FaithAction



A STUDY OF TEN COMMUNITY HUBS IN ENGLAND

FaithAction and Dr David Simmons, 2017

Foreword



Over the ten years that FaithAction has been in existence, we have lived through tumultuous times. From a time of relative plenty and high government spending, we arrived at the economic crunch and austerity. The UK has experienced varying fortunes, but through it all there has been a sense of profound dissatisfaction in society. Both in the times of plenty and the times of little, there seems to be something missing that money cannot pay for. Force of circumstance means that governments, both local and national, are looking for answers beyond simply funding new initiatives.

Increasingly, in the discussions I have been party to with politicians, policy makers and local stakeholders, there is a looking to what 'community' can contribute. In fact, there is a sense that those who are without community are those who are most vulnerable. Formal provision of public service is not enough; people need a connected 'place'. They would seem to thrive best when in community.

If there is to be an active pursuit of community, it is surely the voluntary sector – and especially faith – that should take a lead or be best able to share its intrinsic knowledge. We know a little something about community. Community cannot be a distanced, commodified programme, overseen by distant corporate managers or Whitehall-bound bureaucrats. As we often say in relation to much of the areas of work undertaken by faith groups, 'Faith is often the first in and the last out'; 'Faith reaches the parts nothing else can'; 'Faith is too significant to ignore'.

With the increasing questions we come across – what is community? How do we discover, build, encourage it? – we decided to enter the debate with this modest study.

In commissioning this research, we decided to look at groups that had actively built community, however they chose to define that. We decided to look at faith groups and those groups of no faith, because we believe that community is common to faith – but not exclusive to faith.

We see this study as an opener, which will lead to other research programmes and a gathering of expertise from the bottom up. Then we can collectively seek out the solutions to some big questions: how can positive communities be grown? What are the key elements? How do we all play a part in what is best for the people of the UK?

Daniel Singleton
National Executive Director, FaithAction

Thank you

This report would not have been possible without the individuals who took the time to tell us about their organisations' work. The organisations are:

I. The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham
II. The GateWay, Yeovil
III. Oasis Drop-In, Luton
IV. Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham
V. Sufra NW London, Brent
VI. Upbeat Communities, Derby
VII. Reach Academy, Feltham
VIII. Nishkam Centre, Birmingham
IX. Oasis Hub, Oldham
X. Highfields Centre, Leicester

Any errors or omissions are, of course, our own.

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Written by Dr David Simmons

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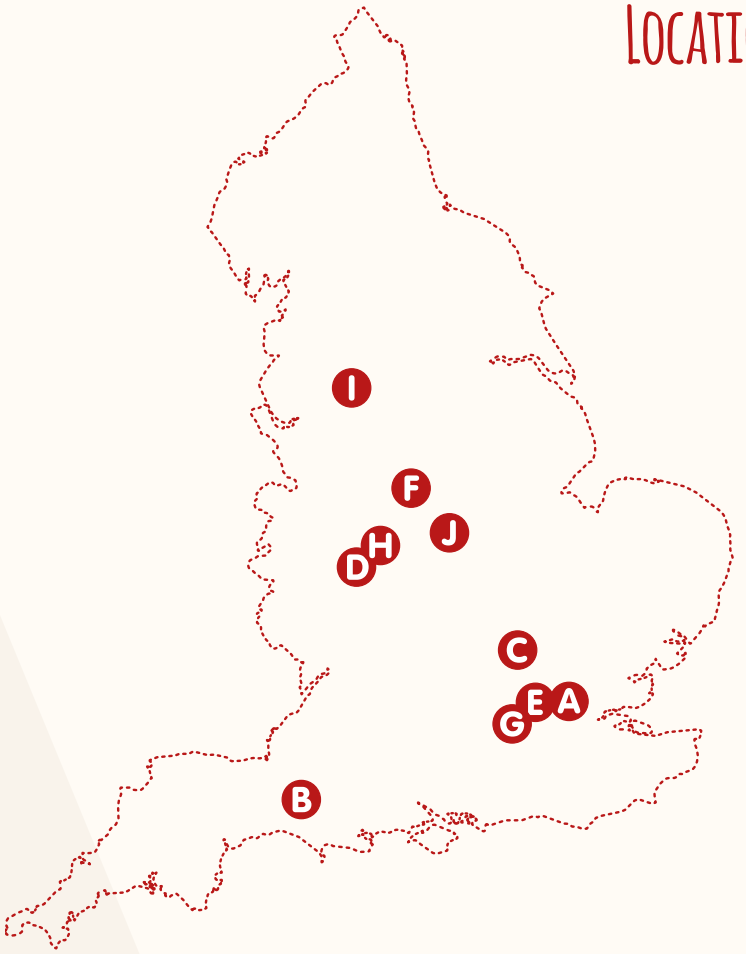
Introduction

The purpose of this research was to highlight some of the exemplary work that is being carried out across the country in creating community. It was also to consider the key 'ingredients' for building and sustaining effective community initiatives. Ten community initiatives were chosen, based on their location relative to areas of known deprivation, as well as their track record of not only delivering excellent services, but connecting people together in a way which enables them to achieve their potential. For want of a better term, we have called these 'hubs', although it should be noted that they do not all centre on a building. The research took place over a four-month period during the summer months of 2017. See the Appendix for further details.

Location of the Community Hubs



- A The Hub@Castle Point
- B The GateWay
- C Oasis Drop-In
- D Karis Neighbour Scheme
- E Sufra NW London
- F Upbeat Communities
- G Reach Academy
- H Nishkam Centre
- I Oasis Academy Hub
- J Highfields Centre

This report provides a brief summary of the work of each initiative, followed by an analysis of themes that emerged as common elements in creating community.

One of these elements is longevity: the very nature of the initiatives is that they are long-lasting. This enables volunteers and staff to spend the hours, days and – in many cases – years with participants that are needed before they see lasting change. The hubs exist within their communities essentially to change the lives of individuals, and so the report also provides examples to illustrate the difference each hub is making in some of those individual lives.

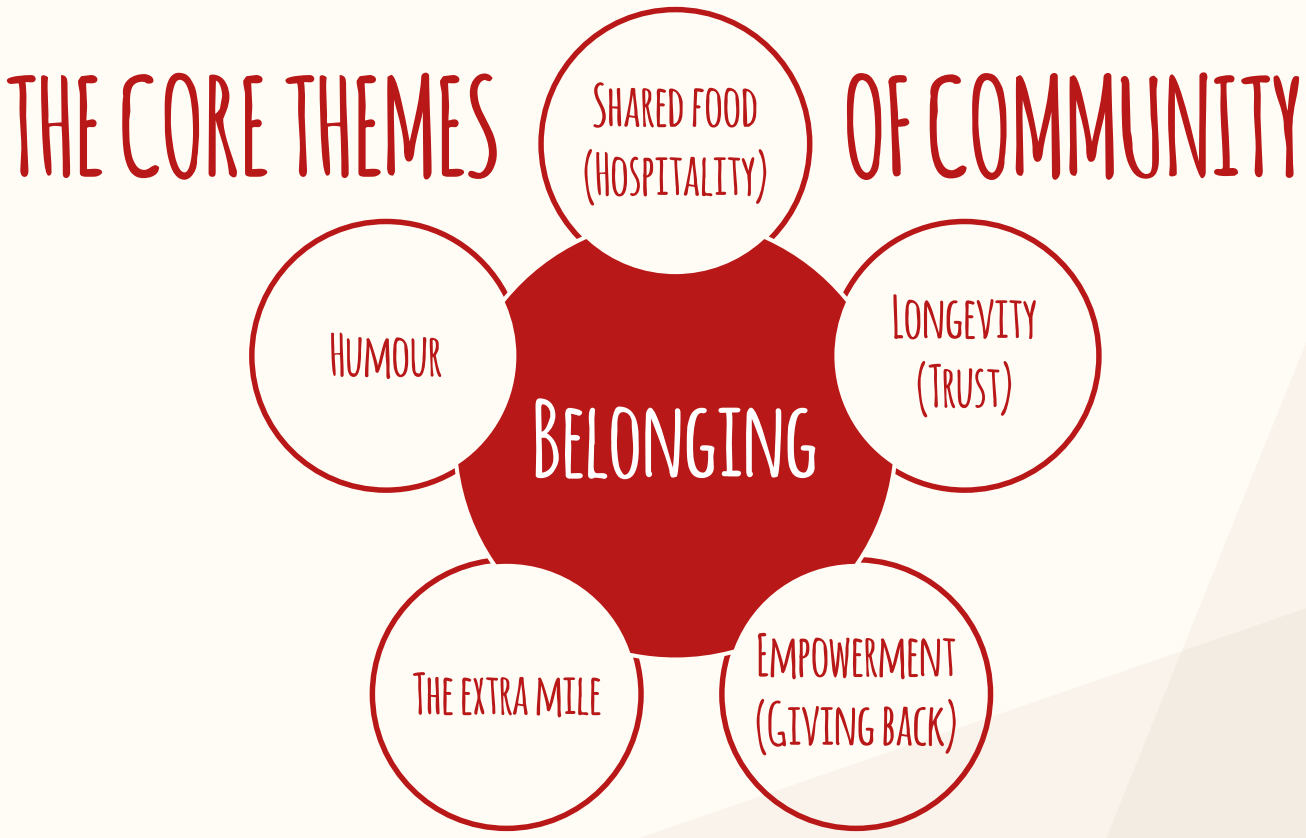
The Core Themes of Community

As the research progressed and interviews with hub staff were analysed, several themes became apparent which occurred in every interview. These are the common elements that help to create community; these were present in each hub in differing quantities. All of these themes were described by the respondents almost unconsciously; they had set out to address a social issue, and these elements were the by-product of the process.

Themes were:

I. Belonging
II. Shared food and expressing hospitality
III. Longevity (which breeds trust)
IV. Creating a team who want to go the extra mile
V. Empowerment (which often means people 'give something back')
VI. The importance of humour

Belonging runs throughout the research as a core process that helps people both to define community and to experience community. It is reflected in the other themes, for example in the meals that people prepare and bring to the hubs, because they feel that they belong. It is reflected in their active participation in the activities, but also when people give something of themselves back to the hub, which they see more as a 'family' than a place where they receive services as passive recipients.



I'd say community was where people find a place of belonging.

The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham


Photograph by Sufra NW London

1. Belonging

This is something that all of the respondent hubs focused on: the ability to create a sense of family and belonging within a deprived community. All of the hubs that participated in this research described the importance of helping participants to feel that they belong. For some, that meant creating an alternative family:

> On the drop-in days we all have lunch together. I think it makes it more 'family', doesn't it?
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

> We call it the 'Sufra Family'
>
> Sufra NW London, Brent

In Castle Point, the emphasis was on incorporating people in every part of life:

> But if community is about friendship … then you don't just meet your friends at a place, you involve them in your lives.
>
> The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham

The word 'safe' occurred a number of times in relation to belonging:

> It's a safe place to be themselves.
>
> The GateWay, Yeovil

Oasis Luton spoke about a safe place, as did Karis in Birmingham, where there was an emphasis on being "comfortable and safe", with participants who feel "confident and safe doing what they're doing".

In some of the hubs, participants preferred a venue with a 'homely' feel, and so the hubs in question went out of their way to replicate that:

> And it feels like a home – we intentionally set it up to feel like a home.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

> There's a real sense of, "This is somewhere we feel at home, we feel … safe and that we belong here".
>
> Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

Home played a vital role in Reach Academy, as staff members visited pupils' homes as part of the enrolment process. This was partly to ensure that the school understood the home environment of the pupils themselves, but also to ensure the whole family were part of the education process, not just the teacher and pupil:

> And so we work more closely with families, I would say, than a typical school. Which looks like: a home visit to every child before they start. To kind of … build a partnership.
>
> Reach Academy, Feltham

Many of the hubs avoided the term 'beneficiary'. Since participants were part of an alternative family, they used words such as 'guest' (Sufra) or concentrated on creating friendship with the people who came[1]. Castle Point spoke specifically about caring for people outside of the limited framework of the hub itself, and at Upbeat Communities, staff described times when the participants would take part in other community activities, such as helping people to move house:

> But if community is about friendship … then you don't just meet your friends at a place, you involve them in your lives.
>
> The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham

> Sharing life with people outside of some formalised programme of activities.
>
> Upbeat Communities, Derby

At GateWay, the importance of keeping groups relatively small was emphasised, so that people can get to know each other: "Belonging is always in the small".

Volunteers played a key role in making participants feel that they belong:

> The volunteers who run that are really good at making people feel welcomed – "Yeah, come through the door, have a seat. You belong here".
>
> Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

> There was someone that came to Community Kitchen, it was their birthday. The young people ran down to Tesco, they bought a cake. And in the Community Kitchen, we had a birthday party. It was completely impromptu. But it meant that that person then felt valued as part of our community.
>
> Sufra NW London, Brent

1 We have decided on 'participant' for the purposes of this report.

The importance of helping people to belong, of course, is that ultimately they feel that they can grow enough in order to give something back to the community around them (see also section on Empowerment):

> …it's about building welcoming communities who are going to enable people to participate.
>
> Upbeat Communities, Derby

> … it's that sense of being able to see something change, being part of a transformation, being part of something and working together … and it's given a sense of pride, it's given a sense of hope, and it's seeing things change.
>
> Oasis Hub, Oldham





II. Shared food (Hospitality)

All of the hubs described the importance of food in their work. In many ways, it seemed to be almost subconscious: using food as part of the life of a community hub came as a natural extension to the hubs' seeking to reach the people around them and to create community.

Part of the reason for sharing food was to foster inclusion and belonging; part of it was a natural extension of hospitality (although as some respondents rightly pointed out, hospitality does not always involve food):

> Because it's the value we place on people and friendship first and then food is just part of that.
>
> Upbeat Communities, Derby

> Hospitality is not necessarily about food. You would never turn a stranger away who needed your help. And I think the moment we stop seeing people as strangers is the moment that we can say, "this is a person that needs help. This is a mother. This is a father. This is a child; this is a grandfather".
>
> Nishkam Centre, Birmingham

At Reach Academy, the teachers and pupils all eat together, and all of the children have school meals:

> "Food is really important to us. So every child has a school lunch. That's very unusual. You have to have school lunch and staff eat with the kids. I think we've concluded that that stuff is really important."
>
> Reach Academy, Feltham

For some, it means participants bringing their own food, and practising hospitality on their own terms; for others, it is the very essence of who they are (for example, *sufra* is an ancient word which means many things in different Middle Eastern languages; all converge on the point of offering hospitality to others):

> The word *sufra* comes from the Persian which means, literally means 'tablecloth', or 'that on which provisions are placed.' And then it has similar connotations in other languages. I think in Egyptian Arabic, it means 'dining room'. In the Indian subcontinent, it usually refers to communal gatherings where people invite someone to their home, and lay down a tablecloth on the floor and then share a meal with them.
>
> Sufra NW London, Brent

While not using the word 'hospitality' per se, Highfields Centre in Leicester hosts an annual festival, in which food is understandably a major component:

> It's really making the space possible for people to come together over food, drinks and activities. You know, that they can participate in, that their children can participate in.

Highfields Centre, Leicester

Shared food around a common table introduced a natural comparator with family life, which so many of the participants lacked, for whatever reason. Family, of course, is core to belonging:

> On the drop-in days we all have lunch together. I think it makes it more 'family', doesn't it? … If you invited guests into your own home, you would all sit together, wouldn't you, and you would all eat together. I think it was like that.

Oasis Drop-In, Luton

There was also a sense of all being committed to a common purpose, together, when food was involved:

> And we're all in this together. We're all eating together we're all – "help yourself. You want a brew? There you go, they're over there. Why don't you make them one as well?" … very much focused around working together, cooking together, growing together.

Oasis Hub, Oldham

Food also enabled participants to cook for others, and to bring in their own food. This also created an opportunity for people from different cultures, and those who typically celebrated their festivals at home, to do so within the safety of their local community hub:

> … they like to bring food. And … they have four big celebrations … things like, Christmas and Easter we hire out a local church hall. Christmas we provide the food, Easter they bring in the food to share together and they are big occasions. And we always bring in food for Eid, though not quite so big because you never know when Eid is, so that's not quite so big … it's a bit complicated. But they love to share, particularly food.

Oasis Drop-In, Luton

> … we do celebrations all the time. And people love bringing their own food … But when we do the Welcome Group and people bring food it's a great atmosphere, and a great sense of everyone contributing, and sharing in each other's cultures and foods.

Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

> … one of the nicest things that – because it wasn't long after the Manchester terror attack this year that we had Eid, and you know, with Eid, some [Muslim] young people come in and some [Muslim] members of staff appear, and they brought, you know, traditional Eid food, and we all celebrated it together.

Oasis Hub, Oldham

In Reach Academy, the school encouraged parents to get involved through bringing food:

> So, we have a 'getting to know you' dinner where every parent brings a dish for each year group … And that's for parents just to come and, kind of have a nice time.

Reach Academy, Feltham

In Castle Point, there was an opportunity for a participant not just to cook for the team, but to cook at home as well. This was a classic example of someone using their culinary skills to give something back to the community in which she had become a core member:

> J had her birthday last week, she invited a load of us to her flat and cooked tagine for us. And there was just something very powerful about us going there.

The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham



III. Longevity (Trust)

Each hub stressed the importance of being committed to their community for the long term, as opposed to 'professional organisations' that might come in to deliver a time-limited project for a few years and then disappear. Longevity underpins the importance of commitment to the participants who attend the services regularly. They need to know that the project will still be there in one year's time, in five years' time, in twenty years' time.

This longevity fosters a greater sense of trust with the participants, who are then able to make themselves vulnerable and know that their friends will continue to be in the hub, available for them, while other things in life may ebb and flow:

> And over time people build relationships, don't you? That's important … So that at the end the support system says, "Right, you're done, now – you're fine", [but] we're still here and we can still carry on walking with them.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

> So the length of time that I've been here, to build that trust …
>
> The GateWay, Yeovil

> So you know I think that is only because we've been here a long while and shown that we're established and … trustworthy.
>
> Upbeat Communities, Derby

> … people feel like they're accessing service – they feel like they are users of a service. And I think it takes a long-term relationship-focused approach to try and break down that barrier.
>
> Oasis Hub, Oldham

The element of trust then comes to the fore, as hubs are seen to be focused primarily on their people, rather than on the 'bottom line':

> You have to have a commitment to a certain area. So one of my criticisms of a lot of the charities that rely on public sector contracts [is] they don't have a loyalty to that area.
>
> Sufra NW London, Brent

> I think we're seen as the most … trusted, long-running recognised organisations in the area.
>
> Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

Some of the participants feel that the hub in question is more trustworthy than their own communities (if they have them):

> For them, it means somebody that is there, somebody they can talk to, and they can trust. And what has come out is that many of them don't trust talking in their own communities, but they can trust here.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

That sense of longevity and dependency is characterised by the hubs' sense of responsibility towards a particular area, where both participants and statutory agencies can identify the hub, because it has often pre-existed them.





IV. The extra mile

All of the hubs who were visited were characterised by committed staff and volunteers, who were willing to serve their community in any and every circumstance. For Sufra, this meant that the paid staff were expected to give even more than the volunteers:

> So I think some of that is also me telling my staff right at the beginning … I say to them, "Yeah, you've got your job description, whatever. But the moment you work any less hard than any volunteer, you have lost credibility. You might as well leave."

Sufra NW London, Brent

For the Nishkam Centre in Birmingham, volunteering comes out of the core Sikh value of *sewa* – the selfless serving of others. The physical outworking of *sewa* can be seen in the Nishkam Centre itself, which was built through thousands of days of service from the local population:

> … something we will talk extensively about when we talk about community, from our perspective, is *sewa*. Volunteering. Selfless service. Nishkam means selfless. So it's not good enough that we – we do something for someone else or something else … it's the way you do it. You can't expect something in return. You should not expect anything in return. Sometimes when some people say you do a good deed with the right hand and the left hand shouldn't know that it's been done. You should forget about it. So one and a half million pounds were for volunteering as a conservative estimate, came to build this building.

Nishkam Centre, Birmingham

For the Reach Academy in Feltham, this 'extra mile' was defined as a 'whatever it takes' attitude from the teachers, who make home visits for every family represented in the school:

> The beauty of starting from scratch, that you can sort of redefine a little bit of the job … and so people do take that kind of pastoral responsibility really seriously and take it on.

Reach Academy, Feltham

For many of the hubs, it meant out-of-hours visits to people's homes, to make sure they were alright:

> If people [are] missed, who normally would be there, we give them a call to check if they're OK, get a volunteer maybe to pop round. I went to see one woman a few months ago, because we hadn't been able to reach her on any of her numerous mobile phone numbers that she had given us. So I went down to her flat, because she had high blood pressure, and I was worried about her.
>
> The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham

> … we never give up on people.
>
> The GateWay, Yeovil

> And there's one lady I spent a lot of time visiting at home, because she wouldn't come out, and that was through the family worker at the local school. And now she does come out, and now she's shopping, but it's taken years.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

The Highfields Centre in Leicester has experienced some considerable financial challenges over the past few years, and yet, as was characteristic of all the community hubs, its staff were prepared to continue to work despite the cutbacks, in many cases taking a cut in their pay:

> … what we managed to do here was introduce what we called the 'EESE measures': EESE – Economic, Effective, Successional and Extendable. And … we didn't rush into it. What we did was effectively reduce our operational cost … and a major cost is staffing. [Some of us] have experienced a 65 percent reduction in pay. Others have equally experienced significant budget … reductions. But what we've managed was to retain the whole of the staff team who were committed to what we were doing. And the governing body has been fully on board with all of this as well. And we've been confident that we will come through.
>
> Highfields Centre, Leicester

Sometimes, when a hub's work is defined according to a strict set of funding criteria, that can limit the extent to which staff go the extra mile, as they are understandably preoccupied with meeting the core criteria. Yet with these hubs, going above and beyond expectation was characteristic of the way in which they conducted their work, and Highfields was an exemplar in this regard.

V. Empowerment

For the hubs that participated in this research, a vital component of their work was to empower people to begin to live their lives again. This transition from a state of passive dependency to taking initiative then has an added repercussion: it motivates participants to begin the process of serving others, to volunteer or to give something back, themselves:

> We may get a lot of people who are being supported by social care, but what they find with us is that place where they can give back as well as receive … Some people come in, and you can see the lights go on, and they say, "This is amazing! Oh – some people are volunteering. Oh – can I volunteer?"
>
> The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham

Part of the motivation behind this is from the hubs themselves, where staff do not want people to feel like a 'project', or someone who is 'done to', but rather seeing the potential in the person from the very beginning:

> Essentially the challenge I posed for the people here was, you know, "Who sets the agenda for this area? Is it those people … or do we set the agenda?" And unanimously, people said, "We set the agenda".
>
> Highfields Centre, Leicester

> We wouldn't want people to think that they were being 'worked with', or 'done to'.
>
> Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

> … we see across all society: social services is done to people. Policing is done to people. Healthcare is done to people. In society, we are very good at doing things to people. And here, what we try and say is, "We do things with you. And we empower you to become the best that you can be".
>
> The GateWay, Yeovil

For many of the newly empowered people, of course, the very way in which they had been helped is the way in which they want to help others:

> So we see families that we've supported through the family project become family mentors supporting other families.
>
> The GateWay, Yeovil

> I can think of one lady who has really come through an awful situation very well, and she is now involved in … advising parents in community centres.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

Ultimately, the goal is for participants to feel as though they have been empowered, inspired, given agency:

> … actually people are choosing to participate in community: in English lessons, in friendship, in social activities. And there is some element of agency in that, that they are choosing it, rather than is just being a service delivered to them, or that they are just the passing recipients.
>
> Upbeat Communities, Derby

In Leicester, the Highfields Centre staff member explained that they felt passionate about empowering not just individuals in the community, but businesses as well:

> It's really about local communities and businesses coming together to support and work with each other to better themselves. Particularly in disadvantaged areas. That's what we want to see happening so, that sense of community has to be owned by all of the players who happen to be in this area.
>
> Highfields Centre, Leicester

For Nishkam, it did not matter where people ended up 'giving back', just as long as they felt empowered to do so at some future point:

> What we've managed to do, with God's grace, is plant the seed. Give them some skill sets. Give them a bit of exposure, a bit of confidence. And all of a sudden, "I can do this!" And then I think it's for them to go into their communities, or where the issues are, where the problems are, and actually try to support people.
>
> Nishkam Centre, Birmingham



VI. Humour

An unexpected theme that emerged very early on in the research was humour and the role it plays in the life of the hubs. Humour is a characteristic of friendship, or family – and an aspect of community is the ability to laugh (or to cry) together. The freedom for people to express emotion, and particularly humour, is a vital transition point, when their lives have often been lived for a long time without that freedom. The question about the role of humour, added to the interviews as the project progressed, always took respondents by surprise, and yet they freely accepted how important a role humour played – not only with the participants, but also in building the teams and inspiring the volunteers themselves.

> [Humour is] massive. I think it's really important. And I think you see that in Creative English[2] – if you've ever sat in on a Creative English session. I mean, there is so much laughter. But I think – yeah, I think with everything that we do … it's huge really. And I think some of the people who come don't have much of a laugh really, their lives are really difficult … But yeah, I think it is huge, the humour thing.
>
> The Hub@Castle Point, Dagenham

> I think laughing is great. It also has an undertone of hope, as well? After all that sadness, there is hope. There is something at the end. You will get through this and if we can be there, we will, but you will get through this.
>
> Oasis Drop-In, Luton

> … I think [humour] is important. It's very much about the ambience and the culture that you create within the organisation.
>
> Sufra NW London, Brent

> We have a value that is called Have Fun. Which is quite unusual. It's certainly unusual for those schools. I think that we do want … we do want the kids to really love coming to school.
>
> Reach Academy, Feltham

> … I think from my own personality that's really important. I like to have a laugh as people. I like, you know I mean, to be a bit cheeky with people every now and then, and I think that is key.
>
> Oasis Hub, Oldham

For Nishkam, humour was an expression of faith:

> … sometimes you can't cry. So you have to go to the other extreme and laugh about things. But this is absolutely the point where faith is critical. Absolutely. The point where faith is critical because, when things don't look

2 Creative English is a programme managed by FaithAction that uses a drama-based method to teach English to those with few or no language skills. *www.creative-english.org.uk*

> great, or things are not going right. And it happens. … But it's about resilience … where do I get my resilience from? … normally you would be crying about things, or upset about things, your sense of humour kicks in. And your sense of humour then sees you through that half hour, that hour, that day. But I think what underpins it is your faith.

Nishkam Centre, Birmingham

For many of the hubs, humour was vital as a means of letting out emotion, and learning to share all of life with participants. Ultimately, it is about sharing their life with them in order that they may in turn share life with others:

> … humour is part of humanity. Laughter is a life-giving thing … It's about sharing life. So we laugh together, we cry together. If we just cry together, it's going to be pretty miserable. Sing together, dance together, mourn together.

The GateWay, Yeovil

> We also share in people's sadness and sorrow when it's necessary.

Oasis Drop-In, Luton

This section is aptly summed up in the words of the staff member at Karis in Birmingham, who recognised the importance of sharing emotion with people as a vital stepping stone to sharing life, building friendship, and ultimately fostering a sense of belonging and trust, in everyone:

> … the two most significant things that we see, in terms of building relationship, are the times of when people are able to laugh with us, and the times when they're able to cry with us. And I think that's a really good signifier that you have built a trust and an openness in the relationship. Because if people are comfortable to laugh with you, if someone feels comfortable to be crying with you, that is evidence of a good relationship, really. So I think humour is important. When I've visited some of the groups we've run, I've seen moments when people laugh together, just … out of discussing stuff, people are able to laugh together. And I think it's a very important thing for bonding – the ability to laugh together is a mark of friendship.

Karis Neighbour Scheme, Birmingham

In terms of the determination for hubs to continue despite constant operational pressures, Highfields Centre have the last word:

> You've got to have a sense of humour. In terms of all of the challenges and trials and tribulations, I mean. And to place it in a kind of a global context of struggles as well, because we're enabled to do things that other communities across the globe would give their eye teeth for. And as somebody said to me, many many years ago; when they came back from Jamaica: "You never fail until you stop trying."

Highfields Centre, Leicester

Reflection on Faith as an Enabling Factor

There can be little argument that, for many of the community hubs featured in this report, faith was a determining factor in their existence and their longevity. Yet for two of them, faith was not a core factor; and for all of the hubs, the emphasis was on delivering services to the whole community: for people of all faiths and none.

The faith origins of the groups are:

Group	Location	Faith basis
The Hub@Castle Point	Dagenham, Essex	Christian
The GateWay	Yeovil, Somerset	Christian
Oasis Drop-In	Luton, Bedfordshire	Christian
Karis Neighbour Scheme	Ladywood, Birmingham	Christian
Sufra NW London	Brent, North London	Muslim
Upbeat Communities	Derby	Christian
Reach Academy	Feltham, West London	Non-Faith
Nishkam Centre	Birmingham	Sikh
Oasis Hub Oldham	Hollinwood, Oldham	Christian
Highfields Centre	Highfields, Leicester	Non-Faith

For many of the projects, faith was not only the determining factor in starting up, but also in their 'stamina'; their ability to persist through all circumstances. This was certainly the case for the longer-term groups:, such as Castle Point, Nishkam, Sufra, Upbeat, Karis, GateWay and Oasis Drop-In. Some of these projects have been in existence for decades, no matter what economic circumstances have prevailed in the wider world. For Sufra, not only the project's core faith (Islam) but also the insistence on celebrating all faiths played a critical part, as staff hosted faith discussions, and insisted that they worked from being "inter-faith rather than explicitly faith-based". For many of these groups, faith also played a core part in their ability to use humour in all circumstances: as the staff member at Nishkam said, when things are difficult, their faith not only sustains them, but enables them to laugh in the face of trouble. Yet it should also be emphasised that many community hubs, such as Highfields and Reach Academy in this research, exist to serve their local communities without a faith basis.



"I'd say community was where people find a place of belonging. I think it's about mutual support, so I think it's really important that it's about giving as well as receiving."

The Hub@Castle Point

Dagenham

Brief history

The Hub@Castle Point has been running since 2012, and is a core project of Community Resources. The Hub aims to be a 'connecting place' where people can come together, helping them to combat isolation and find renewed purpose in their lives. The project's core values are demonstrating love, bringing hope, practising commitment, and creating peace.

Projects

The Hub@Castle Point runs English classes, parent and toddler groups, a community café, personal development programmes, ante-natal groups and, on occasions, a community choir. All of its programmes aim to draw people together to help them achieve a sense of belonging.

Real lives

We were told of a woman who came to learn English found a significant niche in the kitchen; so alongside her English classes, she has been cooking Afghan dishes for the participants and volunteers, and has become extremely popular.

Another woman was very nervous when she arrived, but was able to use her crocheting skills to draw other participants, and now she is able to sit and teach other women to crochet.

The Hub told us of a woman who spent quite a number of months in a state of crisis, but over a period of time, has found that she has a natural gift for encouraging others and bringing out the best in them, making them feel included.

■ www.communityresources.co.uk



Photograph by Community Resources

"Community is where people get to participate, to listen, to serve, to bring who they are. It's a safe place to be themselves."

The GateWay

Brief history

The GateWay is an expression of Yeovil Community Church, in the heart of the Somerset countryside. The GateWay opened in 2000, and hosts many services around a central coffee shop. A major value of the GateWay is to create a place where anyone can be welcomed and included.

Projects

Among the many projects which have been initiated at the GateWay are Yeovil4Family, which aims to respond to the needs of families in the community who require additional support. Yeovil4Work helps people find employment. Other projects include Street Pastors, Christians Against Poverty, the Lord's Larder, and a theatre company.

Real lives

Yeovil4Family spent a lot of time working with a family who were going through a time of significant crisis. One day, the team received a phone call from the mother, who had discovered a bargain at the local supermarket, and bought a vast amount of food for the hub. This was significant because it signalled the first time that mother had been thinking of helping other people, and represented a real breakthrough moment.

The son of another family refused to go to school. So a team member visited him at eight o'clock every day, waited for him to get dressed, and walked him to the school gates. Then they turned around and walked home again. They did this for two weeks, just to get him used to getting up in the morning and going to school. After those two weeks, they went into the school, and visited the teachers, before going home. Then they put together a programme through which he could go in for one morning a week, then one day a week, then for three mornings a week, three days a week, and finally back into full-time education.

■ www.yeovilcommunitychurch.co.uk/serving/the-gateway



Photograph by Oasis Drop-In

"… it means somebody that is there … they can talk to, and they can trust."

Oasis Drop-In

Brief history

The Oasis project in Luton has been running for fifteen years. The aim is to provide a homely refuge, primarily for Pakistani Muslim women, to help them integrate into the community, to learn English, and to find a renewed sense of purpose. There is provision for young children. Occasionally the group hold parties, fun days and other events for the whole family. The premises resemble a residential house, where participants can spend time talking and playing with their children in a 'home from home.'

Projects

The project runs English classes, drop-in support (advice and guidance) and homework clubs, as well as outreach and support in the community.

Real lives

An older Pakistani lady, whose husband had died, was unable to process the ensuing legal documents, because she could not sign her name in English. So the team taught her how to do this, and where to access help, so that she was able to process the paperwork successfully.

A group of young girls arrived from Pakistan, having got married over the holidays. They were all isolated but, through the Oasis hub, got to know one another, and then became part of a community that had developed outside of the hub over a period of years: helping each other with their children, eventually taking each other's children to school, and supporting one another in many other ways.

We were told of a lady who would not leave her home, so the team visited her for a few years, and eventually they were able to help her to leave the home, do her shopping, and lead a normal life.

■ www.oasisdropin.co.uk



Photograph by Karis Neighbour Scheme

"… when we're able to build ways for people to have someone to talk to, to listen to them, that's … crucial in terms of community. There's a sense of belonging."

Karis Neighbour Scheme

Birmingham

Brief history

Karis Neighbour Scheme was initially set up 18 years ago by doctors at the Karis Medical Centre, who wanted to create a hub which enabled local GPs to prescribe social solutions to problems that were exacerbated by isolation and disconnection. Based in the Birmingham boroughs of Ladywood, Edgbaston and Harborne, the group are not located in any one particular place, but see their role as creating friendship through projects that foster inclusion and participation.

Projects

Among many projects, Karis provides a drop-in service, community advice, a community befriending scheme and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Real lives

Karis uses a method of payment called 'Pay As You Feel'. The community cafés run without a fixed price, but the idea is that they communicate the value of the food, so that they encourage participants to contribute either financially or in kind, through washing up or working in the community garden. In the words of their staff members,

"So there's a real sense in which … we're not just handing out stuff, we're still providing stuff that has value – the food has value. And we want you to engage in some way, to say, 'Yeah … I recognise that value, and also the value of what you have to offer.' So they might not have much money, but you can offer your time, and that's a valuable thing. So there's a real sense in there of building people up, because people say, 'Yeah, this is great food, I'm enjoying this, and I can give something of value myself.'"

■ www.karisneighbourscheme.org



"We've tried to move away from being a service provider, to being a place where people can come and find refuge."

Sufra NW London

Brief history

Sufra Food Bank and Kitchen was established four years ago and has been operating for three years in its current location. Its aim is to support disadvantaged families in the local area of Brent, in north-west London. While people may initially go to Sufra for its food bank, the desire is that they will then take advantage of the other opportunities it offers: a chance to increase their personal skills and social capital, and to become part of a community to which they can not only belong, but to which they can also begin to contribute.

Projects

Along with many other projects, Sufra provides a community food bank, advice and guidance, a community café where people can share a meal on a Friday evening, and a community garden where people can learn to grow their own produce.

Real lives

A Syrian refugee who was affected by the benefit cap came to the hub, struggling to find any work because of his limited language skills. The Sufra team discovered that he had been a teacher in Syria, so they helped him to set up a small business providing tuition in Arabic to students. Now he is generating an income, and is no longer affected by the benefit cap.

One of the garden volunteers was an elderly Irish man who had become homeless. In the few weeks since his eviction, Sufra had put him up in a hostel. However, the man's circumstances triggered a psychotic episode. He is now in hospital, but because the man has no family or friends, the team are making sure he is getting the correct treatment, and are visiting him regularly.

40% of the Sufra volunteers are young people under the age of 18. One 16-year-old young man is working with the team to support a Syrian refugee family, because he speaks Arabic and can therefore translate. This gives young people the opportunity to volunteer and make a difference to people's lives that will also affect their own lives significantly in the future.

■ www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk



Photograph by Upbeat Communities

"There are people who care about you – that you're not just a client or a participant, but people care about you outside of their role."

Upbeat Communities

Brief history

Upbeat was established in 2005 as a response to the needs of refugees in Derby. The aim is to build community with those refugees, so that they feel able to contribute to society themselves. Upbeat does this through its projects and its befriending schemes which help the refugees become integrated and established in their community.

Projects

Upbeat Communities created the Welcome Box scheme, which enables volunteers to provide a practical welcome to refugees in their area. The scheme has been replicated in many areas across the UK. Upbeat also provides many other services, including English classes, sports activities, arts, health and wellbeing sessions, parent and toddler groups and community meals.

Real lives

The hub who told us of a Kurdish man, not content simply to receive help, has been organising events in the city of Derby, and then coordinating collections for refugee camps in Kurdistan. He is also collecting and shipping books for Halabja University.

Karina, who runs the project, was moving house recently. Some of the Kurdish project participants heard about it, and on the day she was due to move, a team of them arrived at her house to help her move house in any way they could.

■ www.upbeatcommunities.org



Photograph by Reach Academy

"We are trying to build a community here which has a set of shared values, some shared aspiration."

Reach Academy

Brief history

Reach Academy was opened in 2012, as an all-through school (from reception to sixth form) which provides a full curriculum to 60 students per year. The school ethos is one of full community participation. Central to the enrolment process is a home visit, where teacher, prospective pupil and parent make a commitment to pursue excellence in the education process. As its website says:

"The school's vision is to transform the lives of all of its pupils by giving them the skills, attitudes and academic qualifications to flourish in any career and live happy and healthy lives."

Projects

As well as providing the school, the leaders of the Academy aim to create a community hub next to the school premises, which will host GP services and a coffee shop, as well as maternity care and a space for community organisations to grow and flourish.

Real lives

A pupil was due to come to reception in 2012. He had no language at all, not even his mother's native tongue. There were no toys in the house. The school support staff immediately started to work with the family for one hour a week and bought a set of toys. He had an 18-month old sister. The staff modelled for the mother how to play with the boy and his 18-month-old sister. The mother learned English and, following several courses, got a job. The boy is now in Year 4, and has caught up in some subjects, but his sister, who is now six, is near the top of her class, and is absolutely flourishing.

■ www.reachacademyfeltham.com



Photograph by Nishkam Civic Association

"You would never turn a stranger away who needed your help. And I think the moment we stop seeing people as strangers is the moment that we can say, 'This is a person that needs help. This is a mother. This is a father. This is a child; this is a grandfather.'"

Nishkam Centre

Birmingham

Brief history

The Nishkam Civic Association is a Sikh-inspired organisation based in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods of inner-city Birmingham. The organisation embodies a strong ethos of developing social capital, self-reliance, and capacity building through personal, community and sustainable development. There is a key emphasis on developing a 'big family' of individuals, families and community built on strong values and virtues.

Projects

The Nishkam Civic Association runs the local centre which, among other services, offers advice and guidance, mentoring, learning and development. As well as the centre, there is a heath and wellbeing centre, the Nishkam School Trust which runs five schools, the Nishkam Health Care Trust which offers health advice and pharmacy services, and Marg Sat Santokh, a community cooperative which creates job opportunities for local people.

Real lives

In the early 1980s, there was mass unemployment in the area, and significant numbers of the Nishkam congregation became unemployed. So they decided to start a carpentry cooperative, with a joinery workshop making doors and window-frames, and a builders' merchant. The congregation contributed to the funds, and it soon became a flourishing business which, at its peak, fully supported 80 families, all of whom then had a workplace to go to. The workshop now designs and constructs bespoke high-end kitchens, and the builders' merchant is still working well.

www.ncauk.org



Photograph by Oasis Hub Oldham

"It's a group of people who identify around some commonality, around kind of purpose and aims, and are working together to really try and achieve that."

Oasis Hub

Brief history

The Oasis Hub, which is based in the Hollinwood community of Oldham, is partnered closely with the Oasis Academies in Oldham. Part of the Oasis national strategy is to create a partnership between education and community social cohesion, which is why many Oasis Academies also have a community hub. The Oasis ethos is founded on a philosophy of inclusion and also covers the Nine Oasis habits (honesty, consideration, self-control, humility, joy, hope, compassion, patience, and forgiveness).

Projects

Among other services, the hub runs a youth club, chaplaincy services for the school, a financial inclusion project, and a community farm in partnership with Jamie's Farm in Suffolk.

Real lives

Not long after the Manchester terror attack in 2017, Eid was celebrated. Some of the Muslim pupils and members of staff at the school brought traditional food to the hub and the community were able to celebrate Eid together. This marked a significant moment in community cohesion within the Hollinwood area.

- www.oasisuk.org/oasis-hub-oldham



Photograph by Highfields Centre

"Our vision is captured in the three Es: Enhancing the lives, Empowering communities, Enterprise for one and all. And that doesn't change."

Highfields Centre

Brief history

The Highfields Centre has been operating in Leicester since 1974. Its core values are to create opportunities for local people and local businesses to flourish and to provide opportunities to celebrate diversity and unity in the community.

Projects

The Highfields Centre offers, among many things, advice and guidance, adult education, sports and fitness facilities, services for older people, a youth wing, a Digital Arts Studio and IT suite, and facilities for children under five years old. It also runs an annual Highfields Festival for the local community.

Real lives

As part of the Leicester Ageing Together programme, Highfields Centre has provided an Elders' Club three days a week, collecting the participants in a minibus for a range of activities and lunch. On one particular day, the main hall was booked for a major function, so the deputy head of centre relocated the Elders' Club to the youth wing. And this made a significant difference to the older people: they were able to play pool and table tennis and take part in games – something they would not have done in the previous location. So their sessions now take place in the youth wing on a regular basis and occasionally in the gym as well.

■ www.highfieldscentre.ac.uk


Photograph by Oasis Hub Oldham

Conclusion

The ten hubs represented here are only a handful of the many community hubs which exist through the UK. These hubs do exemplary work in creating community, in some cases with very few resources. Yet all of them display long-term commitment and a desire to see participants progress from a state of isolation and passive dependency to a life where they can contribute to their local communities.

The core themes of community which make these hubs successful can't easily be prescribed, commissioned or enforced. This is what makes the hubs so valuable. It takes a particularly dedicated group, including volunteers, to foster a culture where humour, trust, and going the extra mile help people to belong.

The implication of the research is that when people feel they belong, they move from a place of vulnerability to a place of confidence and strength. Our hypothesis is that these hubs help people to seek and obtain early support – crucial interventions that reduce the escalation of issues to crisis point. This preventative work will have a huge saving for the public purse.

Given that many of these hubs are already in place across the UK, it is important to establish:

I. How much preventative support they undertake

II. What sort of funding and support will make them more effective and sustainable

III. What is needed to create a network of hubs that can benefit from each other



Appendix: Research Methods

Over a period of four months, we visited and interviewed the leaders of ten community hubs. Hubs were purposively selected to represent a spread of faith and non faith-based organisations and of geographical areas. Each was known to the FaithAction or wider LifeLine teams to be doing exemplary work in their local community. The interviews followed a rough topic guide, the questions for which were devised by members of the FaithAction research team, based on a rapid review of existing academic literature about what creates community, community development, employment, participation, advice, friendship, mutual support, cohesion and resilience. Factors such as asset-based community development were also considered.

These interviews (which were on average 45-50 minutes long) were recorded, transcribed and coded through a qualitative research software coding system called Quirkos. From this data, six key themes were selected, which characterise all of the community hubs interviewed. These are the six core elements which we think are vital to creating a vibrant and self-sustaining community.



Topic Guide

I. Tell us about your organisation.

II. How would you define community?

III. How important is your building to your capacity to build community? (Do all/most of your volunteers/staff/beneficiaries live close to your building?)

IV. Are there multiple opportunities for people to engage with your centre?

V. Does the length of time you have been operating in the community have an impact on the sense of community? How?

VI. Tell us about your process for working with volunteers.

VII. Do you have a 'champion' or vision holder, who builds a team that then replicates and expands the vision?

VIII. Is some form of 'hospitality'/ 'loose interaction' / social time a core element of building community? How do you do that?

IX. Are shared tasks / a sense of purpose / 'giving back' to the community core elements in building community?

X. How are people able to 'give back' ? (Do you consciously use an asset-based model of community development?)

XI. What are the challenges you face when engaging with the 'hard-to-reach'? What strategies do you use to address those challenges?

XII. Is a sense of community harder to generate the more projects and processes become formalised?

XIII. Are there any other ways you think you build community that I've missed out?

The question 'What role does humour play?' was added partway through the research when it became clear that it was a recurring theme.

About the Author



Dr David Simmons has written many programme evaluations and training courses, focusing primarily on helping voluntary sector organisations to demonstrate their effectiveness. He completed a PhD in Health and Social Care from the University of Greenwich in 2014.

In 2015, he published his research on police and church partnership working, based on a field study of 3 church-based community projects, analysing their effectiveness in delivering the outcomes of police forces in the South of England. In 2016, he worked again with the police in several coastal, urban and rural towns, conducting further qualitative research to investigate the efficacy of voluntary sector community interventions with regard to meeting police outcomes, which reported in Spring 2017.

He is currently working with Cinnamon Network in evaluating the effectiveness of church-based projects in achieving local health outcomes.

He is also working on a book entitled *How to Measure Your Project*.

About FaithAction and this research

FaithAction is a national network of faith and community-based organisations involved in social action. We empower these organisations by offering support, advice and training – we help the 'doers' do. We also have a key role in facilitating partnerships, sharing good practice between organisations and between sectors, and acting as a connector between government and grassroots organisations. We work to highlight the contribution that faith-based organisations are making to communities up and down the country. We know that the extent and impact of this work, and the reach of faith-based organisations into communities that are often marginalised, mean that faith is too significant to ignore.

FaithAction originated from LifeLine Projects, a UK registered charity established in 2000. Rooted in Barking and Dagenham, it has evolved to be a charity with local significance and national reach. Its primary focus is on equipping and empowering people to 'be' the positive change in their family and community. Since its inception it has delivered employment and skills programmes, alternative education and mentoring support for young people, and family support.

In recent years the LifeLine family has grown, with the creation of Community Resources, a grassroots charity enabling local people to find solutions to local issues. Its projects include a coffee shop and a community hub. This hub blends together some statutory activity, such as a teenage pregnancy midwife service, with a vibrant community, where each has a role to play as a contributor and recipient.

Together, these organisations represent a significant impact on many thousands of lives in the UK as well as a deep understanding of the power of community.

FaithAction commissioned this research to build on our own experiences, and to consider the key ingredients in building and sustaining effective community initiatives that will provide early help to vulnerable and isolated people.

www.faithaction.net

www.lifelineprojects.co.uk

www.communityresources.co.uk

FaithAction

Because faith reaches the parts that nothing else can

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