

**Stories of Change  
from  
Near Neighbours**

**Connections, conversations  
and confidence**

**A deep impact evaluation**

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>07</b>
<b>Understanding the impact of Near Neighbours</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Impact area 1: Connections</b>	<b>15</b>
B16 Live	19
St George in the East Food Hub	27
Travellers Tree	33
Women Arise	39
The Good Shepherd Centre Lunch Club	45
Edible High Town	51
<b>Impact Area 2: Conversations</b>	<b>57</b>
'Breaking the Barrier' podcast	61
Menopause and Me	67
Newham Muslim Forum	71
The Big Conversation Kirklees	77
<b>Impact area 3: Confidence</b>	<b>81</b>
St Barnabas Church	85
Women 100	91
Catalyst	97
Creating Ground	103
Annex A Evaluation methods	109

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**NEAR  
NEIGHBOURS**  
BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

  
Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing & Communities

We are grateful to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) for their ongoing financial support for Near Neighbours.

# Foreword

**N**ear Neighbours supports communities to come together, talk openly and productively about challenging local issues, and empower people to make a difference in their neighbourhoods.

This publication brings this work to life by telling the stories of the individuals and the organisations who are making a difference in their local places, and the resulting impacts on communities. It looks at the connections which are fostered and strengthened between people of different faiths, cultures, and backgrounds, which build inclusion in diverse areas. It highlights the importance of the powerful conversations which Near Neighbours and the projects we support facilitate; how they break down barriers and lead to better understanding so that communities can work together and be resilient in times of upheaval or change. It also shines a light on the individuals who are empowered to grow in confidence and develop as leaders and role models, building a more trusted and representative society.

Near Neighbours has been operating since 2011 in areas that have historically experienced challenges around social cohesion, extremism, and tensions between different ethnic, faith and cultural groups.

One of the key strengths of the model is the ability to be responsive to emerging issues in communities, such as tensions due to the recent migration of specific groups, forced marriage, domestic violence, and mental health issues in young people. As some of these stories show, the projects and the leaders we support are also well-placed to respond to community need in times of national crisis such as the pandemic.

These stories are also a powerful reflection of some of the strong relationships that Near Neighbours Hub Coordinators have built and sustained over time, holding a strong and deep rooted understanding of the communities they work with and often championing their interests to other local organisations and public leaders. At the same time, new relationships are always being developed and brokered, and it is insightful to see so many examples of emerging leaders and social entrepreneurs who have been empowered to test their ideas and pilot new collaborations.

I look forward to the many new stories of change that will emerge from Near Neighbours work in the future.

**Liz Carnelley, Director of Partnerships, Near Neighbours**

# Introduction

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The Near Neighbours programme aims to improve local communities by fostering connections and empowering individuals and organisations to play an active role in civil society. It supports organisations and activities which bring people from different backgrounds together, to develop mutual understanding and social cohesion in diverse communities and strengthen community life through social action.

Funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the programme operates through a network of regionally-based Hubs and their corresponding Hub Coordinators – community outreach and support workers who are employed by a local community organisation and contracted to run the programme in their area. Over the last 12 years, there have been 11 Near Neighbours Hubs. After funding cuts in 2022 some Hubs are no longer in operation – current active Hubs are in East London, Birmingham, Leicestershire, West Yorkshire, East Lancashire, and Luton.

The Hubs coordinate four principle strands of work:

**Grant funding for community projects:** Small grants which enable local people to improve their community. Funded projects and events focus on bringing people of different faiths and ethnicities together to take social action, support vulnerable groups facing hard-hitting social and economic

difficulties, or improve the wellbeing and social cohesion of isolated or segregated members of the community. Responding to the needs of refugees and migrants, vulnerable women, and providing opportunities for young people are particular priorities.

Since 2011, 2,674 small grants have been disbursed, totalling £8,269,445.

In the most recent funding round between October 2022 to January 2023, 35 grants of up to £4,000 each were distributed to projects in six Near Neighbours Hubs, totalling £105,078. The projects collectively involved 107 partners and mobilised over 518 volunteers.

**‘Real People, Honest Talk’:** Facilitated community-based conversations about local issues and challenges. The programme starts with a series of three small group discussions, inviting people from community organisations, schools, and local services to discuss issues ranging from cultural diversity and integration to other local issues like traffic and crime. These conversations aim to foster understanding and identify actions which individuals and groups can take to respond to their shared priorities for their local area. The neighbourhood conversations are followed by a ‘Big Conversation’ event at the city or regional level, where participants share their experiences and ideas with local community and faith leaders, political representatives, and public authorities such as the police or health services.

Since it started in 2017, ‘Real People Honest Talk’ has helped 3,430 people have difficult but honest conversations about what matters to their communities.

In 2022-2023, 150 community members took part in conversations held in Birmingham and Yorkshire.

**‘Catalyst’:** This four-day leadership course trains young people aged 16-26 to be leaders and influence social change in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society and in their local communities. Hosted by schools and community organisations, the course modules cover Identity, faith and belonging; Leadership; Media and effective communication; and Social action and positive change. It aims to enable young people to talk openly about their identity, beliefs and values, gain valuable life skills, and to inspire community engagement and social action.

Since 2011, 86 courses have taken place, reaching 1,406 young people.

In 2022-2023, 45 young people from 4 schools took part in the Catalyst course.

**Leadership for Effective Change:** a national training programme for grassroots faith and community leaders from different backgrounds, ages, and experiences, to learn from experienced community organisers and campaigners. Through a series of six online sessions, the programme aims to inspire and support people to tackle inequality and injustice through social action, and increase

the diversity and agency of underrepresented and minoritised groups in local public life.

In 2022-2023, 36 individuals from 3 different regions took part in Leadership for Effective Change.

In addition to the delivery of these programmes, Near Neighbours is underpinned by:

**Local community engagement work by the Hub Coordinators:** Hub Coordinators undertake other work to build connections and relationships between local groups and individuals. This includes directly organising and facilitating events, mentoring aspiring leaders, building relationships with and between faith and community networks, and engaging with local leaders and institutions.

Since 2016, Near Neighbours Hubs have facilitated 2,353 partnerships between local organisations and organised 2,198 local events involving 97,817 participants.

In 2022-23, Near Neighbours Hubs have organised 59 local events involving 1,941 participants.

**National oversight, coordination, and learning:** Near Neighbours is overseen by a central team which is part of the Church Urban Fund Group. At a national level, Near Neighbours coordinates resources, training opportunities, and signposts funding and activities which may benefit local Hubs and their communities

# **Understanding the impact of Near Neighbours**

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Common Vision was commissioned by Near Neighbours to conduct a deep impact study of the programme to date, investigating and articulating the impact of Near Neighbours on individuals, organisations, and communities in each of the places it operates. The brief included gathering stories and insights about recent impacts over the last year of funding, as well as information about the longer-term impacts of Near Neighbours. Further detail about our evaluation methodology is in **Annex A**.

A number of strong, recurring themes have emerged from the data review, document analysis, and qualitative conversations. These are by nature, interrelated outcomes that cannot be understood in isolation. In the stories that follow we have segmented impacts and outcomes into three categories:

**1. Connections:** Near Neighbours supports projects and activities which build bridges and encourage mixing and integration in communities. This includes forming and strengthening relationships between people of different faiths and cultures, different generations, and social inclusion of excluded groups such as refugees. It also extends to building alliances between different organisations and interest groups, so that people can make a difference in their community together. **This leads to trust, inclusion, and social cohesion.**

**2. Conversations:** Through its formal programmes, small grants,

and the more ad hoc, relational work of the Hub Coordinators, Near Neighbours holds space for difficult conversations, challenging attitudes and changing perceptions about key issues or communities so that people are better able to understand each other and work together for positive local change. This also includes ‘speaking truth to power’, representing the shared interests of community members to local leaders and institutions. **This leads to greater community resilience in times of turbulence or crisis.**

**3. Confidence:** Near Neighbours invests in developing individual community leaders, particularly those who may not be currently represented in local public life, such as young people and women. Its targeted initiatives aim to build leadership skills and personal confidence through funding, mentoring, and raising awareness of community organising techniques and social entrepreneurship, so that people are empowered to make a difference in their communities. **As a result, communities have more diverse, representative and trusted leaders.**

### Key mechanisms of Near Neighbours

Across the sources we reviewed and the stories we heard in our conversations, it is clear that there are some important components of Near Neighbours that create and augment its impact in local communities:

### Nurturing individual community

**leaders:** The individual Hub Coordinators are responsible for delivering Near Neighbours programmes and funding, but they also have a crucial role in building community relationships and using their local knowledge and connections to support local organisations and individuals in other ways. They take a tailored approach to supporting individual leaders and social entrepreneurs, many of whom may not identify themselves in such formal terms.

“Rabiyah is very hands on. She’s out meeting people, talking to people, getting to know people. This really shows in the networks that she has and the relationship she has with different communities. This really enables a lot of communities who potentially wouldn’t have got involved, to [apply for funding].”  
- Rachel Cox, Celebrating Sanctuary Birmingham

“Our Hub co-ordinator [Marzena] really understands what you do and what your vision is. It plays a huge role in creating opportunities.”  
- Laura Marziale, Creating Ground

### Emphasis on piloting and testing new partnerships and

**collaborations:** A defining feature of Near Neighbours small grants is to help organisations pilot something, work in new ways with partners or local people, or take a new approach to addressing community need. Many of the project leaders we spoke to had limited or no experience of seeking funding before they

applied to Near Neighbours; others were established organisations that wanted to test the feasibility of a new project idea or develop a new partnership. Having a firm legacy plan for the project is not a requirement and therefore these projects may have a higher ‘risk profile’ for conventional funders – although many projects have gone on to become sustainable over the longer-term, having developed a feasible model and their track record through the Near Neighbours grant.

“The Near Neighbours grants encourage people to take those steps and then see what develops.”  
- Viv Froggatt, Hub Coordinator, Leicester Hub

“We provide seed funding, it’s about helping organisations see the potential of an idea and grow their capacity to make something happen.”  
- Marzena Cichon-Balcerowicz, Hub Coordinator, East London Hub

### Building sustained relationships:

The grant funding supports projects which are relatively short-term, running over weeks or months, and the community events and leadership programmes run by Near Neighbours are similarly limited in their duration. However, the relationships which are built through these activities are commonly sustained and deepened by the Hub Coordinators over much longer periods. A number of individuals and organisations have first interacted with Near Neighbours through one programme, and then gone on to participate in others or apply for a grant. It is these sustained

relationships in the community which means that the Hub Coordinators themselves are often called upon to advise local government and public service leaders on the needs of their communities.

“It’s not just about the funding, we’ve built a relationship with Near Neighbours. Kaneez [Hub Coordinator] comes into our centre just to have a cup of tea. It’s about that connection and that stability, and that encouragement to bring our community together.”  
- Humayan Islam, BEAP Community Partnership

“The best thing about this project is that as part of the funding Rabiya is my mentor for the year... she has been helping me apply for other funding and it’s been really good to just say ‘hey, what do you think, can you read this etc.’”  
- Sophia Moffa, The Travellers Tree CIC

**Understanding faith and cultural nuances:** In many of the areas in which Near Neighbours operates, faith and faith identities play a strong role in the community. Faith organisations are therefore a key component of social infrastructure in these places, holding strong connections and trusted relationships with local people. Near Neighbours programmes often draw on these connections and broker new relationships between faith-led and secular community organisations representing different ethnicities and cultures. Its embeddedness in faith communities also enables difficult

conversations which challenge perceptions or cultural norms to happen in safe spaces.

“There’s a very interpersonal dynamic to what we do. We can talk about faith openly, it is a welcome conversation as it can be treated with suspicion elsewhere.”  
- Mahera Ruby, community organiser in East London

“We understand the communities that we work with, we are able to spot people who have the leadership potential, and with our help, can develop projects that work and then can grow into something bigger. We also connect them with other projects so that they can learn from one another. For example, a church might have a building but they find it straining to run activities because it takes a lot of volunteer time. And then there’s a community group who can run activities but may not have a space. So it’s about connecting them together.”  
- Marzena Cichon-Balcerowicz, Hub Coordinator, East London Hub

**Iterative development:** It is clear that over time, Near Neighbours has adapted its activities and emphasis to change with the times and respond to emerging issues in communities, from race riots, to different waves of immigration, to the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and the cost-of-living crisis. Local Hub Coordinators listen and learn about what matters to communities and this feeds into the iterative development of the programme on a national level.

# Impact Area 1

# Connections

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Near Neighbours small grants are explicitly targeted towards projects which bring together individuals and groups from different backgrounds, who may not otherwise have engaged with each other. Through diverse community projects and events, the programme has provided opportunities for people from different faith, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to interact, build relationships and new connections, and develop a sense of shared identity and purpose, so that their neighbourhood is a better place to live.

A significant proportion of the grants support new partnerships between faith-based and community organisations, on projects which pool their connections, skills, and knowledge. “Near Neighbours have enabled us to build relationships with people we would never have worked with, which has allowed us to open our doors to so many different people. So many people have got to know us and understand our faith values, and we have been able to understand theirs as well,” reflects Sanjeev Kumar from Cooking in Harmony in Luton. Over time the programme has expanded from working solely with faith communities, to focus on bringing together other ethnic and cultural groups - for example the Black Health Initiative in Leeds, the Chinese Community Centre in Birmingham, and Luton VIPs: Visually Impaired People.

The projects supported often include social events to facilitate mixing and relationship building, but also involve elements of social action and leadership development. “The work that we were doing in the community garden was already informally about building the community,” says David King, one of the project leads at Stamford Court gardening group in Stamford Hill. “The workshops funded by Near Neighbours have been good to focus on advancing that.”

In many cases, projects funded by Near Neighbours are tackling deeply engrained inequalities and social hardship in their communities. Providing spaces for people to come together, participate in activities, and form connections is often particularly relevant for people with wellbeing or mental health needs, transient groups like refugees and asylum seekers, or others facing language barriers or cultural differences “We’re about building relationships, bringing people into conversation, but the best way of building trust is by bringing people together to solve social issues,” says Marzena, the Hub Coordinator in East London.

Ultimately, by encouraging mixing and integration, and building relationships and alliances in the community, Near Neighbours leads to greater trust and inclusion within a neighbourhood, alongside tackling specific community needs.



# **B16 Live**

**Growing young  
people's confidence  
and pride in place  
through the power  
of music**

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, families amble up to the open doors of the Summerfield Memorial Hall in Edgbaston, Birmingham. They're here for B16 Live: a community concert featuring performances from local young people and other music-lovers from the neighbourhood.

Inside, the 70 seats fill up fast until there's only standing room left at the back. It's an informal setting, with attendees mingling comfortably and small children running in and out of the hall to play in the sunshine. One of the teenagers at the back starts stamping their feet to an imaginary beat. No one notices above the chatter until more young people join in, adding words to the beat. The first performance has unexpectedly started: it's a 'flashmob' of We Will Rock You by Queen.

Without hesitation, the audience enthusiastically joins in with the stamping and clapping - after all, they are here to support their young family members, neighbours and friends.

Ten young people from the neighbourhood, aged between 10 and 17, are performing today, alongside other local musicians of all ages. They are showcasing some of the pieces they have been working on together in a series of workshops which were co-organised by Eleanor, a local musician and music teacher, and Sam, who's been organising neighbourhood projects for the last six years. Eleanor and Sam met through another community music

project which Sam set up. "It's clear that music events are really popular with people locally," says Sam. "But we also wanted to reach out to the young people in our area. Something like half of our postcode is under 25 and there's not much provision for youth." Together, Eleanor and Sam applied for Near Neighbours funding to cover the costs of venue hire and involving other professional musicians to run workshops with the group.

Over five workshops the young people learned about a range of music styles, from different singing techniques to rapping and DJing. One of the local musicians is 27 year-old Didactic MK, a professional rapper who has lived in Edgbaston for the last ten years.

"I really liked her style," says 11 year-old Kate\* about Didactic MK. "It was relaxed, we didn't need to follow what she was doing but could do our own thing. I don't enjoy music lessons at school as we don't get to choose what to do, we just have to sing something my teacher has for an hour."

Another professional who led one of the workshops is local artist DJ Rizmi. "I've run a lot of workshops before, but this was honestly the best one I've done," she says. "Everyone had a go and the others were dancing and supporting them. The kids all love music in different ways and there was the space to learn from each other. I can see their confidence and capacity has really improved [since the workshop I ran] from the way that they are hosting the event today and inspiring other young people."

The young participants agree that taking part has increased their confidence, as well as their connections with one another. "When we first came everyone was sat in a circle, really tense," says Kate. "Now, we dance together."

Phoebe\*, 17, plans to go to a music college. She performs a solo piece she has written herself, as well as a duet with Ellie. "I've loved music all my life but I never thought I'd be able to rap or anything like that... the group has given me the opportunity to try new styles with new people."

For Eleanor, instilling confidence in the young people is not only about giving them the chance to try something new, but also about exposing them to positive role models from their community. "I want to get across the idea that you don't have to be famous to be a musician. It's important for the young people to be exposed to local musicians, people who are doing it because they love it. This is about pride of place - people often think you need to go to Digbeth or Moseley for live music. We wanted to big up B16."

The strong emphasis on neighbourhood is reflected in the support received from others at

the event. Sam's connections in the community means he's got a range of individuals and groups involved - from community food group Incredible Surplus, who has provided 12 different platters of cakes and cookies for the refreshments, to local mum of five Ana\* who performs an opera aria in her native Czech. Being part of Near Neighbours has also helped raise awareness with local families and encouraged people to attend.

Eleanor and Sam hope that the levels of interest and support from the community today will help them run similar projects in the future. "We are hoping that this is not just a one-off. The Near Neighbours funding has given us a chance to be experimental and test something out, but it is hard not to have stability for the kids in terms of what comes next," says Eleanor. "We're trying to challenge the 'Seagull effect' where someone swoops into a deprived area, does something lovely and then nothing is left behind. Both Sam and I live here in B16, so we are invested in this, and we're not going to disappear. We have built the relationships with the families and the young people now, and next time we apply for funding we have a track record to demonstrate."

# Eleanor

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## Singamajig Birmingham

**E**leanor is a classically trained vocalist and music teacher. Her work centres on encouraging children and young people to enjoy music in their own way. She met local community development worker Sam while he was running a Near Neighbours funded project in her neighbourhood, and they decided to team up and pilot something for local young people. The B16 workshops educated young people about different musical styles and traditions, aiming to boost their personal confidence and pride in the neighbourhood's musical talent.





# Didactic MK

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## Birmingham

**S**erena, aka Didactic MK, is a 27 year old rapper who has lived in Edgbaston for the last 10 years. She was asked to lead one of the B16 Live music workshops with a group of local young people aged 10-17 years old.

“Having different forms of expression like art and music is really important for learning. Working with the young people was great, they all got involved and gave it a go. This was the first time I’ve done a proper structured workshop like this, so it’s been good for me too.”



# St George in the East Food Hub

Building cultural  
understanding  
through Community  
Cooking Classes

Just off a busy road in Shadwell, the primary school is leafy and quiet. While the children are in class, a group of local women make their way to the back of the school, where a small outbuilding houses a purpose-built kitchen.

The atmosphere in the kitchen is intimate and friendly. It's the final class in a series of workshops so some of the participants already know and greet each other. Today they are making pancakes, fruit compote, and croissants, and there's a sense of anticipation in the air - everyone is excited to sit down and eat together after they have prepared today's menu. Sharing a cooking station between two or three, the ladies are relaxed, but focused on the task at hand.

The participants are a mix of ages and ethnic backgrounds - some are young mums whose children attend the primary school; some are older women with teenage children or grandchildren. The majority are Muslim women of Bengali origin. Some learned about the workshop through their pre-existing connection with the St George in the East Food Hub, while others found it through Eventbrite. Some were invited by Janice, the school support worker and one of the facilitators for the session.

Some of the women here today don't cook at home at all. Others joined because of their existing love of cooking. When asked why they came along today, all the ladies talk

about the social benefits - learning something while meeting new people.

"I've attended all three workshops and they've been great," says Isra\*. "I already enjoyed cooking but have liked learning something new and meeting the others."

"I didn't cook before at home," says Charlotte\*. "It's been good to learn new skills, meet new people, and get out of the house. I live locally but didn't know anyone in the group before."

Janice wanders around the room, talking to participants and making everyone feel comfortable. She works in the primary school and has been involved in other local community organising initiatives led by the local church, so she knows some of the ladies well.

The light-hearted, social atmosphere is telling of one of the objectives for the workshop: bridging new connections in the community and encouraging cultural understanding through the medium of food. But there's another reason why St George's in The East Food Hub have organised these workshops - Tower Hamlets has the highest level of child poverty in the UK with over 50% children living in households below the poverty line. With food poverty rising, the food hub has previously run a number of emergency food schemes, working in partnership with other organisations such as a local Mosque to reach communities hit hardest by the pandemic and the cost-of-

living crisis in recent years. These workshops are piloting a new way to help local families access affordable, healthy food.

"We wanted to do something to tackle food insecurity in a sustainable way," says Katie, one of the coordinators of the food hub. "We conducted a listening exercise with users of the food bank, as well as key people in the neighbourhood who work with people experiencing food insecurity, to understand what sort of community support is needed beyond emergency food aid. Lots of the local parents told us they don't know how to cook Western food but that's what their kids want to eat. People also told us they struggle with budgeting."

Health and wellbeing is another reason for these sessions, with plant-based recipes and nutrition featuring in a number of the workshops. Co-facilitator Elizabeth is a health and wellbeing coach and brings her expertise of nutrition and healthy

eating to the table. "I think it's great for people to know what they're eating," she says. "We've been trying to do some healthy versions of things which people may already eat and encourage people to make their own adaptations to the recipes."

Another participant, Lisa\*, agrees. "I like to eat healthy," she says. "It's my first time making pancakes, and I've replaced the butter with oil to make it healthier." Attending the workshops has also boosted Lisa's wellbeing in other ways. "It helps me with my mental health and gets me out of the house. It would be really nice to do this more often."

Across the four workshops, 36 women have taken part in total. The pilot has helped the food hub reach out to new people in the local community, test a new way of working, and meet hard-hitting social needs as well as providing a space for cultural understanding and friendship.

# Katie and Elizabeth

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## St George Food Hub East London

**K**atie is the Operations and Strategy Director at St George in the East Church in Shadwell. The church has previously partnered with other local organisations to run food banks in the area, but Katie wanted to establish a project for people experiencing food insecurity that would be more sustainable than emergency food aid. She approached Elizabeth, a wellbeing coach, to organise cooking classes for local parents who want to learn more about cooking healthy, nutritious food for their families. While Katie is responsible for the logistics and operations of the project, Elizabeth focuses on the nutrition element of the workshops.





# Travellers Tree

Supporting  
refugees and  
asylum seekers to  
enjoy culture, art  
and the outdoors

On a Saturday morning, a group of 10 cyclists park up outside a museum in Birmingham. They will stop to visit the heritage site and have lunch together. As well as their shared interest in arts and culture, the group also has another thing in common: they are all refugees or asylum seekers who are living in local temporary accommodation.

The group has been brought together for these weekly cycling sessions and cultural visits by Sophia, the founder of The Travellers Tree CIC. They are a mixed group of different ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, originating from Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, and Iran. The youngest participant is a teenager and the oldest is in their 50s. It's not appropriate for us to speak directly with participants as they are meeting to bond with each other in a safe space, but Sophia tells us about some of the group's experiences.

Many refugees and asylum seekers are isolated and hesitant to venture outside of their immediate surroundings. "When they arrive and are assigned temporary accommodation, they receive no information about the city whatsoever," says Sophia. "One guy had been living in a hotel for two years and had never even visited the nearby park as he didn't feel confident going out. Attending the sessions has empowered him and enabled him to connect with others who had similar experiences." Creating bonds, fostering friendships

and sharing experiences are among the most important aspects of the weekly group cycle rides. "Outside of the hotel, they start to form stronger connections. We created a group chat for the participants and it was great to see people starting to talk to each other who previously lacked the confidence to do so." Many speak little or no English - but they are still able to communicate during the visits, with some participants who speak multiple languages translating among themselves or turning to Google translate if necessary.

Each week Sophia chooses a different cultural destination to visit with the group. The activities are an opportunity to get outdoors, do some exercise, and build new connections and relationships with others who have had similar experiences. "Together we have lots of conversations about the art," says Sophia. "I think talking is very important - hearing their views based on their life experiences and their mental state can be really eye opening. Once they arrive to the UK, nobody ever asks them what they think or about their ideas. They don't have a chance to express anything, and that's what I think is really powerful about the project." They recall one particular moment, when the members of the group saw a painting of the English Channel which prompted the group to discuss their individual journeys.

Sophia set up Travellers Tree CIC as a solo social entrepreneur in 2021. "Previously, I used to teach cycling and also worked on a project run by

Migrant Health. Through this work I realised I wanted to be more directly involved with migrants and asylum seekers in the community," says Sophia. "We can take for granted the freedom we have to move around, explore our surroundings, and see friends. The asylum seeker claim can be a gruelling and stressful process, so we hope that by providing them with a means to stay active, express their creativity, and connect with their surroundings as well as the community, they feel more welcome."

A year after starting the project, Sophia applied for a Near Neighbours to continue the project on a larger scale and hire someone else to assist with organisation. While Sophia's projects usually work with people from specific migrant hotels, these sessions bring together participants

from different community settings, involving individuals who have previously participated in Sophia's bike rides as well as others referred by local community organisations.

Sophia stresses the important role that Rabiya, the local Near Neighbours coordinator, has had on the project and their own personal development. "She has lots of knowledge and connections as she organises Refugee Week in Birmingham. She has been a mentor and helped me to apply for funding."

In the future, Sophia hopes to further expand the project. "I see it as a social enterprise that I want to grow... hopefully I can employ some refugees and engage them in running the sessions in the future."



# Sophia

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## Travellers Tree CIC Birmingham

Sophia is an artist and social entrepreneur. In their practice, Sophia centres their work on exploring the interplay between nature and society while addressing pressing contemporary concerns related to privilege and societal disparities. A former cycling teacher, in 2021 Sophia established Traveller's Tree CIC, which organises bicycle excursions for asylum seekers to local arts and heritage sites in Birmingham.

"I am both Italian and British, and I used to travel extensively for work. I feel privileged that I've always been treated well in any country I've been to. Unfortunately, this isn't the case for asylum seekers. They encounter negative language and have to spend their lives claiming and proving their rights to be here."



# Women Arise

Empowering women to overcome language and cultural barriers and find a sense of community

On a grey morning in Leeds, three classrooms in the Bridge Community Church fill up with women for the weekly English and wellbeing sessions run by Women Arise. Some of the participants talk to each other as they arrive, while others are already sitting, doing some last minute revision before today's test. In the background you can hear the noises of kids playing – there is a creche operating on the premises, where participants' children can be left for the duration of the classes. Judging by the number of prams on the corridor, it must be quite full this morning!

There are three classes running today, range from entry-level to intermediate English. As the lessons begin, the space becomes quiet – everyone tries to focus and do their best when prompted by the teacher. The topics covered in each of the classes vary – while one of the groups is learning letters, another discusses UK's geography while the third one talks about participants CVs

The participants are from various ethnic backgrounds and are aged from their 20s to retirement age. The majority are refugees or migrants of Kurdish and Afghan origin. They are here to learn and practice their English, but the classes aim to do much more than this. Helen, the project coordinator, explains. “The objective is to improve more than language skills. We want to reduce the isolation brought on by language and cultural barriers, and we also want to help with mental wellbeing. I think especially for newcomers,

like the Afghan ladies here... they have to settle into a new culture and a new environment, and to be able to meet people in a similar boat to them reduces that sense of isolation. These sessions are an opportunity for the women to meet others in similar circumstances and feel like they are part of a community.”

Women Arise is a project incubated by a local charity called Leeds Christian Community Trust; Near Neighbours was one of its first funders in 2020. Since then, it has received Near Neighbours small grant to cover fees for ESOL tutors, training for the volunteers, DBS costs and resources and admin costs. “Last year we only had one class running,” Helen says. “Now, we run classes 3 days a week and have over 70 participants attending the sessions.” Most recently, Near Neighbours funding has enabled Women Arise to pilot weekly wellbeing sessions in addition to the English language classes, where women can discuss difficult topics like grief or loss. The project has also been supported by the Near Neighbours Hub Coordinator, Kaneez, to apply for other funding and collaborate on new projects with the local council.

As the women become more confident over time, many of them get involved with the project in other ways, such as helping out with the space. One of the volunteers, Salma, is busy in the kitchen preparing tea, coffee and refreshments while the classes take place. “I've been here for a year in a volunteer capacity,” she says. “Before, I worked as a teacher

assistant, so I am also involved during the classes and help with translating.” Another volunteer has progressed from helping as an interpreter during the classes, to doing a masters course in TESOL (Teaching English as a second or foreign language) studies at Leeds University.

The relationships and support network that is cultivated between participants often results in them getting involved in other projects in the community and making changes in their family life as a result of their experiences. “We can see that the women are changing, they are bolder, they get involved in the project and the conversations we are having are really fantastic,” Helen says.

# Helen

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## Women Arise Leeds

An ESOL tutor by background, Helen is the coordinator of Women Arise, which provides language classes, wellbeing support, and friendship to women from migrant backgrounds in Leeds. Near Neighbours funding has enabled the project to grow and develop.

“Last year we only had one class running. Now, we run classes 3 days a week and have over 70 participants attending the sessions.”





# The Good Shepherd Centre

Responding to emergent needs in the community

The Good Shepherd Centre sits on a hill overlooking the village of Keighley in West Yorkshire. At the back of the stone building, there is a large hall painted sunny yellow, where a row of long tables have been dressed with bright tablecloths and vases of flowers in preparation for the community lunch taking place. Against a background of music by Dean Martin and other easy-listening vocalists, the room is a hive of activity – older people sit at the tables chatting, while young volunteers from the local primary and secondary schools and college students help to serve food and mingle with the attendees.

Douglas\* and Gillian\* are both in their 70s. They sit together at one of the tables eating the simple but hearty menu of chicken, potatoes, and mixed vegetables. Douglas\* has been living and working in the local area for decades – he used to teach at the local school – and they find out about community events like this through the church. They are here to catch up with friends and support the Centre by making newly arrived families welcome.

The mood is cheery, upbeat, and celebratory. For some of the attendees, it is a purely social gathering, for others, the lunch is a source of much-needed support for loneliness and other mental health needs.

James\*, in his 60s, sits with his friend David. He has been coming to the centre for the last three or four months. “I’ve had mental health

problems, suicidal thoughts – I was really down. I didn’t want to get out of the house, especially after COVID and the lockdowns. I met David through [another local community group] and he told me about this. It’s helped me get back on track, get out of the house, and do something.” Since getting involved, the Centre has offered James additional support by inviting him to their wellbeing support group as well as counselling sessions.

The Good Shepherd Centre started as a small community initiative in 2014. It was set up to support increased numbers of Central European migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and local families in the town. It offers a variety of services to all new arrivals that range from ESOL English classes through health, employment, housing, benefits, and immigration advice and advocacy, to practical assistance with clothing and furniture, and pastoral support. The Centre has grown over the years and now supports 200 people a week, working closely with the council, schools and colleges, the police, NHS, social services and other statutory bodies and local organisations. The Centre Manager, Dorota, wants to provide “a welcoming experience of all, regardless of age or faith or background, and an ear to listen.”

The centre has received Near Neighbours funding to test a few different projects over the last six years, including the development of a community garden a few years ago, and the trial of some ‘stay and play’ coffee mornings. After the COVID-19 pandemic, Dorota and her colleagues

noticed an increase in members of the community experiencing loneliness and isolation, particularly amongst older people. With this in mind, they set up the lunch club as an initiative aiming to mix people from different ages, backgrounds and religions in the community. The funding from Near Neighbours has gone towards a food hygiene course for the volunteers as well as direct costs like resources, staffing, and heating such a large space.

Historically, the centre has always been strongly reliant on the support from volunteers, and the lunch club is no different. While the attendees eat and socialise in the hall, volunteers are busy in the adjacent kitchen. Sarah\*, a lady in her 50s, has been volunteering at the lunch clubs for the last 12 weeks. “I just retired, so I wanted to volunteer somewhere,” she says. “I help with the cooking and also with the garden. A lot of people who come along live alone and have no one to talk to. It’s nice to give back, but I also get the social benefits too!”

Aside from the four or five volunteers working in the kitchen, most of the others are young people – creating intergenerational connections is another key aim of the lunch clubs. Ellie\* and Esther\*, both teenagers,

started with the centre to gain some work experience. Now they volunteer regularly across different activities. “We spend quite a lot of time here, we’ve enjoyed getting to know people,” says Esther. “It’s helped us understand people better, the fact that they come from different cultures and different backgrounds.”

Local schools send young people to help with the lunches. It’s 11 year-old Alfie’s\* first time helping out. He talks politely with the older people and they ask about his exams. “I’m happy that I will be able to tell new jokes after this event,” he grins.

After lunch, there is a short speech from one of the centre’s trustees, Sean, who thanks everyone for coming and congratulates the volunteers on their hard work. It’s one of the young volunteer’s birthday today, and the whole room sings a rousing rendition of happy birthday to her. To round off the celebration, some other young people perform a short piece on ukeles and trumpets at the front of the room. One of the older ladies sitting at a table stands up and suggests a final group singalong – they sing ‘Oh what a beautiful morning’ and ‘You are my sunshine’ together as the event draws to a close.



# Dorota Plata

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## Good Shepherd Centre West Yorkshire

Originally from Poland, Dorota set up the Good Shepherd Centre nine years ago as a place for families who had recently immigrated from Eastern Europe to feel safe, seek support and make new friends. One of her first grants was from Near Neighbours. The Centre has grown to provide a range of community services and events for local people from a range of backgrounds, working collaboratively with local agencies including the council, schools, NHS, police and Citizens Advice.



# Edible High Town

Growing pride and purpose in the local neighbourhood

Every Friday, a group of people come together to take care of fruits, vegetables, and flowers in one of the eight small patches of land in the area of High Town, North Luton. These patches are being looked after by the Edible High Town group of volunteer gardeners. Each plot is well-taken care of, with a different selection of fruits, vegetables and herbs. These are harvested seasonally and then distributed to the volunteers and the local community.

Edible High Town has been in operation since 2016. It was initially funded by Near Neighbours, when a small grant enabled a dozen local residents to transform the run-down plot into a blooming garden. Through supporting local residents to nurture their immediate environment, the group's overarching objective is to address loneliness and isolation and give people a sense of purpose in the community. Frances\*, one of the volunteers shares: "I recently lost my job, I was feeling quite low. Seeing the advert for the Edible Garden volunteers, lifted my spirits - literally! I attended and loved it. The organisers are very welcoming and I found it gave me a sense of purpose, something to get up for. Plus, I can visualise how my efforts will benefit others. I have lived in the neighbourhood for 13 years and met more High Town locals in one day than I have over that entire period. I hope to be part of this group even after I start working again."

"The goal of the project is getting people out of the house, reconnecting

people with the environment, giving people an opportunity to make their environment look nice," explains Konni, one of the community gardeners at Edible High Town.

The collective effort of caring for communal spaces also addresses littering and fly-tipping, giving local residents a sense of security and pride in place. Another volunteer, Gill\*, reflects: "The work that Edible High Town has been doing has massively helped my perception of my local environment in High Town. I'm not from the UK. Sometimes, the litter and neglect I see here are so bad that I get really depressed about living here. I saw the Edible High Town gardens pop up all over High Town, on Burr Street, Edward Street, even the spring bulbs on the corner of Cobden Street. They're a ray of hope, and it's lovely to see that people who live here care enough to do things. It makes me feel a lot better about living here."

Since its inception, Edible High Town has established partnerships with other local organisations, including Penrose Roots, a charity that works to support vulnerable adults and Noah, a homeless charity organising gardening courses to help people develop skills and find new jobs. It has also secured funding from a range of other sources as well as two additional grants from Near Neighbours. One grant in 2019 funded a neighbourhood sunflower competition in the area. The most recent grant supported the development of weekend tea and gardening sessions for local

residents whereby local residents were encouraged to gather at the community garden and work together. Those who cannot or choose not to participate in gardening can help with distributing flyers, serving refreshments, or simply dropping by to enjoy each other's company. These meet-ups were not only about gardening, but also provided the opportunities to socialise over the refreshments, meet other locals and create a sense of community. One of the participants shares: "I've only been in Luton a year and don't know many people. I've

been visiting the garden many times before, but never met anyone here. I bring compost from my house to the bins sometimes but was never sure if that's okay. Today I learnt about how to compost properly and what to put in which bin, and I was so excited to meet everyone, from so many different backgrounds."

Edible High Town demonstrates the potential of a small project to grow and develop year-on-year, connecting individuals with nature and to each other and including new participants along the way.



# Sam

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## Companions for Hope Birmingham

When Sam moved to Edgbaston, Birmingham, in 2017, he was interested in connecting with his neighbours. After running some community dinners from home, he applied for Near Neighbours funding to set up monthly Neighbour Nights, which are still running six years later due to continued demand and in-kind support from the community. As a freelancer, Sam is involved in a number of other projects in the community, including a food waste initiative and a Christian community development organisation called Companions for Hope.

“Everything I do draws on the principles of ABCD: Asset Based Community Development, where you start with what’s strong to deal with what’s wrong.”

## Impact Area 2

# Conversations



Near Neighbours actively convenes open and respectful conversations, where individuals can come together to learn about each other's values and traditions, challenge stereotypes, and dispel misconceptions. Especially in communities where there are some historic racial or cultural tensions, this is an important way to maintain social cohesion. The involvement of faith organisations and other trusted community groups ensures that these conversations are happening in a supportive environment. "Near Neighbours are able to bring a mix of groups to take part in these conversations - groups that are very supportive of refugee activities, whether they're refugee groups or not," says Rachel Cox from Celebrating Sanctuary Birmingham, who has worked closely over a number of years with the local Hub Coordinator to organise community events during Refugee Week.

As well as hosting community-level conversations about predefined issues, Near Neighbours also helps to address social divisions and prejudices on a more informal, interpersonal level. As Elizabeth, who was formerly the Hub Coordinator in West London, observes, "Just bringing people together helps build understanding and relationships. It's not necessarily doing something formal - I remember a lady chopping carrots with another lady and they told me that they'd never had such an in-depth conversation with someone from a different faith before. They

discovered that they both care about the same things and want the best for their children. So, it's those kinds of conversations that wouldn't necessarily happen if we didn't bring them together."

Near Neighbours supports both its own Hub Coordinators and other grassroots leaders to represent community needs, 'speak truth to power' and share insights with public institutions and authority figures. "When Near Neighbours launched in 2010, it was a time when the Far Right extremist groups held some of the largest protest demonstrations in the country. There were demonstrations in Luton; the town felt under siege and hundreds of police were involved" recalls David Jonathan, the coordinator of the Luton Hub. "Near Neighbours helped to resource and build the capacity of communities in this volatile time and enabled us to invest into training faith leaders to become community mediators and diffuse tensions."

Whether through conversations about specific social issues or systemic inequalities, conversations which build interpersonal relationships, or conversations that raise difficult issues and concerns with public leaders, Near Neighbours is working to break down barriers and promote greater empathy and solidarity between community members so that communities are more resilient and better able to work together in times of turbulence or crisis.



# **‘Breaking the Barrier’ podcast**

**Empowering young  
women to confront  
cultural narratives  
and norms**

The top floor of Central Foundation Girls' School, located above the bustling traffic on Mile End Road in East London, is decorated with purple and yellow balloons. A group of teenage girls are arranging the furniture, distributing flyers, and practicing their speeches with a mix of excitement and nervousness. They will soon be joined by their peers, teachers, community leaders, and local media representatives to celebrate the launch of their Breaking the Barrier podcast. Today's event is the culmination of a year's hard work by sixth formers Sumayya, Swahiba, Mariam, and Mithila.

The central theme of the podcast, as the name might suggest, is barriers and inequalities which the students have experienced or observed in their daily lives. The range of issues discussed in the first three episodes varies from racism and Islamophobia to sexism. "We define a barrier both on a micro and a macro scale. It is something that constricts you, that limits your opportunities," explains Sumayya. They speak about cultural narratives and touch upon their individual journeys as young Muslim women in the UK. For example, in episode 1, Mithila shares: "For me personally, a barrier that I broke is the cultural stigma surrounding mental health and pursuing a career in psychology. I would say that it was a barrier for me because ever since I was a child, growing up in a traditional Bengali household, I've been exposed to a very stereotypical attitude towards mental health. When I came to the UK and pursued

Psychology A-Level, I learned more about psychology, which made me realise how important our mental health is, as much as our physical health." In the same episode, Mariam speaks about the challenges she faced as a woman of colour trying to get into an internship in tech: "We all know that there is a big stigma about girls going into tech, and we all know that it's a subject stereotypically dominated by males, and something that not many women, especially women of colour, venture into. I think every little step I take toward it is a step forward in breaking that barrier, and I hope this podcast encourages you to do the same."

The four young women took part in the Catalyst course run by Near Neighbours in 2022, along with 16 other students aged between 16 and 18 years old. The Catalyst course aims to create the space for young people to have conversations about different experiences and inequalities they face, as well as opportunities to be changemakers and take social action on issues they care about. After completing the course, the students were motivated to have further conversations about some of these issues. They applied for a Near Neighbours grant to create a podcast that they hope will inspire and empower others to overcome their own personal barriers.

"[Taking part in] Catalyst has given the girls confidence. Confidence to think about issues and find a voice. I have seen them transform," observes Saiqua, assistant headteacher at Central Foundation Girls' School.

Saiqua's role at the school includes raising aspirations and student leadership. "I'm always looking for programmes to build confidence, strengthen student voices, and create global citizens who are equipped to make change happen," she says.

Both the Catalyst programme itself and the subsequent endeavour to create the podcast – which included writing the grant application, the recording and editing process, and orchestrating the launch event – provided the girls not only with practical transferrable skills they can use in the future but also equipped them with a newfound sense of agency.

Swahiba shares, "I would have thought before that this was something I could never take part in. But getting the money and moving forward with the project helped boost our confidence in believing in myself and my team." Mariam adds, "Catalyst has lived up to its name. It has made us all leaders and we have developed the skills a leader needs... I'm not willing to be complacent, and

I'm willing to use my voice and stand up for what I want and what I know is right. Because of Catalyst, I was able to rediscover myself. I always knew it was there, but deep down, I thought it's not what society would accept. Because of Catalyst... I'm not willing to just conform to norms anymore. I'm willing to break those rules."

Alongside celebrating the girls' achievements so far, one of the objectives of the launch event is to raise awareness and encourage other students to take part in the next round of the Catalyst course. After the launch event, Saiqua shares that an increased number of students have expressed interest in participating, and she hopes to integrate this experience further into the Year 12 curriculum. "Watching them stand up in front of an audience and confidently articulate what they're thinking, feeling, where they want to go, what the podcast means to them, how they are breaking those internal barriers, how they're hoping that the conversation will help others break through their boundaries – that is powerful."



# Rabiya

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## Hub Coordinator, Birmingham

**R**abiya has been the Near Neighbours Hub Coordinator in Birmingham since 2016. She has 18 years of experience working in community engagement roles in the arts and culture, education, and migrant sectors and was already well-connected in Birmingham before joining Near Neighbours. Her work as Hub Coordinator involves working with faith and community leaders to build meaningful relationships that lead to long term engagement and partnership work.

“Rabiya is an absolute asset, so well connected in Birmingham... She is positive and her glass is always half full, even when there are difficult conversations. She is respected in the community as a result of having these conversations - you can see it every time she walks in the room. She is able to link an institution like the NHS to grassroots groups and community partners. She’s not afraid to push back and challenge, but in the right way.”  
- Jayne Salter Scott, Head of Public and Community Engagement, Sandwell and Birmingham NHS Trust



# Menopause and Me

## Tackling taboos through supportive community conversations

Around 40 women gather in the parish hall at St Ambrose Barlow Roman Catholic Church in Birmingham. The room is abuzz with anticipation. They are here for a special event about the menopause, something which most women experience but is often seen as a private issue or subject to social stigma.

Bordering the rows of chairs in the middle, a selection of community organisations and local businesses have set up small stalls promoting self-care and personal wellbeing. The event starts with a presentation on what the menopause is and how different people experience it, followed by time for questions and general conversation and mingling amongst attendees.

Some of the participants have never had the opportunity to learn about the menopause or discuss it with others, and it's a huge relief to understand that they're not alone in their experiences. One says, "I can't tell you how much this means to me – I thought I was going mad with the menopause!" Another participant describes their participation in the event as "life-changing".

"It's the first time I've organised something like this," says Hayley, who planned and delivered the event herself. "I thought this would be a brilliant springboard for the women of the parish and the community to come together. Even though the menopause is very relevant to lots of people and not a new topic, it still carries a strong stigma," she explains.

"Some of the participants are retired, and some of them were feeling lonely. I believe the event allowed the women to realise that they are not alone and helped them feel stronger."

Before today, Hayley was involved at St Ambrose Barlow church in a volunteer capacity, overseeing the renovation works on the church as well as running its community café which provides free meals and hot drinks for those in need. The idea to run a community event on the menopause came into being after Hayley participated in a 'Menopause and Me' workshop series organised by Rabiya Latif, Near Neighbour's Hub Coordinator in Birmingham in partnership with Birmingham MIND.

From her work with different community groups, Rabiya had noticed that a lot of women had started to talk more openly about the menopause and their symptoms. She began by organising a series of six workshops for faith and community leaders to start a conversation and talk openly about signs and symptoms of the menopause and how organisational policies could be supportive of these experiences. The popularity of these sessions meant the work then expanded to other community settings, as well as a Near Neighbours national webinar on the topic. "Most of my work happens as a result of talking to people," Rabiya explains. "This is an example of how a conversation leads to something, which then leads to something else. We work with the leaders and we work with their community networks."

While Hayley self-funded the event rather than applying for Near Neighbours funding, she notes that the connection with Near Neighbours was crucial for her when setting up the event in her community. "This event wouldn't have happened without Near Neighbours. I wouldn't have had the confidence to organise anything like this... I haven't gone through the menopause myself, and I wouldn't have known how to bring the women together," she says. She adds that having the support from

Rabiya and Fatema from MIND was fundamental: "Their talks were a big draw. It gave focus to the evening."

After the success of this initial workshop Hayley has hopes to arrange another similar event later in the year. "I've had people asking repeatedly: 'When's the next one?'" she says. Looking ahead, she envisions these events evolving into a self-organised group, where women can meet up regularly and provide mutual support to each other.

THE SPACE  
@E20

WELCOME  
EVERYONE



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# Newham Muslim Forum

Conversations about  
community needs in  
times of crisis

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, people Newham in East London were hit hard, like many other communities at the time. The area was already facing high socio-economic deprivation and social tensions before the pandemic, with high levels of anti-social behaviour and gang violence. The pandemic added significant pressures to the already stretched voluntary and community organisations in the area, and many struggled to keep up with the additional needs in the community.

Newham Muslim Forum was established in 2017 as a coalition of around 50 mosques, most of them volunteer-run. Co-founder and trustee Muhammad explains, “The aim behind creating Newham Muslim Forum was to enable local groups with a Muslim faith background to support each other, share resources and learnings, and work together towards a shared goal of making Newham a safer and better neighbourhood for all its residents.”

In response to the needs of the community during the pandemic, Newham Muslim Forum applied for Near Neighbours funding to establish a neighbourhood support initiative to aid the most vulnerable individuals within the community. The support included providing food, collecting medication, arranging for personal protective equipment (PPE), and various other forms of assistance. While the group initially focused primarily on collaborating with the Muslim community, over time they expanded their efforts

to encompass other members of the community. For instance, they collaborated with the local church, St Stephen’s in Manor Park, and assisted the Anglican St Martin’s Church in Plaistow in delivering food parcels and medication to those unable to leave their homes. “[The Near Neighbours funding] enabled us really to dedicate some time and energy to try and get different groups of people to talk and interact and to get to know each other, enabling different people from different backgrounds to understand each other better, do things together,” remembers Muhammad.

As a result of these conversations, the group designed a training programme which brought together a group of local leaders from local churches, mosques, and from other backgrounds. The initial objective of the project was to enhance connections within the local community and establish new relationships with neighbouring individuals and institutions. “The demographics of the project was really diverse,” says Muhammad. “We had a lot of people from Bangladesh and Somalia as well as of various European backgrounds. We also worked closely with the late Father Marco Lopes at St Martin’s Church Plaistow as well as with Plaistow South Big Local who work with diverse groups.” The project included a listening exercise designed to understand the support required within the area. The outcome of this engagement was an action plan addressing crucial pressing concerns in the neighbourhood, such as digital exclusion, food poverty, and financial literacy.

The group that initially formed over lockdown has continued to convene. “The initial Near Neighbours funding helped us to start the project and lasted three months. Three years later, we are still operating.” The experience and relationships gained through the initial project has allowed the group to establish a relationship with and secure funding from the Local Authority. It now runs a series of

leadership and community wellbeing projects across Newham and brings together voices from the community to engage with a number of statutory and non-statutory bodies such as the council, fire service, local NHS services, and the police.

# Muhammad

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## Newham Muslim Forum East London

**M**uhammad is co-founder and trustee of Newham Muslim Forum, a coalition of mosques and Muslim organisations operating across Newham. As a volunteer-led group, it was initially limited in terms of the extent it could build relationships and coordinate projects with other community organisations and services. Near Neighbours funding helped Muhammad and the other volunteers expand their activities to work with a broader range of residents and faith communities. The group was at the forefront of the local response to COVID-19, supporting both Muslim and non-Muslim people in Newham. It also hosts leadership training and coaching, wellbeing sessions, and community safety initiatives.





# **The Big Conversation Kirklees**

**Speaking truth  
to power about  
community**

A buzz of voices echo across the main hall of Dewsbury Minster. Approximately 100 people sit around tables together. They're a mix of local school students, volunteers, faith leaders, and representatives from public services across West Yorkshire. Some are talking, some are listening intently. They have gathered today to take part in the Big Conversation, the final event that is run as part of Near Neighbours' Real People, Honest Talk programme.

The issues being discussed today range from crime, mental health and suicide, to youth representation in politics and the gender pay gap. The agenda has been set by young people who, at the start of the event, presented their views about concerns and challenges in the community to the room. Isabella from year 10, shared her concerns about safety. "I want to make the bus stop safer, so people can feel safer in the community. I want there to be more education and understanding in the community around issues like gangs and drugs, how we can talk to people and be more open with people and to combat the situations." Another year 10 student, Azifa, is passionate about the gender pay gap. "Today I [am discussing] the issue of the inequalities girls face, and how it is necessary for us to acknowledge and spread awareness about that. I think that's very unjust." Following the presentations, the groups of students, local officials, and community representatives sitting around each table are now in animated discussion, with each focusing on a different issue.

In the last six weeks, the students have participated in a series of smaller conversations that prepared them for today's discussion. It is clear that they have engaged extensively with their identified problems - with many citing data and statistics to illustrate their views, and suggesting policies or community solutions to address them.

Being able to discuss these issues in a safe and inclusive environment was key to building the knowledge and confidence to share their views with local leaders and decision makers. Kaneez, the Near Neighbours Hub Coordinator explains, "The young people have been able to explore these issues in safe spaces in the lead up to today. The process can be challenging, especially when there are differing opinions, but it has helped them discover shared values with each other. That's what Near Neighbours is about: promoting shared understanding and learning."

Hearing about the struggles that are faced by their peers is an important step to understanding their community better and gaining a sense of local solidarity. Another student, Daniel, reflects, "We talked about the hardships and problems that our community is facing here. Hardships to do with mental health problems, with young people facing them violence and crime. I was aware of these problems, but now - thanks to this event - I know much more about it. I learned that you don't know what each person is going through and you should treat people equally."

Isabella adds, "[The issue of safety] has always been on my mind and now with this programme, I can really express my feelings and what I want to happen. Previously, I felt that I kept it to myself... now I feel as though we all understand each other a lot better and we all have different views but we're willing to hear the other person before we misjudge them or disagree with them."

When the table discussions draw to a close, attendees listen to a closing speech from Alison Lowe, the Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime in West Yorkshire. Alison responds directly to concerns raised by Isabel and her fellow students around safety at the bus station, reassuring them that

the funding for Police Community Support Officers, who help supervise the local bus station, will be increased.

The presence of local officials and public leaders at the Big Conversation is a crucial component of Real People, Honest Talk, which aims to strengthen the voices of civil society and provide a springboard for collaborative local action. Participants also have the opportunity to apply for a Near Neighbours grant to bring their ideas to life after the events. The programme is run in different Near Neighbours Hubs each year, with each iteration engaging different community groups, public leaders, and local services.

# Impact Area 3: **Confidence**

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Near Neighbours builds confidence amongst individuals to take an active role in shaping their local environments in a range of different ways. Near Neighbours has an explicit focus on building leadership skills amongst people who are not conventional community leaders, and indeed may not recognise themselves as a leader in this way. “Grassroots leaders often don’t have a title attached so don’t see themselves as a leader, part of the work we do is about embracing people who are inspiring and encouraging others to do the same,” explains Marzena, Hub Coordinator in East London. “This was evident during the pandemic - there were people running food banks, activities for kids, and so on and it came quite naturally to them, but they may not call themselves a community leader.”

Near Neighbours grants have an important part to play in developing confidence, giving grantees the chance to experience leadership in their communities and gain transferable skills in community organising, conflict resolution, and project management. “Having been successful with the Near Neighbours funding boosts your confidence, and energy. It shows you that it’s doable, it’s manageable,” reflects Dorota Plata, whose first Near Neighbours grant nine years ago helped grow the Good Shepherd Centre from a community project into a thriving local charity. “Receiving the Near Neighbours funding has helped me articulate what we do and to initiate conversations about our work,” says Mahera Ruby, a community organiser in East London.

Over the years, Near Neighbours has developed a series of formal training and development initiatives for leaders, including the Catalyst Course for young people, and the national Leaders for Effective Change programme. These programmes can be first touchpoints for individuals who then go on to be involved in Near Neighbours in other ways. They may also serve as opportunities for the community members already involved in a Near Neighbours project to gain more formal leadership or community development skills.

Working in and through faith groups helps to identify people working at the heart of local communities as well as challenge existing power structures. “Faith communities can be gatekeepers and often women within traditional communities don’t have the opportunities to make their voices heard,” explains Liz Carnelley, Director of Partnerships, Near Neighbours. “Faith identities are also an important consideration when it comes to working with women and young people to develop their leadership potential.”

By developing the leadership skills and aspirations of women, young people, and other groups who are unrepresented in mainstream leadership roles in community organisations, faith institutions, and public authorities, Near Neighbours fosters a civil society which is more diverse and representative, and therefore more trusted by communities.



# **St Barnabas Church**

**From a cup of hot  
chocolate to a  
vaccine clinic**

Every Thursday afternoon, a mixed group of people gathers for the ‘Hot Chocolate and Chat’ meetup held in the garden of St Barnabas Church in Walthamstow, East London. The group first met in late 2019 and was based around a simple idea - to mitigate social isolation, and foster friendships over cups of hot chocolate. “When we started the project, we only had 2 or 3 people coming along. Nowadays, we see 50 to 70 people on a weekly basis,” says Averil, one of the church wardens.

The concept for the project emerged after the church hosted an event as part of Near Neighbours ‘Real People, Honest Talk’ programme. Over four sessions that engaged both church members and community participants, it became evident that one of the most pressing issues in the community revolved around social isolation. Averil subsequently applied to Near Neighbours to set up weekly sessions for the elderly and other vulnerable people in the community.

When the COVID-19 lockdown occurred, the group initially stopped meeting, then transitioned outdoors. The informal format of chatting over a cup of hot chocolate resonated well with locals at a difficult time and attracted a wider range of participants from the local area. Averil notes, “We’re a church and our mission is to serve the community. I believe this is the single activity that has had the most effective outreach in the sense that we reached people of different faith and backgrounds that we haven’t reached previously.”

The weekly meetups engaged people including the local Muslim population, young people who had previously shown hesitance towards engaging in church activities, and older community members who found the event instrumental in providing them with a sense of structure and purpose.

Near Neighbours funding was the first grant received by St Barnabas Church. It covered the expenses of hot chocolate and cups used during the events but has led to much more. Averil’s experience of applying for the grant meant she became more confident fundraising and successfully secured additional pots of money such as The Winter Warm Spaces Support Grant and The National Lottery Community Fund’s Health Equality funding. “Ever since we received that first grant, I’ve been able to apply that knowledge to seek other funding sources, resulting in our success in garnering smaller amounts from various places,” she reflects. This also built on her previous experience with the Real People, Honest Talk programme. “Learning how to organise Real People, Honest Talk workshops and facilitate them has significantly boosted my confidence in evolving into a community leader.”

The community relationships she had built through these activities, as well as the personal confidence and community leadership skills, led Averil to start another initiative over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the vaccine rollout began, she became increasingly aware of a

number of people in her community who, because of their undocumented status in the UK, were not registered with a GP and consequently, weren’t able to get vaccinated. “These people were working as nannies, carers and other key workers”, says Averil. “They were coming to us and saying that they can’t protect the vulnerable people they are working with”. Averil attended one of the online workshops organised by Near Neighbours which aimed to build vaccine confidence amongst different faith and community groups. There, she was able to voice the concerns of her community.

A representative of Barts NHS Trust was also present at the Near Neighbours’ workshop and was able to help. They connected Averil with a group that was running a vaccination station for asylum seekers. “I brought along 30 people with me to get the vaccine,” recalls

Averil. “Then I got swamped with calls from more people with the same issue who also wanted to be vaccinated.” Averil realised that the needs of her community were much bigger than she had anticipated. She liaised with the health trust and the council to secure a space in a local library where, once a week, a local GP offered drop-in vaccinations for those without an NHS number or identification documents. “We delivered over 400 vaccines, and that’s all because of the Near Neighbours’ workshop.”

Averil’s story serves as an example of how initial, small-scale engagement with Near Neighbours can catalyse deeper community connections and empower community leaders. Averil’s ‘Hot Chocolate and Chat’ helped empower her with the confidence and skills to step up to lead in a time of crisis.

# Averil

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## St Barnabas Church East London

**A**s churchwarden at St Barnabas Church in Walthamstow, Averil was asked to host a 'Real People, Honest Talk' event in 2019. This led to her idea to set up weekly sessions to address loneliness and isolation amongst elderly and vulnerable people in the community. The skills, confidence, and relationships which Averil developed through this work meant that when COVID-19 struck and the vaccination rollout began, Averil set up another project organising pop-up vaccination clinics for undocumented migrants.

"Learning how to organise Real People, Honest Talk workshops and facilitate them has significantly boosted my confidence in evolving into a community leader."



**Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> March**

**International  
Women's Day – with  
Women100**

**The Octagon,  
Queens' Building**

**Queen  
Mary  
Venues**

 **Queen Mary**  
University of London

# **Women 100**

**Supporting and  
celebrating the  
power of female  
community leaders**

It's International Women's Day, and a diverse group of women assemble at the Octagon at Queen Mary's University. They are of different ages and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some arrive with their young children. Under the beautiful domed ceiling and the walls adorned with leather bound books, it's a hive of activity, with singing, dancing, and an international traditional fashion show. Attendees will later hear speeches from two local MPs and three local councillors. The reason why everyone is here: to celebrate the successes and strengths of local women and the leadership roles they undertake in their communities.

The event today has been organised by Women 100, a community for women in East London to come together to develop themselves as leaders and increase women's participation in the community and local politics. A number of co-hosts are also involved, including Citizens UK, Queen Mary University, East London Mosque, local community organisation Account 3, and Near Neighbours.

Women 100 started in January 2019 with a small grant from Near Neighbours and Citizens UK. "Other community organising training was not meeting the needs of a lot of women, for example training sessions were held during times when women can't join because of family responsibilities," explains Mahera, one of the cofounders. "We tailored the offer to suit their needs and worked around their schedules - evenings, weekends, or after school drop-offs."

Near Neighbours funding was used to support the crèche facilities, something which was invaluable in enabling mothers to attend. Some of the training sessions were held at the Maryam Centre, a community centre for women attached to East London Mosque in Whitechapel. Others were held at St George's Church in Shadwell. "Initially there were some reservations by some of the attendees to participate in a religious space that they weren't familiar with," Mahera reflects. "We were able to break down those assumptions. There were teaching moments - for example when the group came to the Mosque we had to explain what happens during the call to prayer."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Women 100 supported its network to run a range of activities in the community, from looking after vulnerable neighbours, to cooking meals for NHS staff, helping women who were victims of domestic violence, and volunteering at food banks. At a challenging time, it played an important role in maintaining morale and wellbeing in the community. "I could see that women were getting tired and stressed out juggling different responsibilities at home and their voluntary work," recalls Marzena, the local Near Neighbours Hub Coordinator. "Speaking with the women made me realise that they need a space where they can feel supported and re-energised. So our next meeting included time to share tips on self-care and keeping positive in the context of multiple demands."

Zaira\* was recruited by Near Neighbours to take part in Women 100 training in 2019. During the pandemic, Zaira was one of the key leaders of Shadwell Responds Group. She helped to set up a food bank at the mosque as well as a sister project at a local church. Together with her husband she set up a befriending service to make sure elderly and vulnerable people in the community stay connected and looked after. She was also part of the local community listening team, helping to identify key issues that were putting pressure on local families. This included identifying families who needed support with mobile devices and internet and organising support for single mums and women suffering from domestic violence. "Her leadership was outstanding. She is a strong networker and resourceful leader," remembers Marzena. "Zaira has developed a strong local network of other women who work with her. She grew in her role at the mosque where she is now recognised as one of the key leaders. She is also well connected with leaders of other institutions in her neighbourhood. It's been a privilege to see Zaira grow and support her in her development as a leader and a woman active in public life."

Many of the women involved have gone on to other leadership roles in the community, including as local councillors, school governors and activists. For example, three of the women now play an active role in the Tower Hamlets Interfaith Forum. Others have led a subsequent mental health project with the East London Mosque.

Sabia Kamali has become a Councillor in Newham since she took part in Women 100. "What I learnt was power isn't your position but working together collectively, bringing people together to take action around our common concerns and overcome social injustice that we face," she says. "I've also learnt that you can't impose your ideas and your vision on people, but you have to work together in order to bring about change... I was taught the art and the skills of being effective in negotiating."

Since 2019, Women 100 has trained 300 women from across East London - mainly from Tower Hamlets, Newham, Redbridge and Barking and Dagenham. The group still meets at least once a year on International Women's Day. "I would describe Women 100 as bringing life to people's dormant interests and passions," says Mahera. Marzena adds, "It's about celebrating unsung heroes and changing perceptions of who can be community leaders."

# Salma

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## Women Arise Leeds

Originally from Iran, Salma has been volunteering at Women Arise for the past year. Her role includes helping with the logistics of the weekly classes and setting up refreshments for the participants. She also assists with the beginners' class, where many participants don't speak English at all. Salma helps with translation for the Afghan women to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate and learn.





# Catalyst

**Building confidence  
and understanding;  
inspiring social  
action**

It's a cloudy day outside but the classroom at Belle Vue Girls' Academy is colourful and cozy, with maps covering the walls and an array of books on the shelves. The 21 students in the room sit in a circle of chairs. They're from two different schools, but they're familiar with each other, having participated in a range of discussions together over the last four days. The young people are from mixed backgrounds; Bellevue Girls Academy is a girls-only school, and the majority of the girls participating are Muslim, while Immanuel College consists mostly of white British students. They have been brought together as part of the Catalyst course, which aims to provide young people with the skills and confidence to take on leadership roles, develop local social action initiatives, and transform their own communities.

During today's session, students are discussing issues that are important to them. Each student is allocated a time to talk about something they care about. The topics and interests they talk about range from racial discrimination and sexism to animal abuse, the education system, and mental health. Each of the students speaks passionately about the topics they care deeply about, many of them choosing to draw from their personal experiences. For example, Nura\* speaks passionately about the need of educating people on the topic of the hijab. She believes that everyone should have the right to wear whatever they choose and has experienced cases where her hijab has been pulled off. She hopes to educate others and promote

understanding and acceptance of different cultural practices. Another student, Fatima, speaks about local discrimination and a recent hate crime in a facility for disabled people. Bianca talks about the Me Too movement, sharing her personal experience of being catcalled while walking home. The personal nature of their stories demonstrate the trust that has been built up between students during the course.

Some of the students who are participating in the session are already involved in creating social change. Habiba, for example, joined the eco committee at school a couple of weeks ago to work towards achieving a green flag status for the school. Another student shares that they are part of the diversity and culture group, which engages with young people at school to emphasise the importance of diversity in the curriculum. The structure of the programme encourages these young people to reflect on their own identities, values, and see themselves as agents of change in this context. The course helps them explore what makes change happen and how they can be part of it, both individually and as a team. Bianca says, "I enjoyed communicating with other people. It's not every day that we talk about difficult topics that happen in our area or about our personal experiences. It was good to step out of school life and to be able to think about our world and our communities together." Dace from Immanuel College adds, "I have made good genuine friendships here, it is good to have friends from different cultures

because it widens your mindset... I tend to be more shy usually, but had the sense of freedom to talk about what I think without being judged."

Since many of the topics covered today relate to the local area, the programme is also a great opportunity for young people to learn more about their immediate surroundings and the local community. Bianca says, "I feel closer to people that live within my local area. I have shared experiences with some other people which makes us similar." Fatima, adds, "I also feel like I know more about local issues; there's a lot that I didn't know but found out through the Catalyst programme." Chloe shares, "Through the programme, I've learned more about different people. Even though we all live in Bradford together, everyone might be brought up differently."

Liz, facilitator of today's session shares: "For many of the students, this marks the first instance they've

spent a meaningful amount of time getting to know someone dissimilar to them, residing in a distinct part of Bradford with varying cultural or religious heritage... What has been particularly remarkable is that, in a time where cancel culture seems to dominate, and people are frequently silenced for expressing an unpopular opinion, this programme provides a space where participants can share new perspectives and learn from each other. It has been a joy to see individuals say, "I do not know what to think about this topic. Can you tell me what you know?" rather than feeling as if they must always have a strong opinion on every issue. I did not expect this to occur, and it has been enjoyable to see it happen."

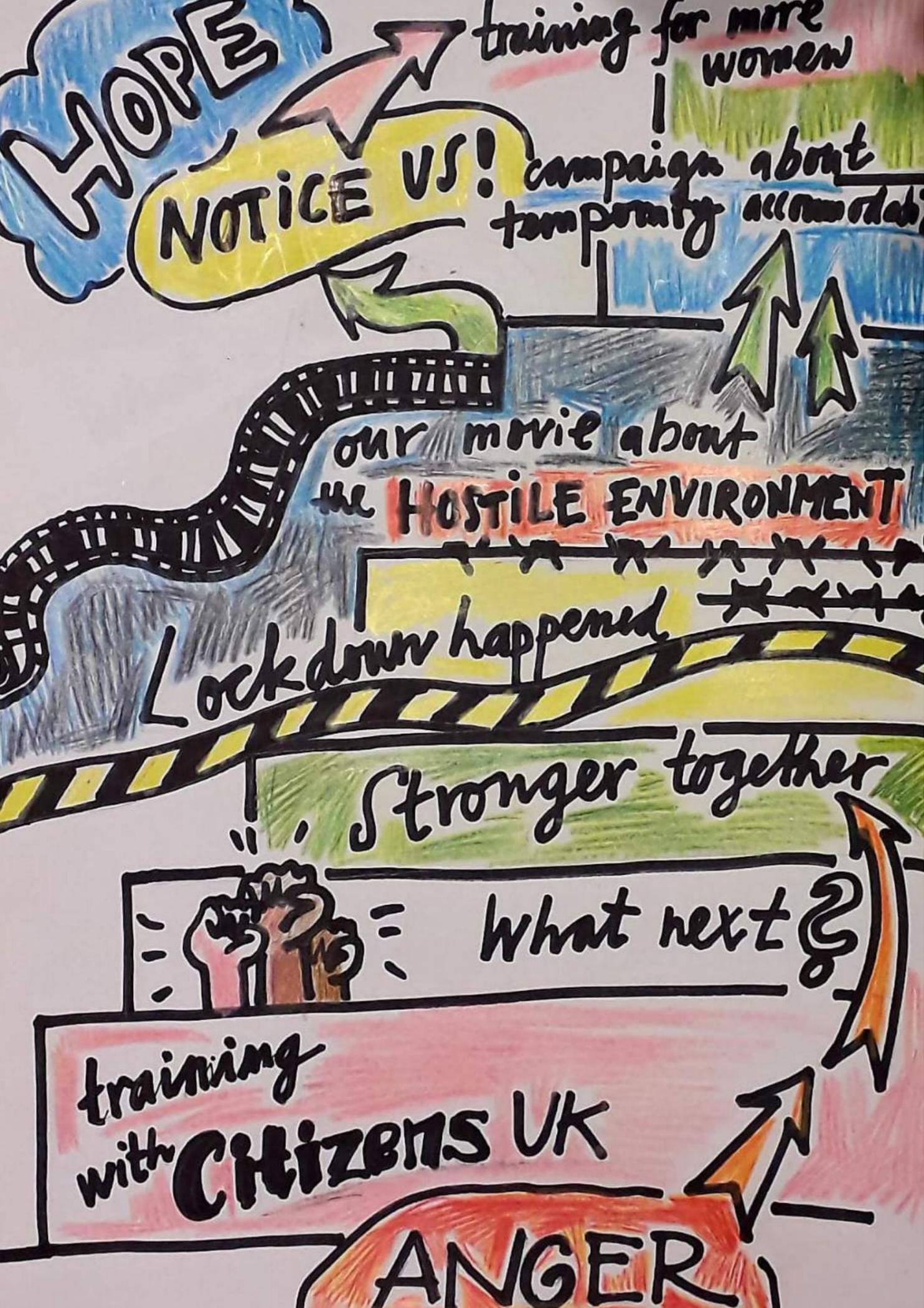
The Catalyst course helps young people strengthen their sense of empowerment and agency. Desiree says, "The programme allowed us to develop leadership qualities that we can apply in our future roles and within our personal networks."

# Sumayya, Swahiba, Marium, and Mithil

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Sumayya, Swahiba, Marium, and Mithila participated in the Catalyst course organized at their school in 2022. The course inspired them to apply for Near Neighbours funding to create the 'Breaking the Barrier' podcast series, which explores themes such as diversity, identity, leadership, mental health, and women's empowerment. A combination of having the opportunity to discuss difficult issues as part of Catalyst, alongside the confidence gained from receiving the funding and implementing the project, has led the students to celebrate their leadership potential and seek to empower their listeners to do the same.





# Creating Ground

Building power and resilience through creative skills

‘Creativity for Wellbeing’, ‘Dance Sessions’, ‘Theatre in Action’ – there are weekly sessions for women from migrant backgrounds offered by Creating Ground, a social enterprise based in Woolwich in South East London. Underpinning these activities is the belief in the educational and transformative power of arts and its ability to educate, inform, build cross-cultural understanding and bring about social change.

Creating Ground has been in operation since 2016, having received initial funding from Near Neighbours in 2017. The grant enabled Laura, the director of Creating Ground, to commence the Creative Skills programme which used creativity and the arts to equip participants with new skills to express themselves creatively. Inclusive to all migrant women, the programme also served as a space for creating new connections and nurturing relationships. “Near Neighbours understood the Creating Ground vision for women to be empowered to share their multiple identities,” says Laura. “The funding was crucial for me to implement this vision and work through how to involve the women in the organisation, working with them not as just recipients of funding but as equals.”

After the programme concluded, the women were keen to keep in touch and they continued the meetings despite the lack of formal sessions. With their newly acquired confidence and skills, many of them were interested in actively

participating within their local community and public life. “We want to feel more visible and not stay in the shadows,” explains Tereza\*, one of the participants. In response to these voices, in 2020 Creating Ground was supported by Near Neighbours local hub coordinator Marzena to embark on a partnership with Citizens UK and develop the ‘Stronger Together’ leadership programme. The programme, spanning 12 weeks, was designed for women to learn about community organising, community action and gain leadership skills. Participants also had a chance to explore issues around identity and belonging and increase their understanding of local power structures and different ways to engage with their community as leaders and volunteers. “This course has shaped myself and other women at Creating Ground to be great leaders in our community via listening, one to one meetings with people, and getting together to campaign for what we feel is at the heart of our group and community,” says Ruth\*, one of the group members. The group of 15 women who participated in the programme were from diverse backgrounds including Nigeria, Czech Republic, China and Algeria. Among them were individuals seeking asylum and economic migrants, representing a rich tapestry of experiences. “The Stronger Together leadership programme gave the group a sense of ownership and achievement... Being connected to Citizens UK gave us the tools to learn to organise with women locally and helped with training,” explains Laura. Hamia\*,

another group member shares, “It was my chance to start making change, not for myself but for others. There is so much injustice in the world. It was an opportunity to be more confident, start speaking with people and in front of people; start saying loudly what I am thinking and sharing my experience, my thoughts with others, not being scared about saying the truth or what is right.”

The group continued to meet after the programme and went on to establish another partnership with Greenwich University who were interested in showcasing their art and personal stories. This collaboration gave rise to two distinct arts projects. One of them, ‘Finding Strength: Our stories of the UK hostile environment’, was a storytelling film which aimed to heighten awareness of the experiences of migrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second project consisted of participant-led workshops tailored for women from migrant backgrounds, which led to an online exhibition showcasing the works of the women involved.

The Stronger Together group remains active, with several of the women who initially participated in the original training which was funded by Near Neighbours still engaging today. Two group members are now directors of the organisation. Having successfully secured funding from other sources, the group also works on campaigning, including the #NoticeUs campaign which aims to influence a change in temporary accommodations for migrants (by, for example, introducing a reasonable eviction notice period).

Creating Ground shows how a small grant from Near Neighbours has catalysed a number of subsequent activities which strengthen wellbeing, leadership capacity, and confidence in the community. “Near Neighbours funding has had a transformative effect, helping us to grow as an organisation. It helped us to move beyond a short-term project to a more established and resilient organisation with women empowered as leaders,” says Laura.



# Kaneez

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## Near Neighbours, West Yorkshire

**K**aneez has been the Near Neighbours Hub Coordinator in West Yorkshire since 2017. Her role has evolved over this time as a result of developing strong and trusted relationships with community groups across the region, to include advocating and influencing authorities on behalf of the groups she works with. This work isn't always easy and she has had to navigate challenges and complexities around power and control.

“When you're influencing people you have a responsibility to be fair, just, and values-led. I am able to challenge certain communities about their values as I look like them, I have walked their path. At other times, I am being a conduit between strategic decision makers and these communities to share their concerns and speak their truths.”

## Annex A

# Evaluation methods

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To conduct this impact study, Common Vision used **outcomes harvesting**, an evaluation method that focuses on capturing and documenting outcomes and changes that have occurred as a consequence of a programme or intervention. Outcomes harvesting centres on identifying and documenting outcomes, by capturing qualitative data and narratives that describe the changes, effects, or impacts observed and experienced. The method involves a flexible and participatory approach to evaluation, engaging with various stakeholders, including participants, beneficiaries, organisers, funders. Their diverse perspectives and insights are sought to identify and validate outcomes retrospectively, rather than working to predefined indicators.

Over the last decade of delivery, Near Neighbours has generated a significant body of qualitative and quantitative data describing its outputs and outcomes. This includes survey results, interview feedback, quotes, case studies and impact data. Detailed quarterly reports have been produced for DLUHC throughout the lifecycle of the funding. We have reviewed data from internal monitoring and evaluation processes which has tracked various metrics:

**Near Neighbours Hubs:** Number of partnerships formed; Number of organisations mentored or supported; Number of events held; Total volunteers mobilised.

**Near Neighbours small grants:** Number of grants and amount

awarded; Grant type; Basic impact data for grants.

**Catalyst/ Leadership for Effective Change:** Number of courses; Attendance figures and demographics of participants; Student evaluation surveys; Facilitator feedback.

**Real People, Honest Talk:** Number of events organised; Attendance figures and demographics of participants; Participant surveys.

We also reviewed qualitative evaluation materials, including site visits and reports from the Hub Coordinators and central Near Neighbours team, and conducted systematic analysis of various independent programme evaluations including:

**Near Neighbours programme evaluation (The Woolf Institute, 2016):** The Woolf Institute evaluated the Near Neighbours programme across five locations in the UK: Prestwich, Luton, Nottingham, Rochdale and Tipton. The first-stage, baseline evaluation in 2015 consisted of semi-structured interviews and workshops with 80 local community activists and faith leaders across the five locations. The second stage of the evaluation, conducted in 2016, used focus groups and interviews with a number of the same participants as in the original baseline study, as well as new grantees, in order to gauge changes in perceptions about community, relations between different ethnic and faith populations, and types of activism.

**An Evaluative Framework for Near Neighbours (Coventry University, 2016):** The Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University developed an evaluative framework for Near Neighbours, and assessed the impact of the Programme against its aims. The majority of fieldwork involved listening, observing and interpreting the work of the Near Neighbours team, including the central administrative team and five local hubs.

**Near Neighbours programme evaluation (BRAP, 2019):** This study established a series of outcome indicators, conducted a survey with 275 recipients of small grants and 176 individuals who had received leadership support from Near Neighbours coordinators or national partners, and conducted interviews and focus groups with 64 people in four local areas (Birmingham, the Black Country, Greater Manchester, and Lancashire).

**‘Restoring Social Confidence’ (Common Vision, 2021):** A research report on the work of Near Neighbours during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report drew on a desk review of over 60 case studies of work led by faith groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, ten local focus groups, and seven semi-structured interviews with community representatives. It introduces the concept of social confidence, described as “the trust we have in ourselves, our community and institutions to look after our individual and collective wellbeing.”

**Evaluation of the Catalyst Programme (inChange, 2022):** A process review of the Catalyst course delivery model and its content, drawing on feedback from 50+ participants who completed the Catalyst programme in early 2022, and an in-depth follow-up focus group with twelve students.

**Unique Value Proposition paper (V. Srinivasan, 2022):** The Unique Value Proposition (UVP) paper aimed to identify Near Neighbours’ unique impact in society and how it has carved its place as an essential convener within communities all over the UK. The paper looked at Near Neighbours relationship with communities, the Local Authority landscape and wider civil society.

We used these secondary sources to outline a ‘map’ of outcomes as articulated by previous monitoring and evaluation exercises. This helped shape a framework for the primary data collection which was undertaken through:

**1-2-1 semi-structured interviews:** We conducted 28 in-depth interviews with individuals involved with Near Neighbours. This included all six of the current Hub Coordinators, four members of staff working in the central team, and 19 individuals or organisational representatives who have received Near Neighbours funding.

**Visits/ observations of Near Neighbours funded projects:** We visited six projects which have received Near Neighbours funding,

usually timing these visits to coincide with community events so that we could speak with participants and wider community members as well as the organisers.

We then analysed these stories and categorised them to identify common

themes illustrating interlinked and interdependent outcomes. We have sought to gather and showcase stories of change that use an appreciative lens to illustrate how people’s lives and relationships have been affected by Near Neighbours.



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CHANGING LIVES AND  
COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

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BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER