

JUNE 2022

# Unlocking Connection

7 keys for unlocking social connections within communities



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

**Since 2021, Meta has partnered with the Connection Coalition to provide small grants to members who want to test ideas and ways to build connections and community through the pandemic and beyond. By bringing together and summarising our learning from the 2022 programme, this report aims to achieve the following:**

- Share the main learnings that emerged on creating connections and where to find further resources and inspiration.
- Paint a bigger picture of the work organisations are doing, particularly the challenges faced and the opportunities available.
- Highlight the work of the participating Connection Coalition members.

Through our test-and-learn approach, we have identified 7 keys for connection which, when considered and applied, have shown themselves to unlock connections between people. These keys are grounded in community experiences and activities and were taken from conversations and learning shared throughout the programme (January - June 2022). This report is aimed at those directly delivering work to create and maintain social connections, but we hope it will also be of use to those in the wider sector including funders and policy-makers.

# BACKGROUND

**The Connection Coalition was formed by the Jo Cox Foundation in collaboration with a range of national partners in April 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, anticipating that the nation was at risk of a crisis of disconnection and a worsening epidemic of loneliness and social isolation.**

Our primary aim is to support organisations who work to build and maintain relationships and connections in their communities, creating spaces for them to share experiences, increase knowledge and build skills. We know that social connections are central to quality of life and wellbeing, not only those with close friends and families, but also with acquaintances and strangers.

We have over 800 members, many of whom have been with us since the beginning, although we have also welcomed nearly 100 of these members in 2022, demonstrating the ongoing interest and need for organisations

to connect and share with each other. The majority of Connection Coalition members are small organisations. 74% of members who responded to a recent survey have an annual turnover of less than £1 million, with 41% under £100,000. Over half of respondents (54%) were either entirely volunteer led or had fewer than 10 employees. Members believe that building and strengthening social connections in communities is a crucial task that we must prioritise across society, with the main purposes to **bridge divides, build resilience in individuals and communities**, and because **we can achieve more together.**<sup>2</sup>

Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. Over the past 2 years they have partnered with the Connection Coalition to provide small grants to members who want to test ideas and ways to build connections and community through the pandemic and beyond. In the second round of grants in 2022, we gave a total of £10,000 to 10 Connection Coalition members. As well as the money, we matched projects with other members to collaborate with, and created a community to offer support and inspiration.

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“A hefty body of research over the years has found that the single best predictor of happiness and well-being is the quality of a person's social relationships... Over the past decade and a half researchers have found that talking to strangers can make us happier, more connected to the places in which we live, mentally sharper, healthier and more trustful and optimistic”!

1. Joe Keohane, The Power of Strangers (2021)

2. Connection Coalition Member survey conducted March – April 2022.

# OUR COLLABORATORS

In January 2022, we invited Connection Coalition members to apply for funding to test ideas and methods of creating meaningful connections. We envisaged the grants being used by members either for something they'd wanted to do for a while but not had the right time or motivation, or for an evolution of existing work that allowed testing of an idea. These were the 10 successful applicants chosen for the programme:

## All the Small Things CiC

used arts and crafts to encourage local residents to reflect on their own personal identity and heritage and that of others in North Staffordshire.

## Books Beyond Words CIO

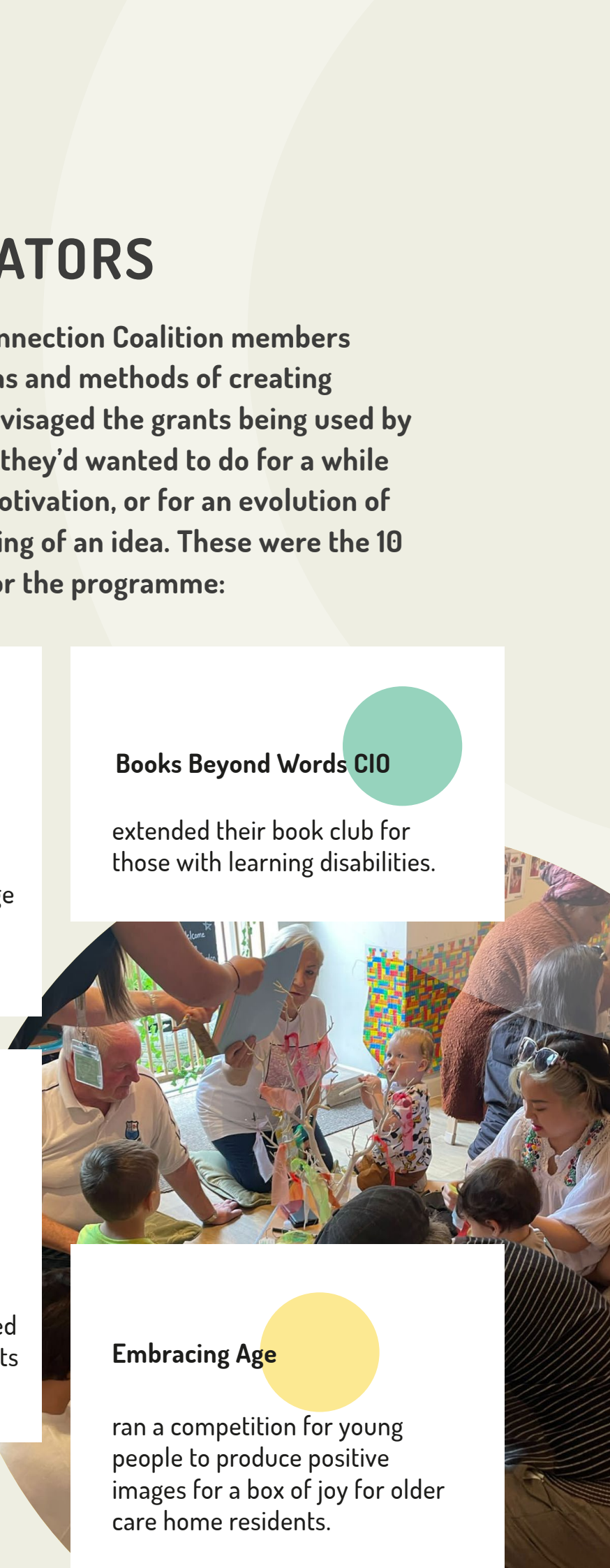
extended their book club for those with learning disabilities.

## Civil Society Consulting CIC

recruited more Kindness Connectors for their mentoring scheme - which supports refugees, those from newly arrived communities and vulnerable adults experiencing social isolation.

## Embracing Age

ran a competition for young people to produce positive images for a box of joy for older care home residents.





### Parasol

organised community events in Calderdale on justice-based themes, including disability and health.

### Ready Generations

delivered two events in the North West to explore the setting up of a multigenerational connective network for people living with young onset dementia and their family and friends.

### Empowerment Charity

ran a series of workshops and conversations to better understand how mental ill health and bereavement creates feelings of loneliness, with a particular focus on young men and those bereaved by suicide.

### Talking Taboos

supported the delivery of the grants, creating a supportive community to offer practical tips and inspiration, while testing their connection toolkit.

### Lit Theatre Company

made connections with older people in Nottingham to co-create new theatre in a way that is meaningful and fulfilling to them.

### The Wolfpack Project

hosted arts and crafts social groups for lonely or isolated young people in Nottingham.

# 7 KEYS FOR CONNECTION

As well as giving the small grants to members, we matched projects with other members to collaborate with, and created a community to offer support and inspiration. We facilitated several online spaces for members to connect, reflect on learning, share challenges and offer support. By providing these reflective spaces and listening to what came up we have identified 7 keys for connection which, when considered and applied, have shown themselves to unlock connections between people.



## 1. Consider your space

The right event space is needed to ensure that people feel safe and relaxed. This doesn't mean high-end buildings which can often feel too formal, but a space intentionally selected to be accessible and facilitate connection.

### Inspiration and resources

"The low-key, relaxed atmosphere was great. This was helped by the fact that people were used to coming to the venue and were attending anyway to go to the Food Pantry." **Ready Generations**

**Questions to ask when choosing a physical space:** What else is the space used for? Might this have any impact on who would be comfortable coming here? Does the space have any plants or offer access to fresh air and nature? Does it have natural light? Is there a space for people to withdraw if they feel overwhelmed or need a break?

**Questions to ask when setting up an online space:** How will people find the link to join? How will people know they're in the right place? How can you help people feel welcomed when they arrive? Can you make it easy for people to withdraw if they feel overwhelmed or need a break?



## 2. Consider your activities

Finding an activity helps make people feel more at ease. It gives people something to focus on, allowing time for conversations and connections to develop naturally. It allows those who might be nervous to participate without having to talk straight away. Activities might include walking, preparing food and eating together or arts and crafts.

### Inspiration and resources

**All the Small Things** used arts and crafts as a way to create connections in their community.

“Through a creative paper cutting activity, participants created many beautiful designs with the theme of connection - pianos, forest and nature scenes, cups of tea, chatting, their favourite video game and cartoon characters, their pets and natural patterns. Participating in this shared activity generated conversation points.

Connection involved other family members. The activity wasn't aimed at children but many of the participants brought their children, who played together and talked about their favourite cartoons characters and films - and so for these children it meant making new friends in a safe and welcoming environment.

For one woman in particular, she was insistent that she had her photograph taken and the date was written and signed to say what she had done in order to support her asylum application, so in this instance the connection looked like security, safety and sanctuary.”



## 3. Remember we can achieve more together - organisations

As activity and event organisers, we can benefit from making connections and collaborating with others. Working with other organisations with shared values enables an exchange of constructive feedback, opportunities and new ideas. Particularly when you're trying to reach new audiences, working with other organisations and groups already known to the people you're trying to connect with can help build trust and understanding.

### Inspiration and resources

“Working with other community groups who are known and trusted helps to affirm the activity but also brings about new future alliances and therefore opportunities. We worked with other organisations and support agencies that are known to participants, particularly those most isolated or not included in mainstream community activity like asylum seekers and refugees.” **All The Small Things**

“Empowerment took part in online collaboration meetings with coalition partners More Human. This created the opportunity for us to discuss our workshop ideas with those who have information and experience of working with young people and an understanding of how to promote work via media. Working with an additional partner the Suicide Prevention Board with Blackpool Council, we discussed communication within local media and how those who’ve experienced bereavement through suicide have been ultimately let down by reporters.”

**Empowerment**



#### 4. Remember we can achieve more together - the community

Involving communities in the planning and delivery of activities improves outcomes for everyone. One of our collaborators put it best: “exploring this topic with community members helped them to feel invested, feel empowered, heard, and is a creative way to create new ideas and solutions, as well as understand what people really need.”

**Empowerment.**

##### Inspiration and resources

“A group of local people were brought together with the support of a brilliant facilitator with specialist training in group dynamics, to explore what belonging in Batley and Spen means to them, and through that to create a Great Get Together event. The project itself became very much about handing control over to the participants. Taking this approach has meant that people feel excited really want to dive in and take initiative to produce their own community event.

The group knows that this event is theirs, that the project belongs to them and their community and they’ve fully embraced that. This approach was initially challenging for staff members, as we learned to trust the process and that the group will find their own solutions. But having seen the benefits of this different dynamic, we’ve found a role for ourselves in supporting and enabling the group. The result has been a greater sense of equality between project participants and members of staff, and a sense that we’re all in this together and excited about what might come next.” **Belonging in Batley and Spen project, Jo Cox Foundation**

The National Lottery Community Fund report, ‘A Meeting of Minds: How co-production benefits people, professionals and organisations’, focuses on the practice of and learning about co-production, as well as the benefits for people, professionals and organisations.





## 5. Pay attention to the small things

Connections aren't automatically created when you bring people together, it requires intention and attention. Paying attention to the details can help give people reassurance and the tools to help them navigate new connections and experiences.

### Inspiration and resources

"Through the project we have become increasingly aware of the value of, what may initially appear as, the small things! We have moved towards getting more granular in analysing, for example, why homemade cake draws people in more than plates of biscuits and what constitutes an authentic welcome. The refreshments and choice of cakes may sound a small thing but it REALLY made such a difference as people appeared to relax and were willing to have extended conversations. This has helped us to define what needs to be in place before people feel confident enough to talk about their situation/issues. The organisation of the space really does affect how people choose to show up in it." **Ready Generations Parasol**

Talking Taboos' Connect Through toolkit has over 30 ideas for the small things organisers can do to help create connections, from letting people know it's okay to attend alone, to using name badges and sharing your own experiences.



## 6. Allow enough time

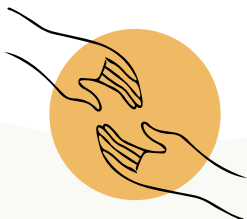
Building trust, relationships and creating meaningful connections takes time. It needs long-term thinking and is built when we are vulnerable with each other, which happens when we feel safe and valued. Whether it's between you and other organisations, or between participants, allowing enough time for individuals to build trust and relationships will pay off.

### Inspiration and resources

In her work on holding change, adrienne maree brown explores the art of facilitation and what is needed to make it easy for groups of people to do the hard work of dreaming, planning, visioning and organising together. She has 9 core principles which guide the work, including this on allowing time: "Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass. Build the resilience by building the relationships. Trust is slow until it is fast." **adrienne maree brown**<sup>3</sup>

### Tips for creating time and space when delivering sessions:

- Allow for people to arrive early or hang around after the session and be ready to welcome them and stay for a chat.
- Allow plenty of time for breaks and don't let breaks be the first thing sacrificed if things aren't running to schedule.
- Get comfortable with silence. If a few people are always ready to jump in and fill silences, you may not hear the voices who need a little more time. Let people know that silence is welcome and gives everyone time to reflect.
- Before you start, establish how people can stay in touch after the session and help facilitate this happening.



## 7. Identify barriers to participation and how you might overcome them

Anyone can benefit from increasing the number or quality of their social connections. However, we know that certain groups and individuals are more at risk of loneliness and disconnection, and many people face additional barriers when it comes to creating social connections. Doing what you can to identify and minimise barriers for those who would benefit most from your activities can help increase your positive impact and change people's lives.

### Inspiration and resources

Recent research for the **Greater London Authority**<sup>4</sup> on loneliness in London identified 5 associative factors that increase a person's likelihood to feel severely lonely (those who report being lonely "often or always"):

- Being acutely poor
- Being single or living alone
- Being Deaf and disabled
- Going through life changes or being new in London
- Feeling different or experiencing prejudice

Can you identify organisations who already work with these groups in your area to better understand and minimise barriers to participation?

**Ageing Better in Camden** have developed resources on their [Warm Welcome approach](#), after older people expressed that being welcomed (or not) to a community activity has a big impact on their wellbeing and on whether they will return. They have found ten main elements for creating a Warm Welcome which encouraged social connection and a sense of belonging.

# THE FUTURE: “WE ARE NOT STOPPING!”

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“We are not stopping! We are going to continue our collection of stories with a view to find funding for the next stage - preservation of the stories (they belong to the community not our theatre company), so we will be having more consultation with the community. Our walking group will continue beyond the project as will our Facebook group and we hope that one day we will have a drama/writers group in the area.” **Lit Theatre Company**

## **We know that overall, Connection Coalition members feel optimistic about their work to build and strengthen connections in their community now and in the future.**

The pandemic has raised awareness of individual and community needs for connection, led to an increased demand for services and created a necessity to adapt. In turn, this has increased hope for the future, generating more opportunities for collaboration among community organisations and an increased willingness to test out new ideas. Members are also confident that they are well placed to deliver the needed work, being trusted within communities and experienced in tackling issues of disconnection, loneliness and isolation.<sup>5</sup>

That does not mean that work to create and maintain social connections is without challenges. The 7 keys for connection which emerged through this project are not new ideas and won't come as a surprise to Connection Coalition members. However, finding the time and resources to prioritise these approaches is a challenge when short-term thinking and funding dominates our systems, and social connections are too often not prioritised or considered in designing our places, services and activities. The question we are asking, alongside our members is:

### **How do we create a world where social connections are understood, valued and prioritised?**

The primary barriers Connection Coalition members are currently facing in their work to create this world are **funding** and **finding a supportive community** with those who share the same values and vision to share knowledge, challenges and support each other.

## Funding

It will be no surprise to hear that the main challenge for Connection Coalition members, like so many small charities, is struggling to secure and maintain multi-year funding, especially for core costs. Members report that it feels particularly challenging when seeking funding to build social connections which can feel 'fluffy and unimportant' to those who 'lack knowledge of the theories and evidence'.

- The Connection Coalition promotes funding opportunities we're aware of through our newsletter, make sure you are signed up!
- If you are a funder who wants to support work to build relationships and social connections, we'd love to speak to you.
- We'd love to share our learning on managing these grants with anyone who's interested.

## Finding a supportive community

Creating connections is hard and can feel isolating. Running one deceptively simple event for people to connect includes a wide range of skills: marketing, logistics, copywriting, facilitation, relationship building, evaluating, and more. As pandemic restrictions are lifted, Connection Coalition members are trying to navigate 'the new normal', ensuring activities are inclusive, making decisions on when to work face to face and when online might best meet needs. Doing this with a small team on limited resources can quite quickly become overwhelming and you might feel undervalued or alone in what you're trying to achieve.

- The Connection Coalition is open to anyone working in this area, offering ways to connect with others across the country working towards similar goals.

"[I have valued] the connection with other organisations, the ability to speak freely and support/be supported by others. We are all human - yet often our day-to-day work is isolating and remote. This became a safe space."

**Connection Coalition member, April 2022**

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**A number of Connection Coalition members offer infrastructure support to help community groups in different ways:**

- aDoddle have created a national resource that brings together charities & community organisations in one place via a network of connected area-based community maps.
- More Human aim to reduce loneliness via their online platform by empowering anyone to be a brilliant organiser of community events and clubs.
- Small Charity Support is set up to help the many volunteer trustees of small charities who are struggling to cope with unnecessarily complex and jargon-laden official guidelines and bureaucratic regulations which are mostly tailored for larger charities.
- Talking Taboos address social issues with a taboo at their heart, including loneliness. They want to support and collaborate with event organisers on their toolkit.
- Zzjimi is an activity and event listing site which enables anyone to promote or find activities and events in their local communities, enabling organisations to appeal to greater numbers and to attract well-matched participants to their listings.

## CONNECT WITH US

### **Jo Cox Foundation**

[www.jocoxfoundation.org](http://www.jocoxfoundation.org) | [info@jocoxfoundation.org](mailto:info@jocoxfoundation.org)

### **Connection Coalition**

[www.connectioncoalition.org.uk](http://www.connectioncoalition.org.uk) | [hello@connectioncoalition.org.uk](mailto:hello@connectioncoalition.org.uk)

### **Meta UK Policy team**

[Sophie England](#) | [Richard Earley](#)

This report has been written by Zoe Cumberland and Ella Turner from the Jo Cox Foundation  
Designed by [HiloDoes](#)