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Evaluating cross-community work in Holme Wood

Making connections?

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December 2008

This report shares the learning from a local project carried out by the Active Faith Communities Programme which was designed to improve cross-cultural relationships on Holme Wood, an outer-city estate in Bradford.

With policy increasingly concerned with finding ways to promote cohesion and meaningful interaction between different groups, this report considers the possibilities and challenges for practice in a particular setting. Holme Wood has traditionally been populated by people from white British ethnic backgrounds. This is gradually changing through a small and diffuse inflow of newcomers from different cultural backgrounds.

Key findings include:

- the importance of taking into account the local context when designing interventions to improve cross-community relationships;
- the tendency of 'newcomers' to the estate who were from different cultural backgrounds to be isolated;
- the importance of bringing these isolated newcomers together for mutual support, while also developing their opportunities for wider relationships;
- the significance of the challenges inherent in this work, including:
 - the time-consuming nature of the relationship building work which is necessary to do this work effectively;
 - potential tensions between work which aims to develop opportunities for mutual support between newcomers and work which aims to connect these newcomers with the more established residents and organisations.

Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	5
1 The local context	6
2 Project aims, activities and process	7
3 Basis of evaluation	9
4 Key issues arising from evaluation	10
5 Conclusion	15
6 Implications and recommendations	16
Notes	18
References	18
About the author	20

This report evaluates the experience of one project designed to improve relationships between people from different cultural groups living on Holme Wood, an outer-city estate in Bradford.

In the context of broader policy and practice concerns about how best to promote community cohesion (Cantle, 2005), this project sought to apply principles from previous residential Inter-cultural Communication and Leadership Schools to a project working directly with people on the estate where they lived.

A project worker was employed who recruited a small group of people with diverse cultural backgrounds and experience of newly arriving onto the estate. This group helped those involved to begin to overcome their isolation by building relationships through shared trips and group work, enabling them to provide each other with mutual support. They also began to plan ways of helping others in similar positions to integrate more easily on arrival to the estate.

An evaluation of this work was conducted based on participant observation and informal interviews at key stages throughout the project. The evaluation highlighted how this approach had several strengths and weaknesses, especially when taken in the context of the particular composition of this estate. This composition and the dynamics of relationships in the local community had a huge influence on how the project developed. There were a relatively small number of people from diverse cultural backgrounds present on the estate, and those whom the project contacted reported experiencing a lack of support in settling when they first arrived, as well as racist incidents. This meant that those from non-White-British backgrounds tended to be particularly isolated, and often struggled initially to access support services and find opportunities to build relationships with others. It also made it very difficult and time-consuming for the project's development worker to make contact with these isolated individuals.

Despite these difficulties, the project was able to build relationships between a small group of previously isolated people from diverse cultural backgrounds who had experience of newly arriving onto the estate. The trips taken to sites of British heritage together were particularly effective as a means of helping this group to bond and reflect on their experiences of living on the estate. The approach taken by the project tended to focus primarily on creating opportunities for building relationships of mutual support between the participants. This was considered valuable and important by those involved given their previous isolation. However, the focus on building these networks with people in similar positions meant that the project was less successful in finding ways to build connections between this newly formed group and more long-standing local residents. Such connections were felt by the participants to be a crucial next step in enabling them to integrate more fully with the wider community.

These findings led to the following conclusions and recommendations for others who wish to promote improved cohesion in similar circumstances in other areas:

1. When undertaking work to improve cross-community interactions, it is important to take into account the way that the local context affects these interactions, especially the relationship between individual, community, service provision and place.
2. It is important to provide increased opportunities and networks for social support between people who have newly arrived in a particular place and may be isolated within it.
3. This support needs to focus not just on mutual self-help (although this is potentially a good starting point) but also on building networks between established

residents and relative newcomers across social divisions and boundaries.

4. This work is complex and time-consuming, requiring skilled community workers building relationships to engage with diverse individuals and groups and build sufficient trust to enable them to be brought together.
5. Despite these challenges, work of this nature can potentially offer an important contribution to building community relationships across diversity and supporting those who are isolated as a result of newly arriving in an area, especially if it can be supported over the long term.

Introduction

Communities across the UK are increasingly diverse, yet many groups of people still feel directly or indirectly excluded from the rest of the community ... Community diversity is ... about ... nurturing a sense of community between all the various groups living in an area. (DTA, 2006, p. 1)

This report summarises the findings from an independent evaluation into the Holme Wood Development Project, which was carried out by the Active Faith Communities Programme¹ (AFC) with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This project was designed to:

- (i) explore the community dynamics between different cultural groups on one particular estate, Holme Wood, in Bradford; *and*
- (ii) test an approach to improving interactions between these groups, through developing a pilot project that drew on AFC's previous expertise in running related programmes.

This report focuses on the second of these aims, and shares the evaluation findings concerning the lessons that can be learnt from the approach adopted by AFC in this project.

1 The local context

The context of the Holme Wood estate is described more fully in an additional report produced by the project worker (Illingworth, 2008). This report details the project's findings concerning the context of interactions between different cultural groups on the estate, together with associated evidence.

In summary, these findings highlight how Holme Wood is an outer-city housing estate with a population that has traditionally been predominantly of White British ethnicity. This homogeneous composition has been challenged by small-scale influxes of newcomers from different cultural backgrounds to the estate, but these changes have been gradual and diffuse. However, the wider city context that historically included ethnic tensions, especially between whites and Asians, has also contributed to these dynamics. In particular, on Holme Wood, a number of new residents from different cultural backgrounds reported experiencing racist incidents over the course of the project, as well as a lack of support in the process of settling onto the estate.

For a much more nuanced account of these dynamics, supported by associated evidence, please refer to this separate report. However, it is important to highlight this context at the outset of the evaluation report, as it turned out to have a profound impact on the delivery and evaluation of the project.

2 Project aims, activities and process

The original aims of the project were:

- to increase understanding between people from different cultural groups living on the same estate;
- to increase opportunities for people from different cultural groups to jointly identify and work together on local action projects;
- to decrease hostility and antagonism between people from different cultural groups on the estate;
- to examine the potential for using, in new contexts, the knowledge and skills previously acquired in running a residential Intercultural Communication and Leadership School¹ seminar programme with 18–30-year-old emerging community leaders from across the region;
- to provide a basis to connect people living in Holme Wood with people from Muslim and other communities in Bradford.²

Active Faith Communities employed a development worker for 10½ hours per week to work with residents and organisations on the estate to achieve these aims. This development worker was tasked with investigating the dynamics of relationships between different groups on the estate. The development worker's job description indicated that he was to use this information to 'develop and run a pilot programme to strengthen relationships and promote positive inter-community engagement'.

The development work that was actually undertaken to fulfil these aims focused on two main strands:

- 1 Initial work with service providers, including statutory, voluntary and faith bodies, to gather preliminary information to inform the project and access residents from different cultural backgrounds who were living on the estate;
- 2 Ongoing work with a small group of nine residents, including:
 - initial individual meetings with these residents and their families to get to know them, find out their perspectives and encourage them to join in and shape the programme of activities;
 - three trips designed to enable these residents to get to know each other and overcome any barriers to engagement between them. These trips were attended by two, four and four residents respectively, with both of the latter two trips also being attended by two children of the participants in addition to these figures. These were followed by an away day in January 2008, attended by three residents, and a short trip to an allotment site acquired for the use of the group as a result of the project, attended by two residents;
 - small group meetings designed to support these residents in developing an informal self-help support network between themselves, and ultimately the capacity of these residents to support others in similar situations as they arrived in the area. There were ten meetings between September and February, with an average attendance of four residents per meeting. The project worker also undertook five home visits during this period to update residents who had not been able to make particular meetings;

- a final event organised in a community venue during March 2008, attended by five residents (including one new resident not previously involved), one child, and two professionals from local services.

The residents who became involved in the ongoing activities were primarily those who had experienced problems with settling onto the estate. As a result of their experiences, these residents were motivated to address problematic issues both for themselves and for future newcomers to the estate. These residents mainly consisted of settled immigrants who had lived on the estate for several years, including refugees, mostly from various white and black African backgrounds, also including one French woman with mixed-race children.

3 Basis of evaluation

The evaluation of this work was based on:

- an initial set of informal interviews with anticipated key stakeholders in the project;
- participant observation of the project in progress at multiple stages as it developed;
- informal individual and group interviews with participants, staff and other stakeholders during the project, particularly towards the end of the project. These were frequently incorporated alongside the participant observation work described above;
- analysis of the findings from the above activities in light of available literature on good practice in achieving the project aims.

A full anonymised list of interviews and observations undertaken is available from the author on request.

4 Key issues arising from evaluation

The evaluation research highlighted several key issues that arose out of this combination of context, project approach and work undertaken. These issues are potentially of wider interest in terms of sharing the learning from this project with those wishing to undertake work with similar aims in their own setting.

The influence of community composition and service provider distribution on project development

Initial attempts to engage residents were hampered by the composition of the neighbourhood in several ways.

First, in an area where the majority of the population (91 per cent) class their ethnicity as 'White British' (Handley, 2007, p. 12), the number of residents from other ethnic backgrounds was limited. As a result, many residents did not perceive diversity as an important issue within their neighbourhood. Indeed, recent research on the estate found that 64 per cent described Holme Wood as a neighbourhood where all residents mixed well together with few problems, compared to 38 per cent for Bradford District as a whole; only 5 per cent of Holme Wood residents felt different groups were antagonistic towards each other (Handley, 2007, p. 8). This view was reinforced by a local community worker in an initial interview for the evaluation:

Personally what I've experienced living here for 20 years is that there is true ignorance of diversity, and when they are racist, it's just because they just don't know any better.

Despite this, the minority of residents who were from different ethnic backgrounds, especially those who had moved onto the estate recently, reported facing significant issues. For these residents, these issues centred on concerns about harassment

from a minority of other residents and a perceived lack of support available from services for their particular needs on the estate. Specialised support services and groups were located elsewhere in the city in areas of more obvious ethnic diversity, leaving these residents especially isolated. Even when more active new residents had tried to explore means of contacting others from different backgrounds in similar situations, they had found this difficult. This was because there was no obvious 'hub' to go to for support, and the situation was exacerbated by mainstream services stating that they were unable to give out details of other similarly isolated residents. For example, one of the more active residents who became involved in the support group described how she had previously gone to her GP's surgery and asked them whether they could let me know about other new residents, but had been told that they couldn't give her those details because of data protection laws.

In such a context, work to support and connect isolated incoming residents from different ethnic backgrounds proved to be particularly valuable for the residents involved. In order to enable this to happen, the project worker had to spend substantial time trying to find ways to make initial contact with these residents, seeking to find them through generic routes such as local voluntary projects, crèches, churches and statutory agencies (e.g. the library).

Such work was time-consuming, especially when combined with the limited returns that it achieved because of the low numbers of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds present on the estate to start with. Those residents contacted were themselves typically isolated, meaning that making contact with one resident in this situation did not necessarily lead to contact with more people from similar backgrounds. It took time for the project to recognise the significance of isolation to potential participants and its possible effects on the project;

indeed, this was a major point of learning for the project.

The project worker primarily focused on making personal contact with these residents, which worked effectively as a way of generating involvement for many of those contacted. However, because of the time-intensive nature of such work, limited direct publicity was distributed more widely around the estate about the programme of events. Where such publicity was produced, there was a reliance on other agencies to distribute this material for the project, rather than the project making the publicity material directly available to the public. This had the effect of largely restricting the distribution of this publicity material to those who might already be involved or connected with agencies (in other words, not necessarily the most isolated people in the first place). An example of this was the final event, which was publicised mainly through the project worker attending community activities such as a drop-in session during the week beforehand to tell people personally about the event, but not through any printed publicity or even large clear signs outside the venue on the day.

The importance of support and opportunities to meet others in similar circumstances

For those newer residents from different cultural backgrounds that did get involved, the project provided excellent opportunities to bring them together and help them connect with others in similar circumstances.

The trips organised by the project worker were a particularly effective means of bringing the small group of participants together and helping them gel as a group. The choice of places to visit, including those related to British heritage, stimulated various useful debates and reflections on their experiences since coming to Britain. The opportunity to leave the estate for a short while also helped these residents to take a break from an environment that had often been stressful for them. Taking such trips collectively helped these residents motivate each other to try new activities, as well as providing opportunities for participants to socialise and make connections with others. As one participant said:

Even if nothing else comes from this, we'll have gained some friends.

The project worker was highly praised by participants for his role in this process; for example, one of the main participants recognised that:

[The project worker] has been marvellous at organising trips and things.

These activities helped to form a supportive group that decided to collectively share their contact details and offer each other support in their everyday lives, especially when dealing with a particular problem. For these residents, they emphasised the importance of informal support networks to help broker access to different services for newer residents. In particular, they were keen to share their stories with each other to help share details of appropriate support services that might be able to help in particular situations. In addition, these participants were keen to generate a means of providing increased support to other new residents. This support was seen as being needed to help new residents overcome the obstacles that they had faced and find their way through what they saw as a confusing maze of agencies.

Tensions between developing support networks and developing cross-community interactions?

This creation of a network of mutual support and relationships between isolated newer residents from different cultural backgrounds who had moved onto the estate was in itself a positive thing. However, by initially focusing on developing relationships and self-help activities between these residents, the emphasis on developing cross-community interactions with the longer-term residents was reduced. The project worker intended at an early stage to develop three such groups (one containing people from African backgrounds, one from East European backgrounds, and one of longer-term established Holme Wood residents), before bringing them together. However, in the end, only one group was successfully established as detailed above. The participants in this group frequently expressed

frustration with this limited involvement from others, recognising their own limited capacity:

It's the same people who are here all the time. (Resident participant, from observation of group meeting, 9 January 2008)

This group had begun to get involved in a number of ideas and projects which they hoped would help address their concerns and build further connections with other residents on the estate. These included beginning to gather together information that they wanted to share with new residents as they arrived onto the estate and securing the use of an allotment to work on together. This desire of participants to make wider connections grew, especially towards the end of the project:

The next step is to integrate. (Resident participant, at final event)

I'd like to meet more locals – fit in more. Even if we start going to the [Community Council] meetings, we can start filtering in. That's the next step ... Instead of being reclusive, we need someone to whom we can say 'Help!' (Resident participant, at final event)

In other words, to use the language of social capital,¹ the project had been good at developing bonding links between newer residents from diverse backgrounds who were in similar situations, despite their other differences, but had been less successful at creating bridging links between these residents and others, especially the majority White British residents. This limitation was exacerbated by meetings of the support group sometimes being arranged at times which clashed with the broader Community Council meetings; these timings were only rearranged eventually at the end of the project at the request of the participants.

In addition, in an area where there were limited numbers of people from other ethnic backgrounds, these dynamics left the project struggling to acquire a critical mass of people for the trips and activities planned by those who had begun to get involved. This came to a head in terms of a weekend-long residential event, which was planned during the final

months of the project but was reduced down to the away day that only three participants ultimately attended. A further example was observed at the final event, in the initial interaction between an established participant in the project and the only resident that had not been previously involved who had turned up at this event. This interaction started with the established group member asking the new participant straight away whether or not they wanted to be involved in the group's allotment. This approach was observed to be off-putting to the new participant, who had not yet had time to get to know the other participants. This situation is illustrative of the dynamics observed overall, in which the focus on a set of activities decided at an early stage by the first participants served to gel this initial group together. However, at the same time, by focusing on these activities, the project's potential to build wider relationships was often limited, to the extent that the focus on developing cross-community interactions was in danger of being lost.

The need to involve more people, including longer-term residents and local grass-roots organisations, from the outset

Clearly, the limited numbers of people and other agencies closely involved in the project limited the project's long-term effectiveness, especially in terms of having a wider impact beyond the direct participants. In terms of residents, in order to develop the cross-community relationship-building element of the work further, there needed to be an engagement with residents from the majority ethnic group as well as those who were in a minority. Ideally, such projects might also consider engaging more widely with those from minority ethnic groups in the surrounding area too, taking account of the inter-estate as well as intra-estate dynamics.

In terms of agencies, the worker had established working contacts with many of the local organisations at the outset, and had begun introducing some service providers to the group (e.g. police). However, much more could have been done to generate ownership from these agencies and connect the group members with other key local contacts at a much earlier stage. For example, one of the regular group attendees only met a key

local community worker at the final event. The resulting conversation led to an open invitation to the Community Council meetings and various offers of support and other contacts that could be useful with the group's work.

As a result, the project's approach did not necessarily make full connections with the support that could have been forthcoming from other agencies and groups. Some agencies were seen as not being particularly willing to help, whereas others had indicated their willingness to support the project, but had subsequently not felt fully engaged in the project. In particular, the churches and the Community Council had been supportive in instigating the project from the outset, and were seen as significant in connecting people together. For example, one participant recognised at the end of the project that:

The churches do a lot for the community where they don't expect you to become a member ... They are a good way to connect with other people.

Other agencies expressed their own capacity limitations in engaging with every small group of residents that arose, and hence preferred to deal with one larger, broader-based residents group instead over the long term.

Participants recognised that they could have made more use of potential connections with other groups and organisations, but that this would have required giving organisations such as the churches more time and notice in order to get them involved. This limited ongoing ownership by other agencies was perceived by project staff as being exacerbated by a tension in the original design, which envisaged two separate stages involving a separation between the initial consultation activity and subsequent work to generate involvement in a project.

Greater engagement in partnership with existing groups and organisations working on the estate by this particular project held the potential for generating wider involvement in shared aims between an even more diverse group which could have included the established majority of White British residents. For example, during the latter end of the project period, a local community worker

reported that a process designed to evaluate the Neighbourhood Action Plan had recently identified race/hate crime as one of the residents' top three priorities to be addressed on the estate. This illustrated potential concerns among the majority of the population which could have been harnessed and connected to the work of the project, but this potential had yet to be realised. Such connections also held greater potential for addressing the more general issues raised by the participants by working alongside groups and organisations with greater capacity. Indeed, by the end of the project, the project worker had begun to make these connections, not least through negotiating an exit strategy that included seeking continuing support for the participants.

Practicalities and timescales

The final set of issues raised by the evaluation concerned timescales and practicalities in the way that participation in the project was supported.

Within the project term available, practicalities and timescales were managed with mixed success. The involvement of those who became engaged in the project at an early stage was well supported. For example, the project worker was aware that transport was an issue for some participants, and provided this where necessary. The group (encouraged by the project worker) was particularly welcoming to those with children, with these children participating in several of the events, meetings and trips as a result.

However, in a few aspects, these practicalities could have been further improved, including by providing childcare during meetings. While many of the venues for activities were accessible and welcoming, one venue used for some of the small group meetings was particularly inaccessible and unwelcoming on a number of grounds. These included having several entrances (all locked until a minute before the meeting started), no signage to indicate that the meeting was taking place or which door to use, and a lack of sufficient refreshments and heating during the meeting. These were addressed for future meetings by using alternative venues. Dates for activities were organised around those attending or involved from the early stages, which encouraged their involvement, but when

any publicity was distributed to agencies about the group's activities, this was frequently done at short notice, hampering wider involvement. Decisions about whether to proceed with particular activities were also occasionally made at very short notice, not least the final decision to scale down the planned residential trip, which was made only three days beforehand.

Overall, there was a widespread recognition from all those interviewed even from the outset that, in order to be successful, there was a need for a longer-term approach. For example, one community worker expressed these concerns both in her initial interview and during the final event:

I think it needs more than a year. It's a long-term process. (Initial interview)

It's a shame that the project is coming to an end when it is just getting going. (At final event)

Despite these concerns, there were good indications that the participants who had been involved in the project intended to continue meeting, supporting each other, and developing wider networks after the initial funding had ceased, leaving a lasting legacy from the project.

5 Conclusion

Overall, despite its small-scale nature, the project has achieved a number of significant practical goals:

- Connections were made between a small number of previously isolated residents from a wide range of non-British backgrounds.
- These residents have increasingly provided informal support to each other, and started various initiatives in order to help others in similar situations settle and integrate more easily into the estate.
- Together with the project worker's report, these residents have also helped raise awareness of issues of harassment on the estate, and the need for agencies to provide more accessible and welcoming support to those who are settling onto the estate (especially recent immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers).
- The participants show signs of intending to continue this involvement and seek broader integration with existing resident involvement and support structures as part of a continuing legacy.

In the process, through the final reports, the project has also been able to:

- provide a case study exploring the dynamics of relationships and service provision for such individuals within estates like Holme Wood;
- share learning from the successes and difficulties that have been experienced by those involved as they have tried to generate greater interactions between those from different backgrounds within this neighbourhood.

These outcomes contribute to the broader findings from Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Bradford Research and Development programme and

other related research in helping practitioners and organisations to reflect on what might work best for generating relationships and understanding between different individuals and groups in their own communities.

6 Implications and recommendations

Reflecting on the learning generated from this pilot project, the following implications and recommendations can be highlighted which may be helpful to those working to promote improved cohesion in other areas.

1 When undertaking work to improve cross-community interactions, it is important to take into account the way that the local context affects these interactions, especially the relationship between individual, community, service provision and place. For workers, this means that finding out the particular dynamics in their particular area is an important first step to deciding on the best strategy to improve interaction. This includes being aware of the impact of a lack of community cohesion on individuals as well as groups, and recognising that racist attitudes can take on different dynamics in different settings, as well as affecting different people in different ways. In particular, anti-social behaviour issues can particularly affect those who have newly arrived onto some estates, especially if they are being targeted and/or feel targeted because they appear different. Statutory agencies with responsibilities for key issues such as housing and crime can do much to help ensure that these residents are aware of the support services available to them. They can also do much to raise awareness among residents of the appropriate processes for making complaints as part of their duty to promote community cohesion, particularly by informing new residents of any special procedures that may exist for dealing effectively with racially aggravated and other hate crime. For example, some group participants felt that a 'welcome pack', co-ordinated by housing agencies and detailing relevant information and sources of support both on and outside the estate, would have been a particularly helpful resource if provided to new residents on arrival. Specialist groups and services endeavouring to support particular groups of residents (e.g. refugees) that

are based in areas where more of these residents reside could usefully consider how they can best connect with those who live in areas where they are in even more of a minority, to ensure that these residents are not further isolated through a lack of information or support.

2 It is important to provide increased opportunities and networks for social support between people who have newly arrived in a particular place and may be isolated within it. Statutory and voluntary agencies, churches and other faith groups can all play an important role in providing these opportunities and encouraging new residents to connect with each other. These organisations could usefully consider what more they could do to enable those who are isolated to creatively connect with each other: for example, by organising and/or passing on invitations to events, opportunities and networks for mutual support.

3 This support needs to focus not just on mutual self-help (although this is potentially a good starting point), but also on building networks between established residents and relative newcomers across social divisions and boundaries. Given the difficulties faced by residents from different backgrounds who have newly arrived in areas like Holme Wood, it is easy for those working with them to get caught up in just directly addressing these difficulties. In doing so, they may miss the greater potential for change that could result from connecting these residents with others in the community. Especially in areas like Holme Wood, where the numbers of new residents from diverse backgrounds can be quite small, this limits the potential effectiveness because it is hard to achieve a critical mass of involvement in the group. It also limits the extent to which newly arrived residents can connect with broader groups working to achieve positive changes on the estate, thus exacerbating their isolation and sense of

victimisation. This is because the process does not enable them to easily see those issues which they have in common with other residents, nor provide them with opportunities to begin breaking down any prejudice which might exist and be contributing towards their isolation or treatment.

4 This work is complex and time-consuming, requiring skilled community workers building relationships to engage with diverse individuals and groups and build sufficient trust to enable them to be brought together. This requires substantial time to be spent both within the project period and for the project period itself to be longer – i.e. a long-term, gradual approach. Those planning to engage in or fund this work should not underestimate the time that this takes, and should allow for gradual, long-term engagement with sufficient time to build relationships with disparate groups and individuals. Investment by public bodies and other funders in community workers can provide an important contribution to stimulating this activity, and hence can be crucial in building stronger communities that have the capacity to welcome everyone.

5 Despite these challenges, work of this nature can potentially offer an important contribution to building community relationships across diversity and supporting those who are isolated as a result of newly arriving in an area. This potential may be particularly realised if it is focused over the longer term on enabling different groups within a particular place to learn from each other and work together to improve their area.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 Active Faith Communities Programme is a subregional infrastructure body which provides advice and support for faith communities and faith-based organisations across West Yorkshire that are involved in addressing the needs of the wider community. See www.activefaiths.org.uk for more details.

Chapter 2

- 1 See www.activefaiths.org.uk/icls/ for further details.
- 2 These aims are taken from the original proposal, with minor amendments to take into account that the initial plan focused just on young people, but this was broadened by AFC to include residents in general at an early stage to take account of initial feedback and in order to adopt a more holistic approach.

Chapter 4

- 1 While there have been several definitions of social capital, Putman's (2000) work has been particularly influential. The 'bonding', 'bridging', 'linking' distinction comes from Woolcock (2001). For a good introduction and further links, see Smith (2007).

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