

Working with Communities

Creating opportunities for the people we support

Our vision is a society where all people are equal participants and have access to the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.

This means people enjoying the good things of life, and having roles in their communities in which they are recognised and valued for what they have to offer. People we support can't enjoy such a life if it's spent only in services. We need to ensure that the work we do providing a service doesn't contain people's lives there.

Making new friends and building relationships in a community or local neighbourhood is more difficult for many people now than it used to be.

Our parents and grandparents gathered together more often, for example at dance halls, in faith groups or at football matches. Today fewer people meet in faith groups, and while many still enjoy dancing and football, a lot of people only watch it at home on television. We now spend more of our leisure time indoors, absorbed in the internet or watching television. When we do go out, it's often only to do the shopping.

In many places, industries once employed generations of local people who together built associations around sport and other leisure activities. Today, family and working life is very different. People are living longer and many more of us are living alone.



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Time and time again people we support tell us that developing relationships is what's most important to them

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People aged between **25 and 44** are **five times more likely** to be **living alone** than four decades ago.

Office for National Statistics

Our work often involves providing a service with the aim of meeting individuals' needs, but simply working with people as individuals is not enough. If we want to support people to lead full lives we need to build on our person centred approaches and work with the communities and neighbourhoods where people live. We need to explore the community and learn about the people we find there in a way that makes sense for the people we support.

Learning about the community and the people there will help us create more opportunities for the people we support to build relationships. It will also help us discover how our work can make a difference to the lives of more people who are at risk of isolation.

"What we learn about the community can tell us as much or more about what's possible for a person, as person centred planning can help us understand by just listening and focusing on the person.

In other words when we're looking for capacities in both the person and community, sometimes there has been way too much emphasis on the capacities of the person and we have not learned anything about the community. We can't honour the spirit of person centred planning without knowing deeply what is in the community and what the opportunities are there."

Beth Mount, author of *Make a Difference: A Guidebook for Person Centered Direct Support*. Inclusion Press. Inclusion Press, 2005.

Why friendships and relationships matter

Relationships keep us healthy and happy in a way nothing else can. They keep us safe and independent because they are the means by which we find out what is going on, how we can make a difference to others and who can help us. The more people we know, the more opportunities and new ideas will come our way. The more our life is spent inside services or only with paid staff, the more isolated and vulnerable we become.

We know that loneliness and social isolation both damage people's health. Research shows that social isolation is more harmful than a sense of loneliness. Not having others involved in our lives and not being involved in the lives of other people is harmful whether people complain they are lonely or not.

We need to remember how important this is. Time and time again people we support tell us that developing relationships is what's most important to them but all too easily we find ourselves prioritising other things.

Why developing friendships and relationships can be harder

We need to be aware of the reasons why people we support sometimes find it harder to develop and maintain relationships. If we want to help people develop friendships we should consider the reasons why we might find it difficult ourselves and also why other people might find it harder to become friends with people we support.

Why people we support find it harder

There are a number of reasons that developing and maintaining friendships can be harder for the people we support.

- **Movement** – people have often moved out of family homes into other places – sometimes well away from the communities they grew up in.
- **Prejudice and discrimination** – many people often find themselves needing to overcome the negative attitudes of others before they make new relationships. Indeed they may be actively avoided in social situations because they seem incapable of contributing equally to a potential acquaintance or friendship.
- **Segregation** – many people have been segregated into specialist accommodation, hospitals and day centres for most of their lives. Their relationships can be lost when these places close down.
- **Communication** – people sometimes communicate in ways that are unfamiliar to many people.
- **Exclusion** – many people have experienced long periods of exclusion in their lives or have repeatedly been excluded from opportunities for friendships.
- **Lack of experience** – some people we support have very little experience of having relationships with people who are not paid to be in their life.
- **Stigma** – some people experience social stigma as a consequence of their disability or health conditions.

We need to be aware of the reasons why people we support sometimes find it harder to develop and maintain relationships

Why we find it difficult

When we focus all our attention on meeting people's needs and overcoming problems, it becomes easy to underestimate both people we support and people living in the local community. We want to develop our practice and support people to participate in the community. Therefore we need to reflect honestly on the reasons why we might find it difficult. Sometimes we find it difficult to believe people we support can have friends and relationships.

- We may find it difficult to believe people have something to offer which other people will want.
- Loneliness and isolation can be seen as normal and what we come to expect for people.
- We often don't notice isolation and loneliness. Busily focusing our efforts on supporting people with activities can obscure our view of their loneliness and isolation.
- The place we occupy in peoples' lives can obstruct their opportunities to make new friends outside of services.
- We may be scared of the "what ifs" out of concern for what we may be held responsible for as well as what might happen to people.
- Our funders and regulators may not attach the same importance to overcoming social isolation as they do to other aspects of our support.
- Our funders and regulators might be scared of the "what ifs" out of concern for what they might be held responsible for.
- We are often unfamiliar with the communities and neighbourhoods where we support people to live.
- Sometimes we have negative or prejudiced views of people living in the local communities and neighbourhoods we work in.



Why other people find it difficult

There are number of reasons why people find it difficult to develop relationships with people we support.

- People we support sometimes look different or behave in ways which can appear strange to other people.
- People are not encouraged to be part of the lives of people we support or are viewed with suspicion by others if they try to be.
- People don't realise they can get to know people we support naturally and informally without becoming a "volunteer".
- Sometimes people don't know how to behave around people we support, how to communicate with them or include them.
- People can be wary of someone who is accompanied by a "carer", especially if it's not clear what the carer is doing and why they are there.
- People are put off getting to know a person accompanied by someone using jargon or talking negatively about them.



What we need to do

- Believe in people's potential.
- Deliberately work to overcome any negative views and attitudes we may have.
- Learn about the communities and neighbourhood where the people we support live. Take an interest in the people who live there and what matters to them.
- Set an example of caring about the local neighbourhood and the people who live there, especially when others don't.
- Be prepared to skilfully challenge others' prejudice by creating opportunities for them to meet and spend time with people we support. We shouldn't presume people will discriminate against them.
- Support people to remember relationships and keep in touch with others they've shared their lives with.
- Support others to communicate with people we support. Pass on our skills and understanding in communicating with people with complex needs.
- Avoid letting our own fears of the "scary what ifs" perpetuate people's exclusion. Instead, talk them through with colleagues.
- Talk positively to and about people.

Accentuate the positive / Eliminate the negative

We often meet people who have been labelled or described to us in negative and unhelpful ways. We can go on to see changes in their lives which only a few years before we might have thought impossible. We know from our experience that the way people communicate, their behaviours and anxieties around others and the situations they engage in can be completely transformed over time. This kind of change usually takes place with gradual progress in very small steps like we use in Active Support. It begins when we overcome the negative attitudes we and others may hold, which limit our expectations of people only to the relationships and situations they experience now.

Similarly, our progress in working with communities can only begin when we recognise how much of an obstacle our negative attitudes are to us supporting people to build relationships and have a role in the community.



- *"There's nothing here."*
- *"Working with communities is all well and good in some little village but not round here...no one talks to you. People don't want to know each other. They're scared; it's rough and dangerous."*
- *"Working with communities is all well and good in a city where there are lots of people, but this is a just a little place. Everyone's at work during the day and in the evening they just stop in or go out somewhere else. People here don't know each other anymore."*
- *"We can't work with communities without more money."*

Many communities include people who are living with problems and difficulties in their neighbourhood. It's not our role to fix communities and neighbourhoods any more than it is our role to fix the people we support who live there.

Every community includes people who want to make things better and often will when given the opportunity. Not every community is based in one geographical place. Communities can be built around a faith or sport or any other common interest.

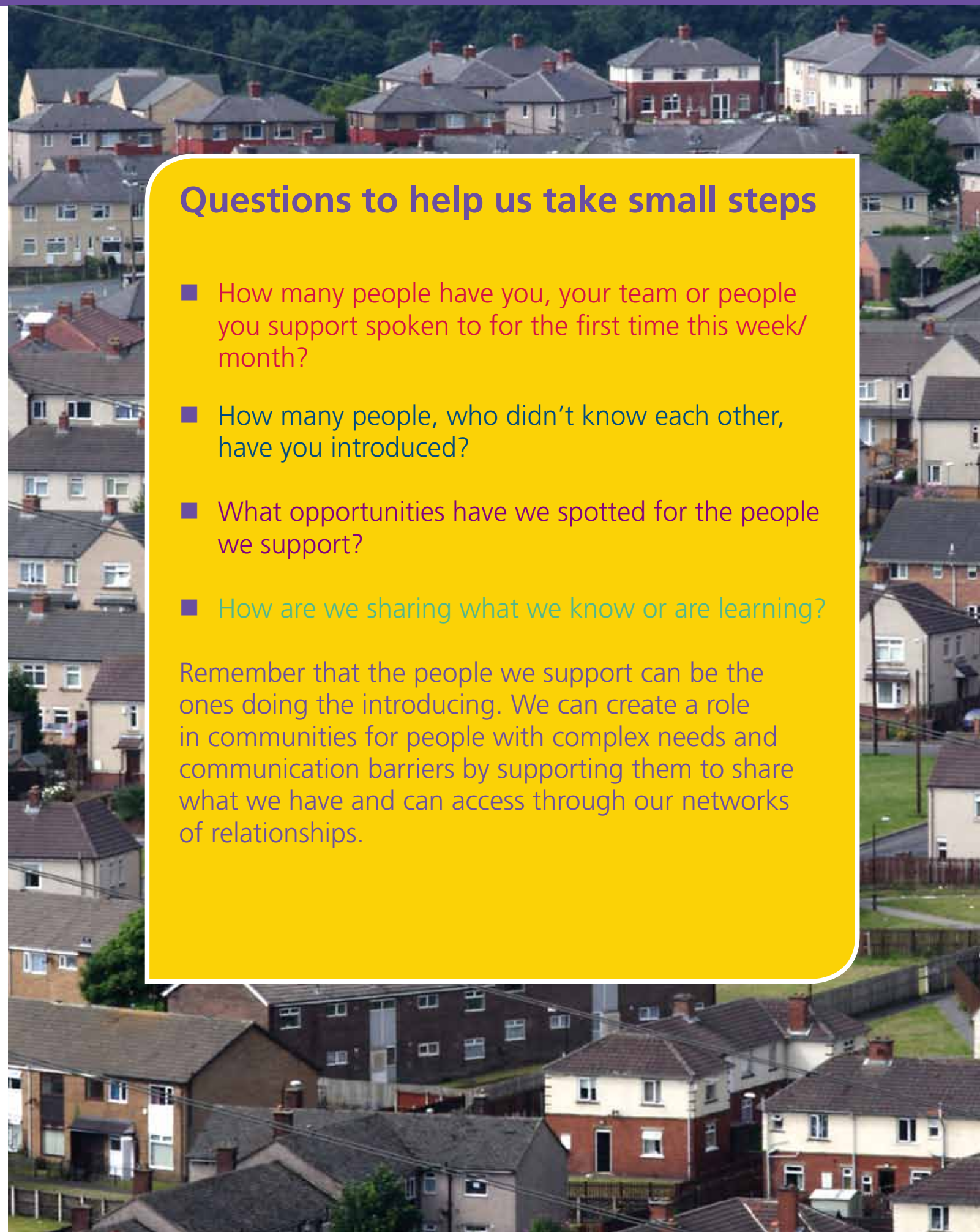
We can always do something with more money but we're trying to build real friendships and relationships for people we support. We can't expect money to do that.

It's important that we shouldn't limit our exploration of the community only to the things we currently think might involve opportunities for people we support. The more people we get to know the more likely we are to discover new opportunities and future possibilities for people to have roles and relationships in the community.

Questions to help us take small steps

- How many people have you, your team or people you support spoken to for the first time this week/month?
- How many people, who didn't know each other, have you introduced?
- What opportunities have we spotted for the people we support?
- How are we sharing what we know or are learning?

Remember that the people we support can be the ones doing the introducing. We can create a role in communities for people with complex needs and communication barriers by supporting them to share what we have and can access through our networks of relationships.



How we can do this

Be a good neighbour

“Little things, such as avoiding eye contact on a crowded bus or dropping a piece of litter in the street can add to people’s feelings of detachment. A smile of recognition to a stranger or a random act of kindness can brighten the day of everyone who experiences them”

Martin Simon, *Your Money or your Life*

We know from our own experience that it’s the little things that can make a big difference to people’s sense of connectedness and wellbeing. We can begin to make a difference to people’s relationships in the community simply by supporting people to be good neighbours. Support staff have a huge influence on how the people we support are perceived by others in the local community. The way we behave and talk around someone we support is often what gives others their impression of that person. We can make a difference to how people we support are perceived by just saying hello. We should make a point of talking to local people, gradually getting to know them and learning what’s important to them.

We can include people we support in conversations with others in a way that makes use of the things they can do or have to offer,

just as we do with other tasks or activities. Some people can find it difficult at first to be part of such conversations and a few people we support may always be uncomfortable with it, but our support can bridge the gap in people’s skills or experience of conversations with others.

Gradually we can change people’s perception of people we support and encourage others to recognise them and what they can contribute. We can keep an eye out for how other people are doing and offer practical help with the time people have. This could be, for example, supporting people to take in the bins for the neighbours, taking in a parcel or offering to fetch some shopping while out. People we support can set an example by caring about where they live, helping the local neighbourhood watch, looking after the street, sweeping up leaves or picking up litter.

James’s story



James likes to go out for a coffee so we support him nearly every day to go to a local café. We used to take him in his car but what we achieved in the community was quite limited. We’d get in to the car, drive to the café, maybe say hello to the people who served us, drink our coffee and then get back in the car and come home. One day we weren’t able to use the car because of heavy snow. We decided to take the bus and this meant we had to walk a mile to reach the bus route to town. Even now when the snow’s gone, we’ve been doing this most days for a couple of months. On his route to the bus stop James walks past the garden of a lady who has a dog. James loves animals and over a period of weeks he began to speak to the lady and got to know the name of the dog. Eventually he offered to take her dog for a walk and now they’ve developed a relationship where the lady will invite him in for a drink and James will take her dog for a walk. Further along the walk to the bus stop are some shops. We discovered that James’s aunt works in one of the shops. Now James regularly goes into the shop where his aunt works and she gives him a hug and talks about how things are going in his life. Another of the shops is a tanning parlour. It has a tortoise in the window and James goes into that shop almost every day, strokes the tortoise, and talks to the staff there. By changing our routine to include a walk in the local neighbourhood and making a point of talking to local people we’ve supported James to build new friendships and relationships with people in the community.

Senior Support Worker, Tyneside



Join what's already there

Before we can know what people we support can contribute to a community, we need to know that community. Working with communities does not mean we should try to meet everyone's needs or fix every problem in the local neighbourhood. We need to explore the community and discover who lives there and what is important to them.

We need to take time to discover what brings people together. We can identify local groups and community events and the local places where people gather such as faith groups, allotments, community centres etc. We could attend local ward meetings or get copied in to the minutes. We need to find out who organises things and who already connects people and can introduce us to others.

Tips for getting a positive response

When trying to work with a community, don't expect results quickly, it takes time. There is no substitute for meeting people face to face and getting to know one person at a time. It only takes one conversation with one person to make a breakthrough. Each time you try, you might get the response you're looking for or you might not. It's important that you patiently persevere. There are some things that you can do which will improve your chances of getting a positive response from people.

You are more likely to get a positive response if you:

- talk and behave positively about the person you support.
- talk in real everyday language and don't use service jargon.
- mention someone or something you have in common.
- just ask for advice or knowledge at first; "do you know someone who might...?"
- ask for or offer a piece of practical help.
- ask for small and specific things; gaining a small commitment makes it easier to gain a large one.
- ask if the person can join in something already happening that requires no new effort.
- make it mutual – we are 'hard-wired' to return favours.
- listen for the reasons why people say 'no'. Discuss with your colleagues and prepare for that next time.
- talk to people about why they are unable to help; unpick it with them.
- You do not always have to ask directly. Instead try turning your approach into an invitation; e.g., 'Can you imagine John ever joining your group?', rather than 'Can John join your group?' This will allow someone to consider a request without feeling challenged by it.

Adapted from *Connecting People* by Clare Wightman of Coventry Grapevine

Laura's story



Every two weeks I help run a local tea dance for older people. United Response support workers introduced us to Laura. She started coming to help us wash up when we had had our cup of tea. She was so shy and reserved when she started. Her support worker even brought a tea towel to encourage her into the kitchen. No such luck. She wants to dance and that's what she does. She has a great time, laughing, giving us hugs and telling us about where she is going on holiday. Recently Laura started coming to a craft group we hold in the communal lounge attached to local sheltered housing. The group makes cards round one of the tables in the lounge and someone usually brings some cake and we have a cup of tea. Other people who live in the sheltered housing use the lounge and people from other community groups come and go while our craft group are there. Laura doesn't really get involved in actually making things in the group. But everyone who is around enjoys chatting with her. She's like social glue that keeps us all talking together.

Coordinator of church community group Yorkshire



Start something for the community

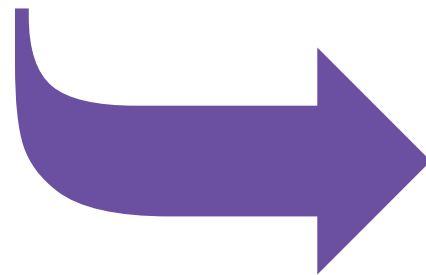
As well as supporting people to be good neighbours and joining in with what is already in a community, we can start something for the community ourselves.

We can support individual people or groups of people to start something of their own, or we can start something as United Response and create roles and opportunities for people we support and others as we go.

Starting something for the community does not mean holding events for other people and doing all the work ourselves. On the contrary, we are not really doing much as a community if we don't give other members of the community the opportunity to contribute and enjoy a shared sense of achievement and belonging with the people we support.

Examples might include

- Supporting someone to **hold a barbecue** and inviting all the neighbours. This doesn't need to take place at the person's house. It could be at their allotment with other allotment holders. Don't buy or cook all the food: **ask for help**, invite other people to bring and share food or drink.
- Support someone to start a **magazine swap** by collecting and sharing magazines round the local neighbourhood. The person we support will find themselves at the centre of conversations that help improve a sense of community for everyone involved. Ask others to drop off magazines at the person's house and then take them round the neighbour's doors especially other people who are vulnerable to social isolation.
- Go on a **litter pick**. Tell people what you're going to do and when, and invite them to join you. It doesn't matter if they do. It takes time to build trust. It's important to ask for help to let others see that you will value their contribution. It's important to show others you're taking action to make the neighbourhood a better place for everybody.
- When you do something as a community you should set yourself the task of creating as many different roles as you can for as wide a range of people as possible. Thinking like this, you can take a simple idea such as a litter pick and build on it further. Here is one example of this approach.



- Invite your neighbours to join in on a litter pick. Give it a name such as **Our Street Big Clean Up**. Ask someone to put on refreshments for the people who work on the day. Ask someone to bake, ask someone to make and serve drinks with the cakes. Ask someone for a garden or community room to hold the refreshment break. Hire a skip – better still, blag one off the council. Ask your local councillor to talk to the relevant council officer. Tell the council it's for a community group tidy up. Let the neighbours know that people who collect litter can also use the skip to throw out the things they've been meaning to get rid of or tidy up their garden. Ask someone to design a poster. ask a few people to put the posters up in their windows. Ask someone to post the **Our Street Big Clean Up** on social media. Don't do all this asking yourself! Ask others to do the asking especially of the people they know better than anyone else. As you plan and work with the neighbours, carve out roles for the people you support. Ask someone to take photos before, during and after the day.
- Ask someone to post the pictures on social media. Celebrate what you all achieved together. Make sure everyone knows the bit they did was valued and made a difference. Give all the credit to others; from the council officers who got the skip and the councillor who asked for it, to the person who baked the cakes.
- By making it a fun day and creating as many opportunities as possible for people to get involved, make a contribution and spend time together, the **Our Street Big Clean Up** helps build a stronger sense of community. Even if some people only throw out their own rubbish, the day still fulfils its real purpose.



Cyprus Litter Pickers, Newham – courtesy of CleanupUK



Community Match Funding

Grant makers often offer funding on the basis of the community matching their funding with people's time, skills and offers in kind. When we're trying to build relationships in a community we should look at what the whole community – not just people supported by United Response – can offer to match the fund. In the example of the "Our Street Big Clean Up" a grant maker might be asked to cover the cost of the skip. The community match the grant funding with people's time collecting rubbish, making cakes, making tea, serving tea and cakes, designing, drawing or printing the poster, making copies of the poster, taking pictures and celebrating what they have achieved as a community. You could take the same approach, matching community activity to grant funding for any community event or project where you need money to pay for resources which you can't get by asking for others to help.

Steps to successfully working together as a community

- Talk to people.
- Think small and face to face.
- Find something that matters to people in the community. They might just need a reason to spend time together, or there might be a burning issue.
- Ask others for help.
- Make it fun.
- Create as many roles and opportunities for people to be involved as possible.
- Ask others to ask others for help.
- Only decide what you need money for after you've worked out, with everyone else, what people already have and are willing to share.
- Celebrate what you've achieved together.
- Give all the credit away to local people including people we support.



Story from Derwent



I was at a networking event for local community groups and organisations. We had a stand to show people who we were and what we could offer. The probation service also had a stand and we got talking about the things they were doing. They told me they had an allotment where they grew vegetables and were wondering how the work of the probationers could benefit more people. We offered to help distribute the vegetables more widely in the community. Initially we thought someone we support could take on the role of distributing the vegetables around older people's luncheon clubs but when we contacted them many weren't interested: they thought there was a catch. We asked all our support staff what other groups they knew and thought might be interested. Now the probation service drops the vegetables off at our area office and someone we support is assisted to deliver them. He visits a community centre with a lunch club for older people, a homeless hostel, a Caribbean community centre, a local church and a local volunteer group that provides support to people with drug and alcohol issues. We've been doing this now for four years and the groups who receive the vegetables are really appreciative. The people we've supported to deliver the vegetables are known by lots of people in the community and are welcomed wherever we go. They've received recognition for the difference they are making and letters thanking them.

Service Manager, Derwent



22. Find your local lunch clubs; visit and offer to help.

23. Visit your local primary school spring fair.

24. Find and visit the local coffee mornings.

25. Go to the pub, talk to people there. Take an interest in them.

26. Visit the church/mosque/gurdwara. Find out who the movers and shakers are, who gets things done and makes things happen.



27. Visit the local community centre and ask people what is going on there. Talk to people, get to know them.

28. Find and visit any local country markets.

29. Contact your local WI and find out what's going on. It's not just for women!

30. Find and visit the local council walking groups.

31. Take in parcels for your neighbours and support people to return them.

32. Offer to wash your neighbour's car.

33. Wash your car on the street rather than the drive. Say hello to people as they walk by.

34. Offer to cut the neighbour's grass when you cut yours.

35. Pick up litter and show others you care about where you live, especially when others don't. Organise a litter pick with neighbours.

36. Get a dog and walk it.

37. Offer to walk other people's dog.

38. Accept offers of help from neighbours.

39. Wash your windows and offer to wash the neighbours'.

40. Offer pet sitting while people are away e.g. rabbits, hamsters, fish or cats.

41. Offer to put the neighbour's bins out when they are away.

42. Offer to put the bins out and take them in for elderly neighbours.



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43. Sweep up leaves in the street for composting; share them with neighbouring gardeners.

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44. Ask neighbours to join you in taking part in the RSPB bird count.

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45. Sell Royal British Legion poppies in your area.

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46. Get together with others to share supermarket vouchers and points. Local schools often collect these for computers or gym equipment.

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47. Grow some herbs to use when cooking or share with others.

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48. Hold a coffee morning for a charity or local project.

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49. Keep an eye on local requests for planning permission and find out what's going on. Ask what other people think about it?

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50. Keep an eye out for elderly neighbours. Offer to be a contact number for distant relatives.

