestants] together on projects that they had a similar interest in, connecting them in friendships. That has worked really well...We have young

people who would never have met someone that they call a friend because they don't live in the same village, didn't go to the same school, and would never frequent the same locations or social infrastructure, so that has been one of the perks."

Community members, particularly young people, were also empowered to take a lead on social action activities such as providing support packages to older people during the Covid-19 pandemic. This improved community perceptions of young people, created more intergenerational links, and created connections across the community.

"That gave a real boost to the volunteers, has improved confidence, and the wellbeing of the local community...we have young people who are now peer leaders within the community, they've grown up through these experiences, and been able to walk away wanting to be able to give something back to their local communities now."

The project also reached vulnerable people, or those living in rural areas, through events and regular spaces such as youth clubs and seasonal parties. Creating new opportunities to meet others and socialise led to reduced isolation, and enabled friendships to form.

"Partners and providers suggested that young people in Limavady living in rural areas are isolated and so, in the summer are unable to socialise with other children... 14-NOW projects provided an opportunity for children to socialise with other children from their community in a safe space and children formed new friendships and developed existing ones throughout the project."

14-NOW used people's points of commonality to bring different people together into their own space to mix, form bonds and socialise. For example, they ran social lunch clubs for older people, women's groups, parent and toddler sessions, weekly youth clubs, men's groups for physical activity and mental health issues, and weekly disability groups.

"People never looked out for their neighbour, they stayed in their own silo. Life was so busy...there was never space to connect with others. But behaviours changed where there were friendships and relationships formed, there were people willing to step out and give back to their local community."

14-NOW demonstrates how projects can impact social connectedness between individuals in the same community (such as creating intergenerational links), connectedness between different cultural or religious communities, and also impact individuals through reducing social isolation.

Mechanisms of Change

Across all the activities, projects typically saw three main mechanisms to achieve social connectedness: **facilitating contact** between different groups, incorporating an **educational approach** where participants directly learned about one another, and **delegating decision-making** to the community.

Contact between different groups

Many projects sought to facilitate contact between people from different communities who would not normally interact with each other. For example, *EmpowHER* brought together mostly white and Asian girls who lived in different neighbourhoods, went to different schools and never mixed. Projects creating these **integrated spaces** aimed at overcoming a sense of different groups living ‘parallel lives’, where groups lived in the same area and never interacted.

“It’s enabled people to come together that would not normally come together. There are lots of existing groups but they are quite specific. So they’re for over 60s, youth group, a church based group, or for people with children. Whereas we’ve always had intergenerational places...it’s allowed people to come together of all ages and abilities and backgrounds.”
-- Project interview

However, mere contact itself is not sufficient to create lasting connections. Spirit-funded organisations also ensured participants had **positive experiences** interacting with each other through this contact. Research has shown positive contact works to reduce prejudice by diminishing negative emotions (anxiety / threat) and inducing positive emotions such as empathy.⁷ Arts and sports-based activities are especially useful for this, as people take part in these by choice, share a positive experience, and are therefore more trusting if interacting in a more institutional setting.⁸

“The biggest bit in all of this is the fun. It was just saying, look at sport for good. It’s how you have fun and how you make new friends, it’s about creating a happier, healthier community. But you do that together, you’re not doing it to someone, you’re doing it with someone.”
-- Project interview

Spirit-funded organisations also **structured** contact to maximise social connectedness outcomes. The contact hypothesis suggests that various key conditions allow for positive contact – **equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals** and **support by authorities**⁹ – with many project activities being structured to incorporate these conditions. For example, *Playing Out* held art and music workshops so participants had concrete tasks to do whilst they met with others. *Community Connectors* brought neighbours together for a multi-faith ‘Come Dine Together’ meal, as this allowed interactions not focusing on tensions

⁷ Everett, Jim, Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future, *The Inquisitive Mind* (Issue 17), 2013: <https://www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future>

⁸ Community Cohesion – An Action Guide, The Local Government Association, 2004, p41

⁹ Allport, Gordon, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 1954

but on the act of preparing food and eating together. This example demonstrates the aforementioned key conditions suggested by contact hypothesis that allow for positive contact.

“The best examples illustrate how the connectedness is used to underpin the development of a shared group ethos so that the participants work together during activities and therefore have a better understanding of each other and better attitudes to diversity result. Weaker examples show how without facilitation the groups fail to fully mix, do not develop a shared codesigned group ethos and thus facilitate improved attitudes to diversity.”

-- Project report

Taking an educational approach

Many Spirit-funded organisations also used an **educational approach** to ensure individuals engaged meaningfully with each other, with cross-group **dialogue and learning** being a core part of many activities. For example, *Breaking Boundaries* used **prompt cards** at the end of sessions to facilitate discussions about cultural norms or other topics. These questions covered themes like languages spoken, ‘what do we have in common?’, food and drink, sharing information about cultures and customs, or names. *14-NOW* similarly held **informal talks and discussion groups** between different communities, around historical issues, to learn about each other’s cultures, backgrounds and perspectives on the world. This educational approach was effective at increasing understanding about traditions and issues faced by other communities, and showing commonalities between their lives, which in turn overcame prejudices and increased inter-community trust and lasting social bonds.

“You’d come to week one, you just get to know people in your group by the 12th session, you were asking me why do you wear a headscarf? What do you do at Eid? So it was creating a comfortable environment for people to ask questions that they normally wouldn’t feel comfortable doing to ensure that they could really understand people that were different to them, and help change perceptions and attitudes towards them.”

-- Project interview

Delegating decision-making to the community

Spirit-funded organisations used **coproduction** in the design or delivery of projects to **delegate decision-making power back to the community**. This happened via **steering groups** with a representative group of community leaders, or **consultation sessions** with the wider community. For example, *Breaking Boundaries* facilitated intergenerational community forums to discuss issues such as littering or anti-social behaviour, which gave young people (as well as older residents) a voice in the community. *Playing Out* used a steering group of 7 residents representing a diverse cross-section of the town, who developed a framework for what the community wanted out of the project. Many projects also **supported communities to plan and deliver activities** themselves, via training up ‘community champions’ or volunteers, or co-producing with grassroots organisations.

“What you had was this adult perspective on where this is the tension, and then you have the young people being really empowered to go out

and make a difference and impact in their local communities to break some of those tensions or those issues. And in every single city, they have all said that they are going to continue with those community forums, both for the leaders and for the young people.”

-- Project interview

Empowering communities to take ownership of projects promoted a **sense of pride and belonging**, as people feel they have the power to change their local area for the better. Projects have helped community members to get together and discuss longstanding points of tension and reach solutions together, where they had previously been disengaged and blamed problems on others. For example, through *EmpowHER*, young women and girls were empowered to lead social action projects against issues like sexism which they previously felt powerless to combat. *Edinburgh Festival City* volunteers equally felt empowered to give back to their city, and that they could make a difference through volunteering. These activities strengthened a sense of agency in community affairs.

“By focusing on people-led design, volunteers had an increased sense of agency, and their contribution to shaping the project activities was of central importance.”

-- Project report

This mechanism also creates a **shared group identity**. Research shows that social connectedness can be accelerated by ‘recategorization’ of identity, where participants’ group identities are changed from ‘Us vs. Them’ to a more inclusive ‘We.’¹⁰ Projects have created new shared identities via steering groups or forums including people from many backgrounds, ages, or cultures, working towards a common goal to overcome prejudices. *EmpowHER* participants created a shared sense of identity as a group of young women and girls, regardless of differing backgrounds. These shared group identities help individuals feel more connected to others and create a sense of belonging.

“It had to be about joint planning. And there had to be some training there around the basic skills around people understanding those cross-cultural approaches... You’re not just here to put on a sport event, we want you to have consultation and ownership, but we need you to think about how you’re going to create a sense of belonging.”

-- Project interview

¹⁰ Gaertner et al., 1993, in Everett, Jim, Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future, *The Inquisitive Mind* (Issue 17), 2013: <https://www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future>

Enablers and Barriers to achieving impact

Enablers and barriers at the ‘**context**’, ‘**project**’, and ‘**people and participant**’ levels affected the extent that social connectedness outcomes could be achieved. We have identified enablers to combat each barrier.



Context

Barriers to social connectedness such as **low levels of social capital, negative media representation of diverse communities, segregated communities, economic disadvantage, ongoing tensions and ingrained prejudice** can make facilitating social connectedness more difficult. Mere positive contact with another group, or friendship with one individual may not be enough to change entrenched views, as participants may see the other as the exception to the stereotype.

However, where projects have an **in-depth understanding of community contexts, needs and issues**, these barriers can be sensitively addressed. For some projects, this meant **staff came from the same community** and understood local issues.

We have to be very sensitive as to where they're coming from, their beliefs and their traditions...making sure that young people are aware that it's okay to have differences, but it's important there's mutual respect."

-- Project interview

For instance, 14-NOW project staff were highly familiar with the legacy of Northern Ireland's Troubles, aware of the continued presence of paramilitary groups in the local area, and took care to treat controversial issues with consideration. This meant avoiding cross-community events during particularly tense times of year, such as the Protestant marching season, making sure to build relationships before broaching potentially inflammatory discussion topics, and ensuring discussions were not one-sided. The impact of this was to ensure contact was positive and build cross-community understanding.

"There's a time period that you need to do to build relationships and to build trust and to create the safe environments...then you can address some of the underlying issues...you can bring in an educational or history talk...It's important that you're not looking at only one side, it's really important that you get a good balance of both communities and both backgrounds, so that people aren't feeling that they have been given a disservice."

-- Project interview

For other projects where staff were not necessarily from the local area, they understood community needs through **steering groups, consultation or co-producing projects with locals**. For example, projects including *Playing Out* kept up to date with community needs through a steering group of residents, as well as staff having frequent informal chats with community members even outside project delivery time. This local understanding allowed delivery to be flexible and relevant to changing local needs, meaning people attended and engaged more, which facilitated deeper social connectedness outcomes.

"The success of the relationship building has been authentically being interested in the community, and it not just doing workshops. So going to other stakeholders meeting, which has nothing to do necessarily with the project... or popping by and just having a cup of tea and just checking if someone's okay. And you have those conversations around people's lives."

-- Project interview

Project

The biggest barrier at project level was **short timespans**, with several projects noting that building trusted relationships, deep understanding of communities, and reaching high engagement and attendance takes a long time. Some felt ending projects early would undermine efforts, as communities had not quite embedded the longstanding strong relationships needed to maintain social connectedness impacts.

"One of the biggest lessons from this programme, it needs to be at least a five-year programme, because when you're working with communities, where they're not even trusting each other, let alone trusting an external coming in, or working with a local authority that they see as the enemy. It takes a good two, three years to build

those relationships and that trust.”
-- Project interview

Projects can overcome this to an extent by **using their budget flexibly** to ensure longer-term participation, for example delivering slightly less but over a longer timeframe. They can also aim to achieve deeper outcomes for fewer participants rather than aiming to reach as many participants as possible. However, **funders have a critical role to consider what can realistically be achieved** in certain timeframes, or **considering longer-term funding**.

Fun and engaging activities acted as the hook for participants to continue to engage with projects. The *Carers Music Fund* used music workshops and socialising to continue. This continued engagement was important for achieving the social connectedness outcomes mentioned previously.

“I come home from college and then I’m at home. But on Friday I run home from college because I’ve got [the project]. Some Asian girls don’t have the ability to socialise. Sitting at home all day, you just get depressed and it makes you feel sad, going out it makes you feel happy.”

-- Project report (participant quote)

Trusted and experienced staff were also highlighted as key to the success of projects. It was important for staff to be experienced and trained in facilitating cohesion, with skills such as conflict management and facilitating difficult conversations proving important for successful project delivery. Project staff often received **training and resources** to ensure they had these relevant skills, with the focus in delivery on the **quality of engagement** and connections forming, rather than a narrow focus on the number of participants engaged.

“[Project staff] were key in bringing the events together, through the whole event cycle. They were mostly those people running the community groups or organisations, so they have the networks and connections in place to encourage people to participate in activities... On the day, their role was of welcoming and introducing, facilitating and encouraging – enabling people to get the most out of their participation and thank everyone involved.”

-- Project report

People and participants

Sporadic attendance at activities was highlighted as a key barrier to participants learning about different communities and forming deeper connections through ongoing contact. This was at times due to a **lack of willingness or confidence to engage in the programme**, or feeling that the project was ‘not for them’. Creating a **safe and non-judgmental environment**, where participants could open up and have respectful discussions learn more about each other, was motivating for participants to regularly attend and make the most out of sessions.

“The leader also noted that despite the women starting the sessions as strangers, by the end they became a bit of ‘family’. This positive group dynamic was attributed in part to the women having the space to have open conversation – being out of their usual social circle or extended family.”

-- Project report

Practical barriers to attending, such as individuals living in isolated or rural locations with a lack of accessible public transport, were also highlighted as factors behind sporadic

attendance at activities. A lack of effective communication channels to inform people about events and activities, in part due to digital exclusion or language barriers, were also highlighted as initial challenges for engaging participants in activities. **An understanding of individual needs helped** Spirit-funded organisations ensure that projects were as inclusive as possible. For example, *Playing Out* allowed older participants in residential homes to wave the parade off rather than being expected to walk in it, while *14-NOW* provided tablets to digitally excluded people.

“One of the things that we did to overcome those barriers was to purchase tablets with 4G, they had access to Wi-Fi, and it was about and then creating ‘how to’ guides, step-by-step. And we also sent out staff and volunteers to people’s doorsteps to be able to give them a rundown or to be able to connect them to the Zoom call... So it was trying to think practically how to overcome those barriers.”

-- Project interview

Flexibility in delivery is also a key enabler, as shown in the below case study.

Case study 3: The importance of flexibility in project delivery

Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals are working in partnership to deliver *Breaking Boundaries*, a project using cricket to bring different communities together who do not usually mix. The project seeks to reduce tensions, foster mutual respect and create friendships to overcome a sense of communities living parallel lives. The participants come from many different backgrounds, including White British and Black African Caribbean groups in Manchester, Muslim and Christian groups in Barking and Dagenham, Indian and Bangladeshi groups in Birmingham, multifaith Women’s groups in Bradford, and Pakistani and Roma groups in Slough.

For *Breaking Boundaries*, staying flexible around delivery has been a major success factor. For example, they found that whilst they were easily hitting targets around participant numbers through delivering large-scale one-off events, these events did not create meaningful, long-term engagement and connections between communities. As a result, the project moved from focusing on events to more regular mixing with fewer participants but deeper, more meaningful and longer-term interactions.

“We realised that one-off events weren’t hitting community cohesion, because you’d walk up to an event, I’d be like, Oh, hi, great to meet you, then I wouldn’t see you again. That’s where we changed it to regularity. So that relationships and partnerships and trust can be built over a period of time.”

Breaking Boundaries was also flexible in delivering activities that would draw in the most people. Finding in the first year that only delivering cricket activities limited attendance, they moved to a broader range of cricket-themed activities. This allowed them to reach a wider cohort of participants.

“In specific wards where there are tensions or parallel lives, there might be one cricket club, but there are lots of youth clubs, schools, faith groups, churches, mosques, and unless all of those people have a love of cricket, cricket was the thing that turned them off rather than brought them in. So, after the first year, we moved towards alternative options...some multi-sport that has cricket skills

rather than a full cricket match...glow in the dark cricket in Birmingham...softball cricket, with Bhangra dancing. That went down really well."

Flexibility also allowed the project to partner organisations from different communities. The partnerships received funding and planned and delivered activities together. This improved partnership working, reached more participants from different communities, and prioritised social connectedness outcomes over just sports.

"Forget cricket – what's the difference between the trust, the relationships [between different communities]?... We went to cohesion first, cricket second."

Breaking Boundaries made sure sessions had some time at the end for honing meaningful connections. They introduced prompt cards around discussion topics, and social activities, to make sure people stayed later and engaged meaningfully. Incorporating this dialogue and learning was successful in increasing understanding, breaking down stereotypes and changing perceptions about other communities. It also allowed cross-community friendships to form.

"They would do a 40-minute exercise class. And then we did 50 minutes of socialisation...but instead of it just being tea, coffee and cake, they'd also do art, knitting or sewing because it made them stay longer...otherwise they found people were just saying, oh, I'll have a quick cup of tea for 10 minutes and shoot off."

Breaking Boundaries demonstrates that projects having the flexibility to alter project delivery according to ongoing learnings is a key enabling factor in maximising social connectedness impacts.

Conclusion and recommendations

Across Spirit's funded organisations, a lot has been learnt about the good practices that projects have adopted to improve social connectedness between and within groups, and at an individual level. These findings are mostly related to the following elements:

- Facilitating positive and regular contact/interaction between different groups
- Embedding educational elements to purposefully change perceptions and understanding
- Actively co-producing activities and bringing together different groups to facilitate understanding of lived experience and break down the 'us' vs. 'them' to cultivate a collective sense of 'we'.

Many of these enablers and mechanisms of change are within the ability of the project to control. However, impactful contextual factors – including ongoing tensions, ingrained prejudices, sporadic attendance, and lack of willingness or confidence to engage – can be influenced by projects to a lesser extent.

These issues need a system-wide approach to address these barriers at different levels. This could include key stakeholders such as:

- **Local authorities**, who are crucial in steering a wider system approach and setting the priorities and direction of development for different localities
- **Media outlets** to address the more subtle but important issues around representation and showing groups interacting together
- **Health partners** to support the aspects of social connectedness connected to wellbeing.

There is an important role for **funders and commissioners** in this space. Funders should not only continue supporting initiatives flexibly and across longer timespans, but also share and advocate for good practices across grantees and the wider ecosystem, including **adopting participatory approaches** in projects. As highlighted in the report, embedding participatory approaches will enable the delegation of decision-making power to communities, which in turn can foster feelings of pride and identity.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to create and champion a **shared definition of social connectedness**. Funders articulating a clear and consistent definition of social connectedness at the beginning of projects would be beneficial to ensure consistent practice across projects in delivery and evaluation, as well as facilitating more shared learnings and dialogue.