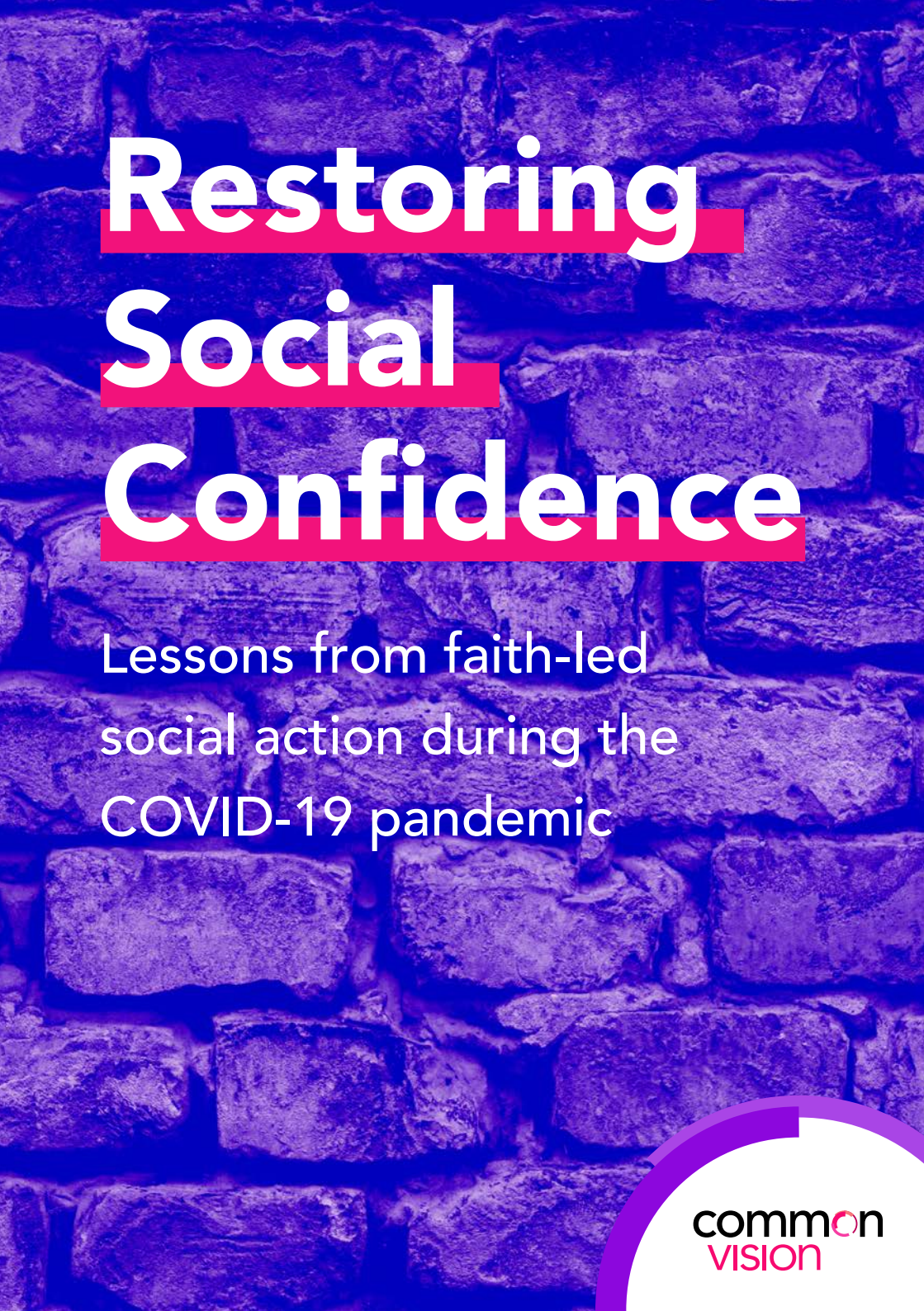
Restoring Social Confidence

Lessons from faith-led social action during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Foreword

Liz Carnelley, Director of Partnerships, Near Neighbours

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the great importance of community connectivity and locally-led social action, not only in responding to sudden crises, but in sustaining this neighbourhood-level support over the long-term.

The research for this report draws on extensive conversations with grassroots faith-based organisations who are part of the Near Neighbours family to understand what communities needed during the height of the crisis, and the key ingredients of successful local responses. It captures the sadly familiar stories of grief, hunger, isolation, exclusion and domestic violence, but also shines a light on the distinctive contribution of faith-based social action during this time.

The work of faith-based community groups has been a crucial part of frontline community responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Faith-based initiatives have helped maintain human dignity, connection, and hope in the face of vast and complex needs. As this report illustrates, faith-based initiatives are distinctive not only because of their social mission but because they address people's emotional and spiritual needs as well as their physical ones. From one-to-one befriending for refugees and asylum seekers in South Manchester that led to participation in more structured groups, to the hot meal delivery service in Luton, to tackling the inequities of access to health and social care in Leeds, the case studies in this report provide lessons in building trust and sharing power at a local level.

The concept of *social confidence* introduces a new framework through which to understand the true impact of the work carried out by Near Neighbours during the pandemic. Common Vision defines social confidence as the trust we have in ourselves, our community and institutions to look after our individual and collective wellbeing. These factors are underpinned by strong, trusted relationships with institutions and diversity within community life.

Near Neighbours has a long history of bringing people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in. The deep well of experience and expertise that Near Neighbours has established over the last decade is something which grassroots organisations have been able to draw on during the pandemic, and I am delighted that this report confirms the significant value of this. From building relationships with local authorities to mobilising volunteers and resources, Near Neighbours supports communities to bring different people together, nurture leaders, promote local ownership and encourages open communication on important but challenging issues. Ultimately, these insights provide a source of expertise and inspiration on how social confidence can be rebuilt and safeguarded in an uncertain future.

Foreword

Caroline Macfarland, Director, Common Vision

Two kinds of stories are told about the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on local communities. One is the celebratory story of mutual aid, whereby a shared crisis has galvanised people to come together and support each other to overcome adversity and care for the most vulnerable in society. The other is about devastation, grief and loss, exacerbated by deep-rooted social inequalities.

Of course, the reality is not as binary; we can - and should - hold both of these narratives about the pandemic side-by-side. They help us reflect on systemic 'fault lines' in our society and provide a focal point for ambition, energy and resources to address root-causes and underlying issues. They also provide valuable lessons in how to nurture and support community resourcefulness and resilience as we seek to 'build back better' from the crisis.

Social confidence is a concept coined by Common Vision which frames both the challenges that we face in rebuilding the social economic and emotional health of our communities, as much as the opportunities to capitalise on the heightened awareness of the importance of strong, connected communities that can draw on social infrastructure and institutional support. It describes the way we feel about our personal agency and self-efficacy within a broader context of solidarity and trust in other people and institutions.

The experiences of faith-based community organisations provide valuable insights into what it takes to strengthen social confidence. Although often overlooked in secular literature on voluntary and community activities, faith-based initiatives have a long history of supporting the needs of communities, particularly in response to hardship and uncertainty. Many of the case studies in this report parallel wider best practice in the voluntary and community sector, whereby it is the local knowledge, trusted relationships, and the soft skills of the people within grassroots organisations that are their unique assets. Faith-based organisations drew on their deep relationships, historic trust, and cultural intelligence to reach communities during the pandemic who might otherwise have been excluded by other neighbourhood or statutory services. But they also played a unique role providing emotional support to their communities, safeguarding personal esteem and self-worth - something which is pivotal to social confidence.

The concept of social confidence, like its sub-components of resilience, self-efficacy, emotional wellbeing and trust, is by nature qualitative and often subjective. But this does not mean it is so esoteric that it has no defined impact or consequences. We assert that a lack of social confidence gives rise to unease and distrust in institutions and government, the spread of misinformation and the erosion of community cohesion. There are a number of lessons to be learned about the types of initiatives, resources and infrastructure that can help heal our communities and strengthen the foundations for a more equal and socially confident society. This report showcases practical insights as much as it champions ambitious principles for the future.

Executive Summary

This report explores the nature and characteristics of *social confidence*, why it is important in the transition to a post-pandemic society, and the sorts of interventions and infrastructure which nurture it. *Social confidence* is a term which we have coined to describe our collective societal feelings; encapsulating how we as citizens feel about others in our community and about our society as a whole. It is a mix of having faith in other people and institutions, alongside how confident we feel about our own place in society. It stems from public trust in institutions combined with a sense of neighbourliness and solidarity, and a belief in one's personal agency.

Although it would seem that the worse effects of the pandemic are behind us, social confidence is still badly knocked. While the vaccine roll-out across the country brings hope that we will bounce back from these challenges in the physical sense, it may take some time to heal emotionally from the sustained uncertainty, anxiety, grief, fear, isolation, exhaustion, and boredom we have experienced.

Communities have had to weather complex and rapidly changing challenges. Different people have had vastly different experiences of the pandemic: due to deep-seated inequalities, some population groups and communities have been hit far harder than others. And even for those people who have not suffered tangible losses, the effects of prolonged insecurity have left them vulnerable and exposed, knocking their social confidence.

Low social confidence is concerning because it is leaves people and communities susceptible to misinformation, less able to make informed decisions, and quicker to blame or scapegoat others. Identifying the core attributes and building blocks of social confidence can help us understand how to restore, strengthen and sustain it in future.

Some of the most positive aspects of the COVID-19 crisis were the ways communities supported each other and the resourcefulness demonstrated by local grassroots groups. This groundswell of community activity in the early stages of the crisis strengthened social confidence in dark times. Faith-led activities and organisations contributed to a significant part of this picture. Therefore, in order to understand how to cultivate social confidence, this report draws on the experiences of faith-based groups and interfaith networks in responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Faith-based organisations – a term we use to mean community, voluntary or cultural groups and organisations which are led by members of a religious community – have

long been building up social confidence within communities through institutional interventions combined with deeply personal and emotional support. Interfaith networks – formal or informal collaborations between organisations or people from different faith traditions – have a long history of supporting and joining up individual faith-led activities and working in response to potential conflict or social unrest. As a result, many faith organisations had solid foundations to build on during the pandemic, enabling not only more connected, agile and sophisticated emergency responses, but also more sustainable community-led initiatives that have continued to offer support and solace into 2021.

Examining faith-led social action within an interfaith framework shows that although the groundswell of community support in the early days of the crisis has sometimes been described as a hardwired and natural response to a shared crisis, many of the most effective and sustained responses were the fruits of decades of work. Chapter One sets out this context further and explains why learning from the experiences of faith-led organisations is particularly useful for wider civil society and government.

Chapter Two looks in more detail at how grassroots faith-led groups responded to community need in the early and later stages of the pandemic. Small, local faith-based groups and networks were (and still are) a crucial part of frontline community responses to the crisis. They responded in a range of different ways to community needs, from scaling up community services to acting as trusted mediators of information. As well as responding to 'hard' needs resulting from closures of community services, disruptions to statutory support, and the increased financial pressures on some individuals and families, faith groups were also particularly well placed to steward the emotional and relational health of communities, due to three key factors:

- Deep relationships. Faith-based organisations held long-nurtured relationships with individuals across the community. They often break beyond the organisation-to-service-user approach.

- Trust. Their standing within communities meant faith leaders were well-placed to support people through fear and anxiety. This was integral at a time of anxiety, fear, and misinformation. The 'seat at the table' afforded to faith leaders was key to their trusted role.

- Experience with grief. Faith groups were particularly well-equipped to help community members manage loss with dignity and sensitivity.

Another key ingredient to faith groups' effectiveness was the element of national infrastructure and coordination. Their highly networked structure is part of what characterises faith-based community action at its best: local faith groups are always part of national or global movements and institutions. Our research has focused on the learnings from Near Neighbours, a programme which brings people together from difference backgrounds and faiths, administered by Church Urban Fund, a social action charity working on behalf of the Church of England. The programme aims to promote social interaction and social action in 11 areas around the country. These are areas of high socio-economic deprivation, where levels of trust for authorities are low, and there is a history of segregation between different ethnic, religious and cultural groups.[1]

Chapter Three details the work of Near Neighbours in supporting the faith-led response from grassroots organisations. Near Neighbours played a distinct and important role in that it supported, linked, and strengthened the efforts of faith-based organisations and faith leaders in some of the communities hit hardest by the virus. In the early days of the pandemic, Near Neighbours local hubs activated their partner networks, effectively mobilised volunteers, and proactively connected with health services to support communities through the crisis. The success and effectiveness of this rapid response meant that the government gave Near Neighbours an extra £1million funding to build on these rapid response activities with grants, leadership mentoring and training. This included funding to communicate COVID-19 public health information and tailored advice about the vaccine in 'hard-to-reach' communities. Our research highlights some distinctive factors that enabled Near Neighbours to deepen its impact during this time:

- A values-led approach to diversity and equality. In a pandemic that disproportionately impacts the lives and livelihoods of Black and Asian people, Near Neighbours' history of supporting grassroots community-led activities by these groups is enabling it to effectively and respectfully channel support the communities that needed it most.

- Hyperlocal responses to hyperlocal need. Near Neighbours' place-based model has meant that over an extended period of time, the 11 hubs had successfully built capacity within communities to deal with crises. The autonomy given to local coordinators means that the programme is adapted to the specificities of each local context.

- Networked power. Effective collective responses during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic had to make sound uses of each partner's time, assets, expertise, and networks. Near Neighbours' experience of knitting together distinct faiths, charities, and grassroots group here became key.

- Personal connection. The 11 local coordinators are key to the programme's success. They act as the faces of Near Neighbours and use their local knowledge, connections, and trust to make sure the money and training is being wisely distributed.

Chapter Four draws out some thematic lessons and explains what those beyond the faith sector can learn from the work of grassroots faith-based organisations and the supportive infrastructure of Near Neighbours. These lessons are 'building blocks for social confidence', which not only show how faith-based community action will be crucial in rebuilding more equal and connected communities, but also signpost the lessons and pathways for secular organisations and services to develop their practice and deepen their impact. We summarise the following principles for social confidence:

- Social confidence is fuelled by collective responsibility and duty, more than individual rights.

- Social confidence is generated through strong, trusted relationships with institutions and within communities.

- Social confidence is strengthened by diversity within community life, whereby perceptions of religious, ethnic, or cultural differences are secondary to a sense of shared purpose

- Social confidence is contingent on personal esteem and individual worth, and as such is bolstered by asset-based approaches to community support.

- Social confidence can be built up through experiencing difficult emotions as much as positive ones.

- Social confidence is strengthened when civil society has power and freedom to speak convincingly about complex topics.

- Social confidence is boosted when community initiatives have a support scaffolding or infrastructure that helps sustain social action at the local level.

- Social confidence is catalysed by an enabling state, whereby local and national government gives communities the resources and freedom to design their own responses rather than dictate solutions.

By understanding the building blocks of social confidence, we can understand how to grow agency, power, potential, and the ability to act together to shape the future of our communities. This report intends to help faith organisations, the wider voluntary and community 'sector', and national support networks learn from the knowledge and expertise faith-based organisations developed during the pandemic, and use it to lay the foundations for recovery.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has cast a new light on what it means to live in connected, resilient and supportive communities. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have had to navigate complex and fast-evolving social and economic challenges that emerged first in response to the first national lockdown and the early health crisis, then to the ongoing impacts of the virus, social restrictions and further lockdowns. Even as the vaccine continues to be rolled out across the country, it is clear that as a society, we will experience the impacts of the crisis for years to come.

Often the picture painted at a national level has been one of social solidarity and 'wartime spirit', focusing on the ways in which people reached out to their neighbours, forged local social networks, and gave each other help and mutual aid in the early stages of the crisis. There are many positive stories about community resilience and resourcefulness that we can learn from for the future. But at the same time, it is important not to underestimate the stark differences in people's experiences. Some population groups and local communities have been hit much harder by the virus and its wider social and economic consequences, often due to pre-existing inequalities. Some individuals have suffered loss, grief, loneliness or mental ill health more than others. And even for those who have not suffered tangible losses, the effects of prolonged uncertainty have left them vulnerable and exposed.

This report looks at experiences of grassroots faith groups and the needs of their local communities over the course of the pandemic, to understand both sides of this complex picture. Faith-based organisations represent a diversity of social and cultural groups, including people who might otherwise be excluded or isolated from mainstream public life. Faith groups also have a long legacy of social action at a local level, and leveraged their experiences, networks and relationships to respond to the onset of the crisis and provide ongoing support as the needs of communities evolved over time.

Although many of the efforts of faith-led groups mirror patterns in wider civil society, they were often able to reach people who fell outside of the reach of others due to their cultural intelligence and networks with minority communities. The experiences of faith-led interventions also provide helpful insights into people's emotional, spiritual, and relational needs, alongside their physical needs: they worked to maintain human dignity, safety, and hope in the face of complex challenges.

> "The key thing is going to be rebuilding trust and confidence, because people are shattered."
>
> Church leader in Southall, West London

Faith-led groups in civil society

Throughout this paper we use the terms: 'faith-based' or 'faith-led' to describe community, voluntary or cultural groups and organisations which are led by members of a religious community. This purposefully broad definition covers a spectrum of activities, from the local community outreach activities of a faith institution such as a Mosque or a church, to a community health group led by people sharing a faith ethos. These groups focus on charitable work or community service, rather than religious teaching, but their faith is nonetheless integral to their outlook or motivations.

We also talk about 'interfaith' networks, referring to formal or informal collaboration between organisations or people from different faith traditions. Interfaith engagement is often based on the similar values shared across religions, such as compassion, dignity, love and peace. Faith-based organisations often also do interfaith work.

"We work in West London where a majority of people are of faith. The organisations we've supported during the pandemic haven't necessarily been faith institutions but more just community groups on the ground, responding to the needs of their community. But nearly all the people that we work with, the leaders of those organisations, are of faith."

Elizabeth, Near Neighbours coordinator, West London

Particularly in areas where religious affiliation is high, a community's religious life is inextricably part of its broader social and cultural life. For instance, in Luton, 78% of people are religiously affiliated.[2] The pastoral and spiritual support that religious institutions and faith-based organisations provide is therefore a backbone of wider social support.

Although the pandemic has led to an intense public focus on safeguarding the physical and economic health of the nation, our collective emotional health is also a vital component in the transition to a post-pandemic society. This emotional health is not just about the personal wellbeing and mental health of individuals, but is predicated on how we feel about others in our community and about our society as a whole, coupled with how we feel about ourselves as members and contributors to that society. We call this 'social confidence'. Social confidence is something which stems from public trust in institutions combined with a sense of neighbourliness and solidarity, and a belief in one's personal agency and self-assurance.

> "We need to build everybody's confidence for start, before anybody will even come back [to religious institutions or community spaces]. I think working together we can do that."
>
> Community worker from a church in Birmingham

At the moment, social confidence is badly knocked: grief, anxiety, fear, isolation, exhaustion, and boredom (de)animate our collective emotional lives. This was not the case in the early stages of the pandemic when shared purpose unlocked a wave of social action. But since then, many of the gains from the early response have been lost. Research by More in Common found that although a record 62% of people agreed that 'as society, we look after each other' in May 2020, this had dropped back down to 26% by early 2021.[3]

The erosion of social confidence is concerning because it is when we don't feel certain or self-assured that we are more easily influenced by misinformation, less able to make informed decisions, and quicker to blame or scapegoat others.

Identifying the core attributes and building blocks of social confidence can help us understand how to restore, strengthen and sustain it in future. There is a lot to be learned from faith-led social action within an interfaith framework here. Faith-based organisations have long been building up social confidence within communities, and interfaith networks broker bonds of shared purpose and agency within and between communities, often in response to potential conflict or social unrest. This work provided solid foundations to build on during the pandemic, enabling a more connected, inclusive and dignified community response.

However, whilst the groundswell of community support in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic has sometimes been described as a hardwired natural response to a shared crisis, the most effective local responses were underpinned by local infrastructure, networks, and relationships that had been built up over decades. This report therefore looks at the key ingredients which formed the backdrop of successful

What is social confidence?

Social confidence is a way to describe our collective societal feelings. As opposed to 'trust' which is about how we view others, social confidence is a mix of having faith in other people and institutions, alongside how we feel about our own agency and self-efficacy in society. If personal confidence describes the extent to which an individual trusts their own judgement and abilities, and values oneself, then social confidence is the extent to which we feel we can rely on our community and take shared responsibility within it. It stems from the quality of the relationships between us, our communities, our institutions, and the state, and consequentially, how we process emotions and internalise risk.

Personal confidence has long been considered important within psychological and behavioural theory. The 2018 report from Nesta and Osca, 'Good Help, Bad Help', gives a potted history of the term: from 19th century psychologist Frederick Needham's design of asylums to generate "self-confidence and becoming", to 20th century psychologist Albert Bandura's work on 'self-efficacy' or the 'confidence to act', which argues that "that in order to pursue any goal we must have some confidence that we can achieve that goal".[4] Self-confidence, however, is something that is seen as something specific to the individual, whereas social confidence speaks to our collective wellbeing.

Social confidence is an outcome of a strong civil society, and is particularly fitting in the context of faith-based social action. The word 'confidence' breaks down into con-fidence, or 'with faith'. Indeed, a recent report by the British Academy and the Faith and Belief Forum suggests that 'confidence' is a preferable word to use when describing social cohesion than 'identity' or 'belonging' because it reflects "an underlying principle of trust" acute in religious communities, but that resonates more widely "as a sense of assuredness that emerges out of harmony between one's identity, belonging and beliefs".[5] Compared to other terms which describe the strength of communities, social confidence reflects the importance of shared emotions, values and beliefs in structuring our community lives.

grassroots interventions. We draw on the work of Near Neighbours, a national programme providing support and funding for faith-led and community-based activities in 11 areas in England. Covering areas including Bradford, East London and Leeds with large Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations, the work of Near Neighbours comprises a snapshot of the physical and emotional needs of communities acutely hit by the pandemic, many of whom are isolated from or mistrustful of other local support services.

Near Neighbours responded to the challenges of the pandemic by leveraging their networks and trusted relationships within communities, and their connections with public leaders, to provide a two-way conduit for dialogue and action between individuals, communities and local and national authorities. This meant that from the outset, the programme was nurturing the capacity, voice, and connections of key individual 'trusted mediators'. Whilst in the outset of the pandemic these leaders supported heath messaging and gave spiritual leadership, from 2021 onwards they were able to act as 'community champions' to support the vaccine rollout within marginalised faith communities.

In short, Near Neighbours provides insights into the infrastructure, activities, and relationships that can support grassroots organisations and, in turn, support the emotional health of the individuals they serve. This model gives us valuable insights into how to build and strengthen social confidence at a local level as well as the mechanisms and principles which enable joined up national action.

This report uses the lessons from faith-based responses, and insights from the Near Neighbours model, to understand and explore the ways in which we can restore social confidence in local communities. It is intended to help faith organisations, the wider voluntary and community 'sector', and national support networks to learn from the knowledge and expertise faith-based organisations developed during the pandemic, and use it to lay the foundations for recovery. It also shows us the extent to which investment in national initiatives and infrastructure can lead to effective on-the-ground support. Together, the work of hyperlocal faith-based groups and the national infrastructure support, make a profound contribution to nurturing communities' social confidence. So, in a time where inequalities, isolation, and alienation are undermining social confidence, it is vital we learn from their work.

About Near Neighbours

The Near Neighbours programme is administered by Church Urban Fund, a social action charity working on behalf of the Church of England. The programme aims to promote social interaction and social action in 11 areas around the country, through brokering positive encounters where groups have been separated by mistrust, developing resilient relationships across differences and diversity in communities, and strengthening community life by supporting an active civil society. All Near Neighbours local hubs are located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation, where levels of trust for authorities are low and there is a history of segregation between different ethnic, religious and cultural groups.[6]

The programme has three key facets that have remained constant throughout the pandemic: a small grants programme that gives funding to social action and interaction projects in each of their areas; a network of 11 local hub coordinators who build relationships between faith organisations and with others, provide mentoring and training, and signpost community members to the grant programme; and a series of leadership and training events that are hosted by local hubs and run by central facilitators. The core programme includes 'Catalyst' leadership training for young people and 'Real Talk, Honest People' sessions that build understanding between faith groups.

Within the nationwide community response to COVID-19, Near Neighbours has played a distinct and important role. The programme has supported, linked, and strengthened the efforts of faith-based organisations and faith leaders in some of the communities hardest-hit by the virus. In the early days of the pandemic, Near Neighbours local hubs activated their partner networks, effectively mobilised volunteers, and proactively connected with health services to support communities through the crisis. The success and effectiveness of this rapid response meant that the government gave Near Neighbours an extra £1million in funding to build on these rapid response activities with grants, mentoring and training. This included funding Near Neighbours to support the 'Community Champions'[7] scheme, communicating COVID-19 public health information and tailored advice about the vaccine in 'hard-to-reach' communities.
See Chapter Three for further information.

Methodology

From February to April 2021 Common Vision employed a mixed method, qualitative research approach, starting with a **desk review of over 60 case studies** of work led by faith groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided by Near Neighbours hub coordinators. This was complemented by a **literature review** of academic, policy and civil society studies on community responses to the pandemic.

We then conducted deep listening activities with the 11 Near Neighbours Hubs, representing a cross section of faith-based community action in low income areas in the **Black Country, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham, Lancashire, Luton, Peterborough and London.**

We drew insights from **ten local focus groups** that brought together faith-based and community organisations in each of these areas, and supplemented insights into the key similarities and differences between local responses and community needs with **seven semi-structured depth interviews** with representatives from faith and community organisations in Blackburn, Bradford, Rochdale, Leeds, Luton, and West London.

2. Rising to the challenge

How faith organisations responded to communities in crisis

The knowledge, resources and connections which faith groups hold are sometimes overlooked in discussions about civil society and community development. This chapter explores the ways in which faith-led groups responded to the early stages of the pandemic and the first lockdown, and subsequently how these responses adapted to changing community needs over time.

We found that small, local faith-based groups and networks were (and still are) a crucial part of frontline community responses to the crisis. They responded in a range of different ways to community needs, from scaling up community services to acting as trusted mediators of information. We can judge the success of their response by the extent to which they helped maintain human dignity, connection, and hope in the face of vast and complex needs. Broadly speaking, faith groups were particularly well placed to steward the emotional and relational health of communities, due to their distinct and powerful set of deep relationships, embedded trust, and emotional intelligence.

2.1. A complex picture of community need

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, local community leaders were faced with a diverse and fragmented spectrum of needs. Many of these needs were neither entirely new, nor distinct to faith communities, but were intensified by the pandemic. Other needs emerged in direct response to the health impacts of the virus, lockdown measures, and the wider social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

As the pandemic progressed - from the immediate health crisis and the first national lockdown, to staged reopenings and subsequent local and national lockdowns, alongside the roll-out of the vaccine - the needs of communities at a local level have evolved and layered on top of each other, adding to the complexity of the picture.

Our research revealed three broad 'categories' of community need that first arose during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Existing inequalities pushed to crisis point: Poverty, food insecurity, domestic violence and other existing 'hard' needs were exacerbated as a result of closures of community services, disruptions to statutory support, and the increased burdens on individuals and families. For instance, The Trussell Trust saw a 33% increase in support needed during the COVID-19 pandemic across their 1,300 food banks;[8] and rates of reported domestic violence have risen by at least 7%.[9]

"I came across so many people who just didn't have food to eat. They had to meet a lot of criteria just to access food. It's very frustrating that in the fifth richest country, we can't access the resources to give people food."

Member of a health inequalities group in Greater Manchester

"Something that came out through lockdown was the rise in domestic violence. It was difficult to provide support as people were locked down, so we used creative ways of reaching the ladies that found it difficult to access help."

Community coordinator in Bradford

"I'm the parent of a daughter who's 23 and has severe learning difficulties, and it just feels like she's being forgotten. Throughout this pandemic the learning disability community has not been on the government's radar, when it comes to support... I feel like she's been forgotten and us as carers have been forgotten as well. It's showed me how little my daughter's life means in the wider sense."

Community outreach coordinator in Bradford

- New acute health and social needs: The virus and lockdown measures led to emergent needs that had not been experienced at all, or at least not as acutely as before. Beyond the unprecedented pressures on the NHS, community members were having to adapt to shielding, life with long COVID, and new caring responsibilities. Financially, many people found themselves out of work, furloughed on reduced pay, or scraping by on statutory sick pay. Young people and ethnic minorities have generally been hit hardest. Socially, more people were experiencing grief, and experiencing it in isolation, cut off from communal mourning practices. The rapid roll out of test-and-trace and the vaccine has similarly created new challenges within communities.

"Why are people not engaging with the vaccine? Well, they have a lack of trust. The blame [for COVID-19] had been placed on the Muslim community at the time, with lockdowns in Northern towns being announced the day before Eid. Many communities don't know what's going to happen when they come and do the test and trace, what the government is going to do with the records. Some people were thinking, when they do the test and trace and the government get the DNA, they could pin you with a crime. So they haven't been engaging."

Kaneez, Near Neighbours coordinator, West Yorkshire

- Latent social support needs and skills gaps: Lockdown gave loneliness[10], mental illness, social isolation, racism, and cultures of misinformation the space to grow. Many of those who were feeling lonely and isolated before the pandemic, felt pushed to breaking point after months of lockdown. Others did not have the skills or tools to adjust to new norms – for example the move to contactless payments and online deliveries tipping people from digital exclusion into more acute financial and economic exclusion.

"We've had so many deaths in the community, and people are grieving at home. Normally neighbours would go and visit grieving families, or there would be big gatherings at mosque, which everyone would get solace from. I think the loneliness is really big at the moment."

Chair of interfaith work at a Mosque in Birmingham

"The biggest gap in our community is social isolation and digital access. We are providing mental health services, specifically for South Asian women, who often do not have any access to, or knowledge about, digital services and are sometimes living on their own. They don't have anyone to talk to."

Services manager for a small mental health charity in Birmingham

This fragmented puzzle of complex, overlapping needs left many people in local communities feeling vulnerable, excluded and left behind. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many statutory services were overwhelmed, many traditional civil society organisations stood paralysed; and individuals were unsure where to turn for help or how to take action to help their neighbours. In the months which followed, uncertainty grew around new public health measures and social restrictions, including test-and-trace and the vaccine rollout. All this meant that our social confidence – people's sense of security and trust in institutions, in communities and in their own agency – was eroded and undermined.

The virus itself, and the broader negative social and economic impacts of the pandemic, hit those in low-income communities hardest. Furthermore, we know that different ethnic and religious communities have experienced the crisis differently, with people from ethnic minority backgrounds being more likely to suffer the brunt of infections and deaths, and more likely to suffer adverse long-term impacts from COVID-19. As such, social confidence within these communities took a similarly disproportionate hit.

> "The pandemic has really shown a divide in our communities in language translation. My family and I were stranded in India from March to May, and my dad was meant to be shielding. My dad didn't understand the four page letter that came from NHS or central government. And he kind of looked at me as somebody who works in health to tell him what that meant in Punjabi, I haven't got a scooby."
>
> Communications specialist from a Council's Health and Care Partnership

2.2. Roles and responses of faith organisations in serving community need

The role of faith organisations in these communities evolved as the crisis developed. They were often at the heart of a local community's initial response to the crisis. With historic and rooted relationships within some of the communities' worst affected by the crisis, faith-based organisations were ideally placed to understand local needs and develop good community responses.

Faith-based social action is by no means a new phenomenon; faith groups make up an important facet of the history of social infrastructure in local communities – that is, the social groups, resources, spaces, tools and networks that enable social mixing, support civic cohesion and improve quality of life. But the pandemic gave these organisations the unspoken 'permission' and motivation to act like never before, due to the urgency and complexity of local needs and the gaps or lags in support provision.

> "One of the big issues from day one of COVID-19 has been managing change, because it was a forced change. It was short term sharp change. So, change of people dying, change of people attending funerals, change of how you can't go out freely, change of how you go shopping, restrictions... that the biggest issues that we faced: managing all of that forced change at once."
>
> Bishop of a church in Birmingham and community campaigner for racial justice

> "In these really difficult times people have come together. The community has constantly stepped up. Whatever race or religious background you come from, people have stepped up, and that is humanising."
>
> Community outreach coordinator in Bradford

In practice, faith-led organisations responded to the crisis in three overarching ways:

- Faith groups set up or scaled up community services: A vast number of faith-led community initiatives were launched or scaled up in response to the pandemic. Food security and provision (food banks, community kitchens, and food delivery services) was a particularly prevalent issue; a survey of local authorities found that 60% of local authorities involved food banks operated by a faith group or faith-based organisation as part of their response to the pandemic.[11] But groups also helped with a range of other needs including physical needs like paying for clothes and bills, and tensions within the home by providing home schooling support, marriage counselling, and escape pathways for victims of domestic abuse.

> "Because faith spaces are so well known for running food banks, it's been interesting to see the shifts that have happened. So the Gurdwara [Sikh temple] has free community meals – 'seva' – everyday, which you wouldn't know unless you've ever gone to one. During the COVID-19 pandemic, seva spilled over into the street. Mosques don't usually run food banks, but more started during this time. Churches usually are the ones running food banks, but they also filtered out into the non-religious spaces."
>
> Rabiyah, Near Neighbours coordinator, Birmingham

Unlocking community support for victims of trafficking through the crisis: Azalea, Luton

Azalea is a Christian charity based in Luton that supports people to escape sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. They remained in full operation throughout the pandemic thanks to support from sexual health services and the police who helped them to execute due diligence activities. This meant they were able to continue to support the most vulnerable during lockdowns, "supporting 17 women and one child escape international sex trafficking in partnership with Border Force and Bedfordshire police in 2020." "It was a privilege to see justice, care and restoration for these individuals", said CEO Ruth.

In addition to their specialist work, they have been running a street drop-in service throughout the pandemic, giving access to a food bank, rape support, bills support, condoms and clothes. During the times when their drop-in centre was closed, Azalea started Walking Outreach through Luton city centre to give snacks, information, and support. They also set up a new programme called Dashing Drivers – a network of drivers who would collect donations for the charity from across Luton. What stood out most to the team during the COVID-19 pandemic was the support they received from local people, and the generosity of people who themselves were experiencing hardship.

- Faith groups kept their community connected: Faith organisations acted as social conveners, setting up support groups, community chats, and going door-to-door to check that their neighbours were not isolated. Many groups paid special attention to digital exclusion and in many cases helped community members to get online. This sustained social connection in a time of isolation.

"Lockdown has brought the isolated to the forefront. We've recreated a WhatsApp group: a lady joined who has social anxiety, she has not been out of her home for years. And all of a sudden, she was part of a group where she was talking to others, having laughs, and playing games with us. That's the most contact she's had with people for ages. She then started helping us because she understood what it was like to be isolated, so she taught people how to be able to survive being isolated, and so it's brought the isolated in to help us."

Community development worker from a church in Birmingham

- Faith groups acted as trusted mediators: At a time of fast-paced changes to health guidance and social distancing restrictions, faith leaders used their trust within communities to listen to concerns and share the facts. They relayed information to community members as well as representing their communities to

Shaping culturally tailored support to refugees in isolation

The pandemic cut refugees and asylum seekers off from their support networks. Interfaith networks stepped up to support 250 asylum seekers housed in a hotel in Wythenshawe, South Manchester. The Near Neighbours' local hub was contacted by the Council to see if they could support the residents through this period of loneliness, trauma and uncertainty.

As a result, the local Near Neighbours coordinator, Samra, made connections between local grassroots groups and the hotel. These groups then set up ESOL classes, music and arts therapy, and fitness activities. However, they ran into a problem: although these projects were available, due to language barriers and the trauma being experienced by the residents, they were not attending the sessions.

To address this problem, Samra bought in a local church-led organisation – The Well Project – to draw on the skills and knowledge of their refugee and asylum seeker volunteers and connect directly with residents. Near Neighbours funded them to go into the hotel and work with women and families, knocking on doors and starting conversations in the residents' native languages like Arabic and Farsi to see how they were feeling and what they needed. This has unlocked engagement and nurtured a friendlier, safer, and less alienating atmosphere in the hotel.

the authorities. In the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicting health messages damaged trust in the lockdown restrictions, the test-and-trace system, and the government and NHS response to the virus itself. Since December 2020, faith groups have been playing a key role in the vaccine roll-out, supporting anxious community members to make an informed decision about the vaccine, booking appointments, communicating advice and concerns back to health and political leaders, and lending both their cultural expertise and physical spaces to support the rollout.

Dispelling the myths around the COVID-19 vaccine: One Voice Blackburn

One Voice Blackburn is a community membership organisation that supports the social and economic wellbeing of some of the UK's most deprived communities in Blackburn with Darwen. The area has had some of the highest infection rates in the country, on top of long-term lower life expectancy rates. One Voice Blackburn has run several health awareness programmes covering everything from mental health to vitamin D. More recently, they have begun a vaccine awareness programme, supported by Near Neighbours, to counter high rates of vaccine hesitancy.

One Voice Blackburn created several videos featuring different members of the community – including pharmacists, young people, a local GP, and the chair of the local council of Mosques – each delivering a personal message and dispelling myths around the vaccine. As a membership organisation they are highly embedded within their community, so have the trust and relationships to talk confidently about the vaccine. As the Chief Executive, Zaffer explains, "We want to take our community on a journey. We can't just talk down to them. It's got to be the other way. Our community has to tell us what they want, and what our approach should be, to any health issues we discuss".

They also view their role as providing "vital intelligence" from the ground in their community to national services. They are not only a gateway to access the marginalised and deprived, but also a way to learn about why those inequalities exist and how they can be addressed.

"I think the reality is that quite a lot of people don't trust government health messages. So, if you have faith leaders reiterating the key health messages that can gain a lot of trust. Some of the faith institutions have even been used as vaccination centres. I think that has helped a lot. People might feel more comfortable accessing a faith centre than they might a local health centre for the vaccine."

Elizabeth, Near Neighbours coordinator, West London

"A very elitist message has come out around the vaccine – those who don't adhere or endorse it are 'conspiracists' – I find that quite negative and damaged relationships with BAME communities. To tackle this, we became an official vaccine centre. It is an opportunity to create better support at the heart of the city's deprived areas, and to challenge misinformation around the vaccine."

Community centre organiser in Nottingham

Across each of these three areas, faith organisations developed agile and well-tailored resources and services where other forms of public provision fell short. The types of response were as diverse as the needs they faced, and the communities they were designed with and for. This picture supports the findings of a recent report by the APPG Faith and Society which argued that "faith groups have vital resources which are crucial for community wellbeing, and which cannot be found anywhere else".[12]

However, this is not to say that responses were an extension of existing activities. Effective interventions often relied on support from national networks and institutions and were driven by committed and dynamic leaders who went above and beyond to support their communities. These success factors are explored in more detail in Chapter Three.

Building local alliances for longer-term community resilience: Shadwell Responds

At the very beginning of the first lockdown, Shadwell Responds was founded by a network of ten faith and community organisations in East London. It was co-led by the local Near Neighbours coordinator Marzena, alongside Centre for Theology and Community and local community leaders.. To meet the needs of their most vulnerable community members, the Shadwell Responds team organised to provide advice, support, and food deliveries. For instance, they organised food donations for the food bank at Darrul Ummah Mosque, built a team of volunteers to run a similar project at St George's Church, and raised additional funding to distribute digital tablets to 30 families.

Whilst the initial months of the response were powered by energy and connection, the group foresaw a waning of energy in autumn 2020. Instead of closing down the programme, they pivoted to focus on deepening relationships and partnerships by organising regular online meetings, training and follow-up 1-2-1 meetings to keep people motivated and connected. This enabled the group to evolve into a more permanent alliance working on ideas for joint interfaith action.

Summing up the evolution of the initiative, Marzena, the local Near Neighbours coordinator said, "We built on the work that started at the beginning of the pandemic and as a hub we use methods of community organising to develop a stronger local alliance that can work together to address current crisis but also beyond that, building community resilience".

2.3. Stewarding the emotional health of communities

The above examples demonstrate how faith organisations make up a key component of a community's social infrastructure – the networks and relationships that create social connection and support. Many of the successes of the interfaith response are echoed in wider voluntary and civil society interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some respects, it may not make sense to isolate the work of faith groups from wider civil society – no one type of organisation or sector could or should fix the puzzle of fragmented social and economic needs of communities in isolation. But our qualitative insights highlighted a particularly effective role of faith organisations in maintaining human dignity, safety, and hope in the face of complex challenges. They supported people's emotional, spiritual, and relational needs – along with their physical ones – with a cultural intelligence and authenticity that set it apart from other local interventions.

The emotional needs of individuals and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be underestimated. The unprecedented nature of uncertainty, loss, grief and vulnerability at a national scale required highly human-centric responses at a local level.

Creating a space for new friendship: Southall new parents' group

A local GP in Southall, West London, approached Near Neighbours with concerns about new and expectant mothers being isolated and living away from their traditional family support and advice structures. The pandemic meant many mums gave birth in a climate of personal and financial uncertainty, isolation, and health anxiety, and found it more difficult to access services. These problems are particularly acute in Southall were there are high levels of deprivation, many multiple occupancy households, many recent immigrants and where a majority of households speak English as a second or third language.

To address this, the GP has worked with some of the volunteers from St John's Church, Southall to set up a weekly Bumps & Baby group, providing informal wellbeing support, friendship building, and learning. This has provided a space for new mums to come together with others in similar situations across faith groups, get support, and be referred if necessary. This group, supported by Near Neighbours, continued whilst many other parents' groups were paused.

This project demonstrates the ongoing importance of friendships and deeper relationships across ethnic and faith groups in the COVID-19 pandemic. It promotes greater understanding and long-term resilience through creating friendships that continue as the babies grow up.

"We have worked hard to keep the HOPE alive. As people battle through the pandemic with various challenges, we stand among and alongside people in their pain, suffering and loss and as far as possible, we have tried to reach out in hope for everyone's wellbeing in our town using our voluntary sector, individual, and institutional networks and partnerships."

Kim, Near Neighbours coordinator, Luton

"We found ourselves in a social prison. Isolation has left us damaged, emotionally and mentally scarred. Many of us are struggling with challenges but most important to all of us is our emotional wellbeing."

Christian faith leader in Greater Manchester

Qualitative evidence from our interviews and focus groups suggests that faith organisations were able to steward and safeguard the emotional health of their communities, due to the assets and experiences they already had:

- Deep relationships. Faith-based organisations held long-nurtured relationships with individuals across the community. They curate highly networked relationships formed between individuals within and beyond the religious community, rather than an organisation-to-service-user approach.

"We had to develop new relationships, trust and friendships in very little time. It was a big challenge but it worked. Everyone was pulling in same direction, the purpose was clear about why we needed to work together, and there were no competing agendas. It meant those relationships that take years to grow, happened in a couple of weeks. This meant individual sacrifices, but there was that collective pulling in the same direction. There was a willingness by people to take a leap of faith and work together."

Voluntary sector support worker in Greater Manchester

"We were forced to come together and work together hand in hand during the pandemic. Especially in our community in Rochdale we have many charities who work with specific groups. For us, yes we're an Arab group, but we always incorporate different cultures and different people and beliefs into our work."

Young community leader within the Arab community in Greater Manchester

Relationships of care and support: The Good Shepherd Centre, Keighley

The Good Shepherd Centre is a charity in West Yorkshire which supports newly arrived families and individuals from Central and Eastern Europe, alongside other immigrants and refugees. Normally they work with about 150 people every week. The centre is deeply embedded in people's lives, supporting individuals from birth to death - Dorota, the centre manager, has been to about 40 childbirths since she started the job.

The centre remained open throughout COVID-19 but focused on working with people on a 1-2-1 basis, helping to provide food, furniture, and clothing for people. As the immigrant community were cut off from their family and wider support network abroad, and in many cases had No Recourse to Public Funds, they experienced social and financial vulnerability.

The relationships developed through this direct help, as well as the deep interpersonal trust amassed since the centre was founded in 2007, put the centre in a strong position to support the vaccine roll-out. They received a grant from the Near Neighbours Surge programme to do this. As the centre manager Dorota explains, The Eastern and Central European community they work with had high rates of vaccine hesitancy: "There's no trust in the government. The Brexit situation doesn't help, because people feel the government just wants to get rid of them all".

To tackle this trust deficit in the government, they've tapped into their interpersonal trust in communities, for instance running an online coffee morning targeted at small groups of people they knew had anxieties around the vaccine. They have been booking vaccine appointments for people on a daily basis, putting out bilingual factual information about the vaccine in partnership with local GPs. Dorota credits their success in the trust she and the centre have within the community, and the approach they are taking to have open conversations, rather than directly campaign for vaccine uptake.

- **Trust.** Their standing within communities meant faith leaders were well-placed to support people through fear and anxiety. This was integral at a time of anxiety, fear, and misinformation. The 'seat at the table' afforded to faith leaders – their connections with political decision makers and other civil society leaders – was also key to their trusted role as community representatives.

> "It's been a challenging time as people struggled with family members getting ill or experiencing grief, so we wanted to create a safe space where people can feel connected and involved in the positive action to support their community."
>
> Elizabeth, Near Neighbours coordinator, West London

Addressing fears and hesitancy about the vaccine: Black Health Initiative, Leeds

Black Health Initiative (BHI) is a community engagement organisation that works to redress inequalities and inequities of access to health and social care for disadvantaged communities in Leeds and beyond. The health inequalities the pandemic exposed have underlined the importance of their work, with black African seniors over seven times less likely to have had the vaccine than their white counterparts.[13] They have therefore dedicated energy to combatting fear and distrust of the vaccine. This has involved a 'Community Conversations' webinar, with health and faith leaders answering questions; teaming up with York University to do an academic survey around hesitancy; and training up 'Community Champions' to have factual conversations about the vaccine with community members.

Operations Manager Bridget believes faith leaders have a key role in restoring confidence in the vaccine because they can share the facts with moral and ethical authority. She explains their approach: "It's never been about promoting having the vaccination, it's about having a conversation about facts so that people can actually go away armed with the information they need to make a decision".

> "When we are consulted on behalf of our community it's really important. The [Sikh] community understands that we are more and more a part of the wider community, we are being consulted, and people feel valued. We are not forgotten. We are able to go back to the community and say look, you have a voice, I can take you to the platform where you can speak, I can facilitate your viewpoint."
>
> Secretary of a Gurdwara in Luton

- **Experience with grief.** Faith groups were particularly well-equipped to help community members manage loss with dignity and sensitivity. This role has carried a heavy toll for many faith-based organisations that have been at the physical and emotional front lines of death and grief within the crisis.

> "There was a lot of death and loss of loved ones. The most difficult aspect of the pandemic for us was dealing with the funerals. We had six on a single day, which was too many for the volunteers. They were overwhelmed. We had to buy a new vehicle that can transport four bodies at a time. Over the last 12 months we have handled over 120 people. We used to do a maximum of 40 in a year."
>
> Leader of a Somali mosque in Southall, West London

Research participants often compared the highly personalised responses of voluntary and faith-based organisations with that of local authorities which was viewed as relatively cold and uncommunicative. Although participants recognised the extreme pressures on local authorities, sometimes they were seen to hinder the community response.

> "One of the challenges in Southall was that we found ourselves asset-rich in terms of space, without the means to realise this potential. During the pandemic we had a fully fitted industrial kitchen, and a lot of homeless people sleeping outside the centre every night. But we couldn't take them inside simply because we were only licensed for residential purposes. We couldn't be flexible to changing needs because the covenant [with the council] signed 18 months ago shut the doors to the people who most needed the help."
>
> Pastor at a Pentecostal church in Southall

Interfaith support for grief in Leeds

Across our research we've heard powerful testimonies of community responses to grief and loss. One of these stories was told to us by a young Muslim man based in Leeds who works as a community worker with young people and victims of domestic violence:

"For 12 days I watched my grandfather die, and I couldn't be in his presence. And I couldn't touch him, and I couldn't be around him. To be reciting his last rites of last prayers to him on the phone, and not being able to sit in front of him, was the worst and best thing I've ever done. But I was given the honour to be the reciter in front of him as he passed away, and just on the last minute the phone connection went so I didn't actually see him pass until a minute after, but all I saw was his face. And I'm sorry if that is graphic and uncomfortable, but it is the stark reality. In my work, many people have been going through similar things.

"I was angry with everyone because no one came to his funeral, there were barely enough people to lift his coffin and to carry him. And of course, I realised after that they couldn't be there, people need to put their own health and wellbeing first. I'm grateful that he had a tiny funeral, I'm grateful that for his 80 years, people didn't contract COVID-19, but it hurt the people in my household that no one could be there. After that, all of my family except me tested positive for the virus so I had to live in my shed for those two weeks.

"So, my life of the last few weeks has been tough. The positives have been the number of people using their community messengers, using the habit of doing the phone-ins and checking on each other, finding ways to share food and stuff. I realised who my friends are and who my neighbours are. It was a Sikh man that came and was able to make sure there were flowers for my grandfather's coffin. It was a Jewish man that came and brought the first meal to my front door. It was a Hindu man that helped us work with the repatriation services to get his body back to his village in Pakistan. So it was very much an interfaith education.

"It just goes to show it's been a tough time but there is certainly a lot of love in this country. And I'm more grateful now that he came to England in 1964 and made me a citizen of this country than I've ever been before".

In many areas, local authorities turned to faith-based organisations to help reach people and communities which may otherwise have fallen outside of their reach. Research from the APPG Faith and Society suggests that in the context of the COVID-19 response, local authorities most valued the quality of relationships faith-based organisations held within communities.[14]

The emotional support and care provided by faith groups was integral to the quality of their response; and the resulting social confidence the groups created within communities was as vital as the food, money, and practical support they gave.

> **"The feelings that we have been supporting are hope, anxiety, uncertainty, needing to belong, and above all fear. Overall if I could use one term to capture all this it would be 'emotional labour'. The amount of emotional labour that's really been involved in trying to address and manage the pandemic has been huge."**
>
> Marzena, Near Neighbours coordinator, East London

So far, we have established only one side of what made the faith-based response effective in building social confidence – their relational, spiritual, and emotional power. Yet often these interventions were underpinned by wider interfaith support – that is, mutual cooperation between different communities of faith – and national infrastructure and coordination. This highly networked structure is part of what characterises faith-based community action at its best: local faith groups are always part of national or global movements and institutions.

Whilst this chapter focused on the work of individual, local organisations responding directly to their communities' needs, in the following chapter we describe the need to 'connect the dots' between hyperlocal efforts to leverage their impact. At a time of such intense physical, emotional and spiritual need, there were many competing demands on faith groups and community leaders, who may not have been able to cultivate social confidence in the way they did had they not been able to draw on support themselves. The next chapter looks at what infrastructure faith groups themselves needed to be effective in strengthening social confidence in their communities.

3. The support behind the faith-led response

Lessons from Near Neighbours

The previous chapter has shown that in times of intensive community need and uncertainty, faith organisations were able to respond with diverse and well-tailored forms of support. They often played a unique role in local communities because of the relationships, knowledge and trust that had built up over previous years or even decades. However, this does not mean that the community interventions they delivered were an inevitable or easy extension of existing activities, for the organisations or the individual leaders involved. This chapter looks at the ways in which focused support from national networks and institutions helped local efforts. We draw on the experiences from Near Neighbours hubs around the UK, and the factors that made Near Neighbours' approach successful in supporting interfaith activities and amplifying community action at the national level.

Near Neighbours had a strong track record before the pandemic in encouraging and resourcing social action so that people of different faiths could work together to address social issues in their local places and neighbourhoods. The programme infrastructure, networks and knowledge and the experience of the local coordinators played an important and evolving role during the pandemic, from early mobilisation of rapid response activities in local neighbourhoods, to sophisticated mentoring and training that helped organisations and individual leaders build the capacity, skills and connections to develop and scale their efforts. As a result of this approach, Near Neighbours received £1million from the government in early 2021 to deepen and strengthen community activities, particularly around the vaccine roll-out. The work of Near Neighbours is a useful case study when considering how national networks can help local actors boost social confidence across diverse local communities. This is important now, when pronounced health and economic inequalities and regional disparities threaten to hold back our recovery.

3.1. Supporting organisations to evolve their responses

Near Neighbours hub coordinators played an active role supporting grassroots faith-based organisations meet the needs of their communities in crisis. In the early days of the pandemic, Near Neighbours coordinators activated their partner networks, effectively mobilised volunteers, and proactively connected with health leaders to serve and support both their direct communities and wider social ecosystems during the crisis. As the pandemic progressed into summer 2020, Near Neighbours hubs developed the rapid response with grants, mentoring and training. This enabled activities to transition from emergency responses to sustainable community-led

initiatives that have continued to offer support and solace into 2021. When many mutual aid initiatives were fizzling away, Near Neighbours provided the scaffolding for many others to grow and thrive.

A snapshot of the work of a local Near Neighbours coordinator: Kaneez's story

Kaneez is one of the 11 local coordinators dotted across the UK. Based in West Yorkshire, she works across Bradford, Keighley, Leeds and Dewsbury. Her work has spanned from linking up a church-run foodbank to local Muslim food shops when the supermarket shelves were bare; to creating community videos; to supporting victims of domestic violence and the bereaved in her communities. She is proud of the work of the faith and community sector in West Yorkshire and strongly believes that grassroots groups played a powerful role in keeping the nation going when lockdown first happened.

Over the course of the pandemic Kaneez's role evolved to include engagement with public health messaging, both within communities, and between communities and government. Her role evolved again when Near Neighbours received extra funding from the government in January to boost COVID-19 vaccine uptake in local communities. There was a challenging balance to strike amidst a sense that black minority ethnic communities had been neglected for decades, and so the work to counter vaccine hesitancy involved harnessing the connections of hyperlocal community groups and creating grassroots partnerships. Kaneez has helped set up vaccination hubs, community meetings, and Q&A sessions. Challenges remain, particularly in some localities, and in response to new and emerging tensions (such as the response of some communities to the Sewell report on race and ethnic disparities). The conversations she has about COVID-19 and the vaccine are complex, but Kaneez is harnessing the trust she holds within the community to navigate this complexity and continue to represent some of the most marginalised voices.

The Near Neighbours programme has had a historic focus on supporting and stewarding the development of small, community-led, start-up organisations led by people new to community work.[15] The specific challenges and support needs of these organisations during the pandemic response included:

- Connectivity beyond the faith community. Many faith-based organisations felt like they were 'lone battlers' in the early stages of the pandemic, and benefited from connecting with each other to share skills and resources. Connections beyond faith communities, to local authorities, public health bodies and national government, were also imperative to successful action.
- Collective voice on shared challenges. Many faith groups feel the need for coordinated advocacy around specific issues related to the pandemic, such as local authority policy on foodbanks, or institutional discrimination against certain religious communities.
- New skills to address lockdown. Particularly in the initial lockdown, many grassroots groups didn't have the digital know-how they needed to reach their communities online.
- Funding, volunteers and other resources. Many small organisations drew down their reserves to support their community in the initial months of the pandemic, and have been struggling to raise additional funds to sustain their efforts. Other resources such as volunteers have also decreased over time.

> "We had a lot of volunteers supporting us but now people are going back to work they are having trouble sustaining their volunteering. So now I'm wondering how we can support them to volunteer, with either vouchers or a mutual support programme."
>
> Leader of a voluntary organisation supporting Latin-American immigrants in East London

> "We've had to rise to the challenge of not being able to deliver some of our projects. This means we've lost funding because we can't show the outcomes. We've had to look at where we want to target our limited funds to meet the needs of the most important people, who we regard as the elderly and vulnerable."
>
> Community safety and wellbeing champion in Luton

The Near Neighbours local coordinators, supported by the national programme, stepped up to meet these needs in their local places in a number of ways:

- Forging grassroots connections. Near Neighbours forged 332 new partnerships between different faith groups and faith-based organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic – far exceeding their original targets. At times this took the form of brokering a partnership between two groups working in the same area, in other instances Near Neighbours hub coordinators convened coalitions of community groups to meet a pressing community need. By helping groups work together, Near Neighbours enabled the resources, knowledge and skills of each group to be channelled where they would have the most impact, and so amplified the work of individual groups.

- Building bridges to local authorities. Near Neighbours hub coordinators often acted as a bridge between local authorities and grassroots faith-based social action groups, advising council community response planners on interfaith assets and the needs of marginalised communities in the pandemic, for instance around health messaging. They advocated for interfaith networks, conveying their concerns and priorities to decision makers as a collective voice; and spearheaded inclusivity and anti-racism within community responses.

- Mobilising volunteers. Near Neighbours coordinators took an active role supporting faith-based organisations to find and activate volunteers. They mobilised 1,168 volunteers in response to the COVID-19 crisis, of which 321 individuals were new to community volunteering. This not only supported faith-based organisations to deliver their work in the crisis – often connecting them with skilled volunteers for specific tasks such as translation – but enabled more people to be involved in supporting their neighbours and making their community a better place.

- Funding and mentoring. The programme's grants and mentoring offer were important for ensuring grassroots faith-based organisations had the skills and resources they needed to do their work in some of the areas hardest hit by the crisis. Near Neighbours distributed £170,000 to 85 organisations in 2020, and a further £500,000 between January and March 2021, as well as providing mentoring support to 297 projects.

Growing community resilience: Shri Guru Ravidass Sangat, Luton

Shri Guru Ravidass Sangat is a charity and Sikh (Gurdwara) temple in Luton. Their journey with Near Neighbours began in 2016. Their local Near Neighbours coordinator encouraged them to set up a programme called 'Cooking in Harmony', based on the Sikh free community kitchen concept of 'langar', which brought together the Sikh and Irish communities in Luton through cooking authentic Punjabi curries. The cooking and shared meals facilitated deeper conversations about their communities' common experiences, problems, and values. It enabled members to form bonds of understanding, solidarity, and respect. Now, four years on, they are still attending each other's social and religious events: "that mutual respect has now turned into a friendship" says the temple Secretary, Sanjeev. From the project, the Gurdwara were able to present their findings at the House of Lords, and were selected to meet the Queen to mark their success. Since then, the work has snowballed and they have done similar projects with the Red Cross, local church groups and other faith groups. One of their partners, Warden Hill Community Centre, offered them a waste site which they have developed into a community garden.

When COVID-19 began, members of the Gurdwara delivered hot meals to key workers, homeless people, and other communities they had got to know through their Near Neighbours work. Drawing on their core volunteers, they delivered 6,300 hot meals in the first lockdown, and a further 8,000 meals from the November 2020 lockdown onwards. Near Neighbours funding enabled them to sustain their work beyond the first lockdown. As a result of the 'Surge' programme they have partnered with community wellbeing group Penrose Roots, who focus on environmental projects that improve mental wellbeing. The Penrose Roots members have helped the Sikh community to grow produce for more community meals, whilst supporting mental health recoveries in a space of peace and reflection. They hope this garden will help nurture new community initiatives, more trusting relationships, and a healthier, more resilient community: "We never would have believed that the first Near Neighbours project would have brought us to where we are now".

3.2. Nurturing individual leaders and building solidarity

Individual faith and community leaders played a powerful role within the community response, mediating between different groups, providing emotional support to communities, and giving a voice to the experiences of their neighbourhoods. The Near Neighbours' hub coordinators and national training programme helped existing leaders work together and sustain momentum; supported new leaders to emerge and take action; and pioneered new models of distributed and shared community leadership.

Many faith leaders poured their hearts and souls into supporting their community in the initial stages of the pandemic. This left organisations under-resourced and tired as the crisis continued.

> "I need a break. They need a break. We need rest, and we need a social gathering, which we can't do. There's a collective healing that's missing. I need to see my family and I haven't seen them for more than a year, but I know that as bad as it might feel for me, it's worse for the migrant people. I need a break, I know I need a break, I need to get the hell out of here."
>
> Director of a Catholic retreat centre in Tower Hill, East London

Faith leaders were not only responding to community needs during the crisis, but needed support themselves to work sustainably and effectively. Near Neighbours supported them in the following ways:

- Mentoring and 1-2-1 support: Near Neighbours hub coordinators provided individualised training and mentoring for faith leaders across their networks. This ranged from help with funding applications or digital skills, to brokering connections between community leaders and local authorities. In many cases, they helped active neighbours and 'community movers' – people keen to make a difference but without a specific outlet – to flesh out their ambitions, connect with others, and lead practical initiatives in their neighbourhood.

Building the foundations for sustainable community leadership: Julia in Nottingham

Julia works as a women's community organiser for a church in Nottingham. She moved to Nottingham in 2020 with few connections, but huge passion and a wealth of experience working as a counsellor with women who have suffered or are suffering domestic abuse both in her home country of Kenya, and in London.

In October Julia got in contact with Lindsay, the Near Neighbours coordinator in Nottingham, to enquire about funding and they have since struck up a strong relationship. Lindsay helped channel Julia's drive and experience into tangible and sustainable actions: securing funding, setting up formal peer-support groups, facilitating connections with other community organisations, and providing access to technology for groups. Having the support and funding has provided firm foundations for the future. As Lindsay says, "I expect the group could have started without us, but with us, Julia has some resources to use long term and a bit of a pathway to form future groups. By encouraging collaboration with other women working locally, she is sharing the load and ensuring more women are being equipped to do as she does".

From a good neighbour to community organiser: Khulsuma in East London

Khulsama is a conservative Muslim woman living in East London. In 2019 she went through Near Neighbours' Women 100 leadership training programme, co-run with The East London Community Organisation. Despite previously lacking the confidence to participate in public life, after the training Khulsuma has become active in organising women, particularly from Bengali and Somali communities, in a local support network.

At the beginning of lockdown, Khulsuma was instrumental in setting up Shadwell Responds, together with the East London Near Neighbours hub and wider community sector. She organised a team of women to sew PPE and cook hot meals for NHS staff and vulnerable local people, reached out to local families to see what they needed, and when Near Neighbours helped raise money for laptops for digitally excluded families, she led a small panel of diverse leaders to decide on laptop allocation.

Khulsama is now a key member of her local community. Marzena, the East London Near Neighbours Coordinator commented "She's excellent at bringing people together, organising logistics and keeping other people motivated". This is an example of how Near Neighbours has supported one woman to grow her confidence and leadership capacity, in turn enabling her to build a wider network of Muslim women in East London, and support the whole local community.

- Formal training: Near Neighbours delivered formal training programmes such as the 'Catalyst' programme for young leaders; or the 'COVID Cash Recovery' course for leaders needing to support community members in financial distress. Training was delivered to over 2,700 women and 1,600 young people in 2020.

Creating a collaborative intercultural ethos: Omar in Greater Manchester

Omar was a young child when he came to the UK from Palestine. His involvement and volunteering in his community from a young age has played an essential role in allowing him to appreciate the difficulties that refugees and asylum seekers face, particularly lack of support for the growing Arab community in Greater Manchester. In 2017 he attended one of the Near Neighbours young leaders' training programmes called Catalyst. With support from Samra, his local Near Neighbours coordinator, he went on to have conversations with his community and see what support was needed. As a result, he helped co-found a community organisation called Lamet Habayeb Association or, roughly translated, 'A circle of close friends'. Omar, now Vice Chair, explains, "We decided to create a group in order to bring Arabs together. To make sure our views are heard and represented."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Omar and his team used Near Neighbours training sessions to develop their work, attending training on digital, fundraising, and mental health. As a result, they tailored their services to continue to support their members during this time: they ran online cookery classes; online hate crime awareness training; and worked with other organisations in the community to support struggling families with food parcels. Samra, the Near Neighbours coordinator, also made an introduction to the Penny Appeal who gave them food parcels to distribute to their members. Going forward, Omar would like to see a renewed focus on supporting grassroots, self-led community action. Omar says, "by coming together and combining our efforts to help people, we'd have a bigger and better effect".

- Peer exchange and solidarity: Whilst adrenalin powered the first wave of the community response in Spring 2020, by the autumn many community leaders were beginning to suffer from burnout. As well as the direct support from Near Neighbours coordinators, the programme convened local interfaith communities for support and solidarity. In early 2021 each local coordinator brought together a group of 15-25 faith and community leaders from across the area in a session called 'Stories of Hope'. Here leaders shared experiences of the pandemic, made connections between their work, and discussed pathways to a better future for their communities.

Sharing community action pathways: Black Pentecostal Church leaders' training in East London

In Autumn 2020, the Near Neighbours East London hub, brought together church pastors and members of their congregations from Black Pentecostal churches across East and South London. The training explored ideas of social justice in the context of faith and public life. It aimed to share knowledge between leaders, as well as build bridges between different churches and neighbourhood community organisations.

The session highlighted stories of where collaboration had worked well. For instance, Mother Cecilia from On the Rock Ministries church in Barking and Dagenham shared her story of how Near Neighbours funding helped her organise football sessions with young people on a local housing estate. When the pandemic began, Mother Cecilia drew on these new relationships to organise a mutual aid group. The training also encouraged participants to imagine how they can apply learning in their local communities with support from Near Neighbours. As a result, the East London Near Neighbours team is now mentoring three leaders who are building new interfaith initiatives in Lewisham and Hackney. This illustrates an impactful leadership development journey, where the assets and experience of faith leaders is harnessed through a training event, seeding inspiration, brokering connections, and leading to real-world impact in local communities.

"Events like this [Stories of Hope] help, connections like this help. You can sit at home all day and not meet anyone. These events are very helpful. I don't think we're going to ever get rid of the virus but hopefully we can ramp up our social interaction."

Community leader in Peterborough

At a grassroots level, the faith-based community response was often powered by the work of individual, highly driven leaders. Near Neighbours reflected this by targeting support to the individual leader, rather than just the organisation, and enabling them to connect with and support each other.

3.3. The ingredients of effective support

2020 was a pivotal year for the Near Neighbours programme, with the reach and scale of the programme expanding significantly in some of the most diverse and disadvantaged communities in England. This wasn't an automatic or easy response to the crisis, but the result of a concerted effort to develop the most useful and impactful version of the programme possible in some of the UK's worst affected communities. At times, the pandemic has made it harder to deliver outcomes – whilst in previous years a large majority of participants said Near Neighbours improved their confidence to make a difference in their community, only 40% did in Spring of 2020, rising to 52% in Autumn. This may point towards a more entrenched sense of crisis in communities over the course of the pandemic, or it perhaps demonstrates the importance of face-to-face relationships. Nevertheless, our research highlighted some distinctive and unique factors that enabled Near Neighbours to deepen impact, and effectively support social confidence in the places served by the programme:

- A values-led approach to diversity and equality. Near Neighbours have a strong history of supporting and funding grassroots community-led activities, particularly work led by Black, Asian, and ethnic minority communities such as Gypsy Travellers. 59% of Near Neighbours 2020 grant applicants were Black or Asian, and 40% were born outside of the UK.[16] In 2019, 28% of grant applicants had never applied for a grant before.[17] This points to the powerful role of the local hub coordinator, who can cultivate initiatives and personal relationships with groups who are under-funded by most mainstream foundations. In a pandemic that disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of Black and Asian people, and in a year that saw racism put under a spotlight by the Black Lives Matter Movement, these deep connections with communities of colour enabled Near Neighbours to provide a backbone for relevant, trusted, and useful responses for these communities. By bringing people together by faith, not just race, Near Neighbours operates beyond different identities through a lens of shared values and purpose.

Mediating the Black Lives Matter movement: Stories from Luton and Peterborough

Alongside the pandemic, 2020 was shaped by the heightened public awareness of racism within institutions and communities. This was triggered not only by the Black Lives Matter movement but also dramatic health inequalities which left minority ethnic groups disproportionately vulnerable. Near Neighbours has a long history of promoting inclusivity across cultural and ethnic groups and the way the local hubs responded demonstrated a desire to 'show up' for Black people and communities of colour.

In Peterborough, the local Near Neighbours coordinator Femi channelled funding to amplify the voices of young people from BAME communities. She collaborated with the Peterborough Racial Equality Council (PREC) to launch 'For the City's Sake', a research report which raised awareness of issues of racism within Peterborough and sketched out pathways to action. The report received praise from different faith leaders and led to the founding of a young people's working group on racial equality.

In Luton, the Near Neighbours hub helped organise a Black Lives Matter event attended by over 2,000 people, working with the police, the council, young black leaders, local organisations, and faith leaders to ensure a peaceful and meaningful protest. The hub supported the young people to voice their concerns over stop and search, and the death of a young man in police custody two years ago. Moving forward, they are arranging for Home Office representatives to attend a community forum meeting to improve community relations.

- **Hyperlocal responses to hyperlocal need.** The place-based model for Near Neighbours has meant that over an extended period of time, the 11 hubs have successfully built capacity within communities to deal with crises. The autonomy given to local coordinators meant that the programme adapts to the specificities of each local context, resulting in bespoke community networks that they could mobilise quickly in the crisis. Grants provided as part of the programme are earmarked for small scale, locally generated activities. From 2011 to 2016, for instance, between 68% and 81% of projects awarded small grants funding are delivering in the same postcode area that the lead organisation is based.[18] This long-term approach embeds resilience in communities and helps them weather different types of crises.

  "I'm very passionate about local problems and local solutions. How we care for our neighbours needs to be spoken about more. It is inspirational the way that people in Luton care and see [sex trafficking] as their problem, not a state problem... I wish more people knew about the local solutions here. About the individuals here who give sacrificially to create the solutions."

  Leader of a charity that fights sex trafficking in Luton

- **Networked power.** Effective collective responses during the COVID-19 pandemic had to make sound uses of each partner's time, assets, expertise, and networks. Near Neighbours' experience of knitting together distinct faiths, charities, and grassroots group became key here. Brap's 2019 review found that 73% of participants reported that Near Neighbours support has increased their ability to network, and that 88% continued to work with different faith or ethnic groups after training sessions.[19] This meant that Near Neighbours has been building networked power systems – where power is defined by interdependency, contribution, and connection – that could lead the rapid response whilst systems of hierarchical power faltered.

  "We don't always do the softly-softly approach. We are quite strategic in how we bring together community leaders and get them to commit to change. Near Neighbours is quite key in bringing together these influencers to build one strategic approach and galvanise goodwill. To have one platform is really important."

  Elizabeth, Near Neighbours coordinator, West London

- **Personal connection.** The 11 local coordinators are key to the programme's success. They act as the faces of Near Neighbours and use their local knowledge, connections, and trust to make sure the money and training is being wisely distributed. Local coordinators are often trusted community leaders and are called upon to advise local government and services on the needs of their communities.

  "[My local Near Neighbours coordinator] has been very helpful not just because she knows me personally, but because she also has a feel for the community that I'm working with because she'll come out and see and hear and have that conversation."

  Bridget, Operations Manager, Black Health Initiative, Leeds

  "Kaneez [local Near Neighbours coordinator] has become a real friend. Working with Near Neighbours as a funder is the first time it's felt like I'm working with a family member, which is very open and honest, you can raise your concerns, and say what works and what doesn't work. I've never felt worried to say if it's not all working well."

  Dorota, Centre Manager, The Good Shepherd Centre, Keighley

  "Kim [local Near Neighbours coordinator] has been very supportive, giving us information, guiding us, and sometimes even giving us partners to approach."

  Secretary of a Gurdwara in Luton

The Near Neighbours approach is based on core principles of Asset Based Community Development. It draws on the best of what the faith community can bring to communities; sees multiculturalism and diversity within communities as a huge opportunity, rather than a risk factor; keeps things local and rooted in real peoples' lives; and, through the hub coordinator, provides a highly relational and personable element which balances the power of the network with the need to engage with community members on a personal and emotional level.

A review of Near Neighbours by the Woolf Institute in 2016 stressed the importance of the general 'ethos' which interfaith action, and a Near Neighbours hub more specifically, creates in an area, suggesting that this ethos enabled "the development

of projects across different groups, even without Near Neighbours funding". We could name this ethos as social confidence, and see how during the pandemic a backdrop of shared values, common goals, personal relationships and confidence in each other, enabled an agile and effective community response. The Near Neighbours' approach builds communities' social confidence by working from the individual outwards, working with leaders, organisations, and then neighbourhoods. In doing so, Near Neighbours both addressed the direct needs of grassroots faith groups involved in community action, and provided a wider support infrastructure for communities' social confidence.

The next chapter explores what those beyond the faith sector can learn from the work of grassroots faith-based organisations and the supportive infrastructure of Near Neighbours. These lessons are 'building blocks for social confidence', which not only show how faith-based community action will be crucial in rebuilding more equal and connected communities, but also signpost the lessons and pathways for secular organisations and services to develop their practice and deepen their impact.

4. Conclusion

The building blocks of social confidence

The COVID-19 crisis is going to impact our lives for some time. Although thinking about 'the light at the end of the tunnel' gives us hope, it is clear that the social and economic effects of the pandemic will continue, in ways we cannot yet know, for years to come. The levels of uncertainty over the course of the pandemic to date have profound implications for our social confidence: the trust and conviction we have in ourselves, our local communities and our institutions to look after our individual and collective wellbeing. Looking forward to the future, it is important to understand how we can preserve and restore social confidence even in times of prolonged uncertainty.

From the work of faith-based organisations and the interfaith networks supporting them during the pandemic, we can extract a set of lessons and principles on how to incubate, grow and restore social confidence. These 'building blocks' provide insights and lessons for others in civil society and the public sector, on what our communities need to become more resilient and hopeful about the future. They also show that faith-based community action will be a crucial part of rebuilding a more equal and connected post-pandemic society.

> "Everything changed. But I think it has really made us all aware that there is no limit, we can always improve, and we can always develop. It has encouraged us to take different forms and different approaches and think about things in different ways and that has been a really interesting learning curve. I don't think after lockdown this is going to end. It's going to keep continuing and we're going to build on it quite positively."
>
> Young community leader within the Arab community in Great Manchester

With this in mind, we can learn from the successes of faith-based organisations and interfaith networks to extract the following principles for social confidence:

- Social confidence is fuelled by collective responsibility and duty, more than individual rights. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, more people felt that they could rely on each other, and that they lived in a community who cared for each other.[20] Many philosophies of social action grounded in religious teachings stress collective responsibility and the duty we have to support one another.[21] Having on-the-ground infrastructure to support and guide those who want to exercise this duty is crucial to converting latent civic potential into actions which can genuinely impact on our collective wellbeing.

> "In our faith, Islam, when you do charity with the left hand the right hand shouldn't know. The community is a bit like a body: if your finger hurts then the whole body is suffering."
>
> Chair of interfaith work at a Mosque in Birmingham

- Social confidence is generated through strong relationships. The Near Neighbours approach demonstrates the value of strong relationships. The programme cultivates interfaith partnerships to build trust and unlock community capacity to be resourceful and self-reliant. This supports the findings of the Carnegie UK Trust's research into public services which finds that it is this focus on 'relational power' which helps people thrive rather than cope.[22] Although relationships can't be replicated or systematised through processes, a relational approach can be applied to other services and systems.[23]

> "What's going to be really key is to provide spaces for people to heal collectively. It could be sports or creative arts... but I think we need more recognition for government and local government that people based in communities are best placed to know how to help their communities heal, and to give communities the autonomy and the money to do that. It will look different for each of us, but I just think providing that physical space for people to come together collectively is the only way we're going to heal."
>
> Priest and interfaith advisor on women's engagement, Bradford

- Social confidence is strengthened by diversity. Our ability to forge shared values and trust across difference is directly affected by levels of social confidence. By definition, interfaith networks, broker and encourage diversity within community life, countering perceptions of religious, ethnic, or cultural differences through a sense of shared purpose. Going forward, civil society could learn from the commitment of interfaith networks to work with diversity as an asset, and the ways in which values-based social action serves as a common ground for people from different faiths, races, ages, and backgrounds.

- Social confidence is contingent on personal esteem and individual worth. Although social confidence does not simply refer to the personal confidence of individuals and is 'more than the sum of its parts', it cannot exist if individuals are feeling apprehensive, undervalued or threatened. This is why asset-based

approaches to community support, which draw on the skills and experiences of community members, grow social confidence as well as the skills and capabilities of individuals. The focus of Near Neighbours on training and mentoring individual leaders demonstrates the impact of strong and focused leaders for their communities.

- **Social confidence is built up by experiencing difficult emotions** as much as positive ones. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent to which communities feel able to support neighbours through grief, depression, anxiety, and fear was a test of social confidence. Faith-led groups' experience of working with death and grief meant they have been better equipped than most to deal with this. Acknowledging and providing expression for the people and things we have lost, as individuals and communities, reaffirms belief in the value of all human life, and is therefore a potential route to strengthen our collective resilience and self-efficacy in the future.

  "I think the negative for me both as a priest and personally has been bereavement and grief in COVID-19. You can't get together to heal in all the ways you would have be able to before. I'm really worried about the long-term impact on people's mental health, and how all of that unexpressed grief is going to come out."

  Priest and interfaith advisor on women's engagement, Bradford

- **Social confidence is built when civil society has the power and freedom to speak convincingly about complex topics.** As our research has demonstrated, health messaging around lockdown measures and the vaccine is sensitive and complex. Faith-based organisations have stepped into a role as trusted mediators of information not because they are unequivocally backing the government's messages, but because they steward open conversations and communicate people's fears and anxieties back to the authorities. When our community organisations have this voice to speak about complex issues within communities, and the independence to speak truth to power, we can see social confidence in action.

  "It can sometimes challenge the trust we have in our community to work on the vaccine, but that's where our confidence and our reputation comes in, because people do trust us. If they didn't trust us, they wouldn't even look at the message. We've got to make sure that the people involved in developing messages are also part of our community, and are also respected, and the message that we're getting out has to be accurate and fair."

  Head of a community health charity in Blackburn.

- **Social confidence is boosted when community initiatives have a support scaffolding.** Without the infrastructure to sustain and support it, social action bubbles up but pops easily. The work of Near Neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic provided firm foundations for faith-based community action by resourcing new initiatives, connecting existing ones, and enabling leaders to thrive. Our social confidence relies on the continued strength and prominence of funding and support programmes which help voluntary and community organisations sustain their work.

  "All the good things that happened during the pandemic wouldn't be possible if there wasn't this infrastructure in place. If the civic society organisations were not doing what they did. If you believe in that, then you should invest in it."

  Marzena, Near Neighbours coordinator, East London

- **Social confidence is catalysed by an enabling state.** The outpouring of social action in the initial stages of the pandemic can be credited, in part, to local authorities taking a step back. When local authorities enabled, rather than controlled and dictated, the community response shone. Whilst in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic this was due to local authorities' lack of resources, in future this sort of "community power paradigm"[24] can be by design. The events of 2020 and 2021 gave us a glimpse of the large-scale possibilities and pitfalls of this approach. When communities have the ability, resources, freedom, and permission to design their own services and collective lives, social confidence is realised.

  "We need to decentralise decisions and power, and then give local communities the power and the authority to make decisions about what they need. Things like schools and faith groups can play a central pivotal role in that, because there's a huge deal of trust between schools and families, or faith

groups and families. And I think by empowering those organisations, these bedrocks of our society, we can move towards equality."

Board member at a foundation trust in Bradford, and foster parent

"I worked really closely with the local authority and what's been a real step change in the pandemic is their frequent praise for the work of the faith and community sectors. And I think what we need to do going forward is make sure we're capturing that, and that's not just putting out a 'lessons learned' report to gather dust. How do we use the change in perceptions to change how grants are distributed, or services are commissioned?"

Research lead at a voluntary sector consortium in Birmingham

By understanding the building blocks of social confidence, we can understand how to grow agency, power, potential, and the ability to act together to shape the future of our communities.

The transition into the post-COVID world is a time of anxiety and apprehension, but it is also a time to reassess our values and priorities as a society, and identify the mechanisms and principles which can help shape a stronger future. This report has explored how to build social confidence using the mechanisms and principles deployed by faith-based organisations and interfaith networks as an example of what has already been effective. As this research shows, the work to build back social confidence is already happening. We now need to trust and invest in developing this practice further. In order to heal our communities, we must ensure their emotional recovery is supported, alongside their social and economic renewal.

Acknowledgements

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