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Ageing society

**BETWEEN KITH AND KIN
AND FORMAL SERVICES:
EVERYDAY HELP AND
SUPPORT IN THE ‘MIDDLE
LAYER’**

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This paper:

- looks at acts and relationships of everyday help between the worlds of ‘kith and kin’ and formal service provision;
- focuses on the role of those groups and organisations which lack any formal remit for support but make an important contribution to an ‘infrastructure of kindness’;
- explores how such settings can facilitate – and sometimes constrain – small acts of kindness and variation in such dynamics across social and geographic contexts.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned this paper as part of its programme on ageing society, which works to understand how demographic changes will affect the way we live and work together.

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Executive summary

This report forms part of the Liveable Lives study, a largescale qualitative research project examining views and experiences of everyday help and support – low-level, ordinary and often unnoticed acts and relationships that can help us to manage the practical and emotional challenges of our daily lives.

Everyday help and support – low-level, ordinary and often routine acts and relationships that help us to manage the practical and emotional challenges of our daily lives – is little noticed, studied or understood. Much of this takes place in the realm of the wholly interpersonal. But there is also a ‘middle layer’, between the interpersonal and the world of formal service provision. This consists of diverse groups, associations and organisations which typically lack any formal remit for help and support but which nevertheless make an important contribution to an overarching ‘infrastructure of kindness’.

The main report from the *Liveable Lives* study focused on experiences of everyday help and support involving family, friends, neighbours, acquaintances and even strangers. This supplementary paper looks at the related issue of the wide range of local ‘middle layer’ groups, organisations and associations and at the role these play in enabling, sustaining or constraining such relations. Specific settings examined included a supermarket, a library and a group working to create a community garden. The middle layer has an important role to play in creating the conditions for ‘ordinary kindness’ simply by encouraging social interaction. Groups, organisations and associations in this realm draw people together through shared interest or purpose; they provide spaces within which interaction can happen, and sometimes actively facilitate access to those spaces. As such, they serve as junction boxes, connecting diverse strands of community and social networks.

But spaces and opportunities in this layer are experienced differently by different people and in different social and economic contexts. For example, the research suggests that those from middle class, professional backgrounds may feel more confident about engaging with self-organised groups and associations, such as ramblers, book groups or other interest-based activity. Those in a predominantly working class area like Maryhill can set greater store by known, informal connections; and there is a greater role for ‘provided’ spaces and activities, such as those based in local community centres.

While there may be an apparent fit between the not-for-profit sector (such as the library) and notions of everyday help and support, ‘ordinary kindnesses’ are evident in

corporate or commercial settings too – whether a supermarket, café or corner shop. The significance of all these middle layer settings varies from one community to another, depending on what other facilities are available and the extent to which people live highly local or more geographically extended lives.

Within the more formal organisational settings of the middle layer, it is often when individuals transcend their formal or scripted roles that there is the greatest scope for small acts and relationships of help and support to emerge. While this might carry some risks for organisations – if for example, staff in a library or supermarket are distracted from the core tasks of lending books or selling groceries – it can also be seen as congruent with good customer service and as part of what attracts people to those particular settings in the first place.

Groups, organisations and associations at this level can also learn something from the way that everyday help and support is navigated and negotiated between individuals – for example, about the difficulty that people have in acknowledging vulnerability and asking for help; the way that help and support often happens most easily ‘in passing’; and the scope to derive benefits that are mutual from participation and engagement in community settings. A sense of achievement and social connection reported by members of the community garden is an example here.

Introduction

The main report (Anderson *et al.*, 2015) of the Liveable Lives study focused primarily on the interpersonal and wholly informal aspects of everyday help and support – in other words, on the small gestures and favours exchanged with family, friends, neighbours, acquaintances and even strangers. It highlighted the contrast between the unremarkable form that such interactions often take and the difference they can make, and in doing so drew on the notion of an ‘infrastructure of kindness’ – a framework of everyday help and support which is largely taken for granted and unnoticed, allows other things to happen, yet requires maintenance and repair in its own right. In doing so, it deliberately drew a contrast with the more visible realm of service provision associated with those organisations (whether in the state or non-state sectors) that have a formal remit to provide care and support.

The aim of this supplementary paper is to look at what might be termed the ‘middle layer’ – those groups, organisations and associations that sit between the realm of the interpersonal and that of formal service provision. This territory is wide-ranging and hard to define. It includes, for example, informal or semi-formal groupings revolving around shared interest, leisure or community activism; public and third sector bodies not directly

involved in delivering care or support; and commercial organisations whose activities help to facilitate, whether intentionally or not, supportive relationships within communities. As individuals, we encounter and relate to the organisations in this middle layer in a variety of ways. Sometimes we are paid employees or unpaid volunteers; sometimes we are customers, users or clients; and sometimes members, participants or ‘co-producers’.

This middle layer has parallels with what others have described as civil society (Keane, 2013) though we have chosen to avoid this term because of its association with the space between state and market – an understanding which is problematic not least because of state funding of some of the activities that might be thought of as ‘civil’. Taking our lead from the organisations and activities that participants themselves mentioned in the main study led us in a direction of bodies and practices that were broader than those traditionally associated with the space of civil society. We also chose not to explore the interactions that take place there through the language of participation. While there is a growing awareness that ‘participation’ should be seen as including ordinary activities such as going to the pub and gardening (Miles *et al.*, 2014), it is debatable whether the term adequately captures the in-passing, dropping in and out quality of some of what we observed or participants described in the course of the research.

Our analytical interest here is in the role that such collective activity may play in enabling (and occasionally constraining) ‘ordinary kindness’. As such, we are as interested in their *intermediate* effects and the ways that they may contribute to a culture or infrastructure of kindness as in their primary functions or the things they do *for* people. At the same time, we are also interested in what these and other organisations can learn about the skills and conditions of helping and being helped from the realm of the informal and the interpersonal.

We begin, though, with some brief sketches of some of the ‘middle layer’ groupings, organisations and associations encountered or studied during the course of the Glasgow research, in the three study areas of Maryhill, Hillhead and Bearsden.¹ The aim here is to begin to illustrate the diversity of such bodies and the range of ways in which they help to foster or support relationships at the individual level. In the remainder of the report we draw on interviews with individuals.

Pen pictures of some of the groups, organisations and associations in the Liveable Lives study areas

‘A very social library’: Hillhead Community Library

Hillhead Library is one of a number of community libraries operated by Glasgow Life – an umbrella body managing a variety of leisure and recreational facilities on behalf of Glasgow City Council. The library, which is reputedly one of the busiest in Scotland, offers a wide range of services and activities. In addition to lending and reference facilities, for example, it offers meeting/community spaces, IT facilities, study spaces, and a range of events and activities including several book clubs, early years groups and a children’s movie club. It also hosts the MacMillan Cancer Information and Support Service which uses volunteers to offer informal advice and support to people affected by cancer. The library is open seven days a week and was purpose-built to meet the needs of the local community. Its staff describe it as a ‘social space’ and note that some of its users find it too noisy. It is used by a wide spectrum of the local population, from students and academics to local parents, special interest groups and those simply seeking somewhere warm to sit for an hour or so.

‘A good friend on the phone’: Good Morning Service (GMS)

GMS is a third sector organisation which had its origins in the death of an elderly Glasgow woman whose body lay undiscovered in her flat for several months. The organisation provides a telephone-based befriending service for vulnerable older people throughout the Glasgow City and South Ayrshire council areas, offering regular phone calls and a range of additional activities (including outings and get-togethers). The service was conceived as a way of supporting individuals that connects with existing formal services, close family and friends. Its (paid) staff make, on average, 900 calls a week to more than 300 users. The frequency of calls is determined by the service user, as is the length (within reason). While some users simply ‘check in’, others take the opportunity for a longer conversation; some ask to be contacted once a week, others every day. The various elements of GMS’s work appear to complement each other well and the format has been adopted in several other locations.

And do you know it's amazing the amount of clients who are now really good friends from it, from meeting at the get-togethers, and they now keep in touch, and they now come to our, our things together, sit together, and they also meet up [outside] Good Morning, so they've now got friends for life as well.

Member of staff, Good Morning Service

While GMS could be seen as belonging to the 'service provider' tier, it also functions as an intermediary – connecting (and reconnecting) older people to each other and to relevant services – and, through the work of befriending, engages in a kind of low-level 'ordinary' support that is rarely possible within more formal settings.

Friends of Kersland Lane: Community gardening in Hillhead

This is an informal group which meets for a few hours each month to tidy and transform a derelict site where a tenement building once stood. Over a period of several years, and with very little direct funding, this has been turned into a community garden, containing raised beds, flowers and benches. The core group involved in the scheme is relatively small but highly committed. Several have links to other community and environmental projects elsewhere in the West End. While the project has a clear environmental focus, it also plays an important social role in the lives of some of those involved.

[An] aspect that's really heart warming is that it's so important to some people socially. [Name] in particular, they love the garden. They're quite protective of it. [...] it's more than social. It's more like a life force of some sort. It's an integral part of the lives of probably all of us to some extent but some people to quite a large extent and that's part of the profile of the group maybe.

Member, community garden

Maryhill Integration Network (MIN): Bringing Communities Together

Maryhill Integration Network is a charity that brings established and recently arrived communities together through art, social, cultural and educational groups and projects, giving local people a chance to learn new skills, meet new people, share experiences and take part in activities to improve their communities. Its small team of staff and volunteers develop projects that create bonds and links within and between communities to encourage cross-cultural understanding and celebrate diversity. Its classes and activities include dance, English as a second language, parent and toddler music classes and creative writing. It also organises a number of community events to coincide with national events such as International Women's Day and Refugee Week.

'Making moments matter': Tesco, Maryhill

Like large supermarkets elsewhere in the UK, this branch in Maryhill offers a range of 'community services' including a café, optician and post office. It also employs a

community champion whose (part-time) role is to understand local community issues and to use the supermarket's resources to help. That work ranges from liaison with local groups over fundraising activities in the store, to facilitating educational visits, enabling the use of store facilities, managing donations to local food banks and other charities, and co-ordinating external volunteering by staff. Despite the criticism that large supermarkets drive smaller local shops out of business and erode community spirit, there was plenty of evidence of people developing friendly and supportive relationships with staff, and of using the store for more than just shopping. This aspect of the relationship between staff and customers is undoubtedly institutionalised – and capitalised on – by the company (as evidenced in its customer relations concept of 'making moments matter') but it also seems to tap into a genuine interest on the part of many of the staff. (This theme is returned to below.)

We've got to greet the customer, you always say hello, and then offer a hand to pack. Once you've offered the hand to pack, you don't tell [the staff] to have a chat but the majority of them do because the people that are on the tills they love it, do you know what I mean?

Member of staff, Supermarket

Healthy ageing group, Al' Furqan Mosque, Maryhill/Hillhead

This group, based at a busy local mosque in the area bordering Maryhill and Hillhead, is a collaboration with a neighbouring day centre for older people. It was established to provide culturally appropriate help and support for older males in the local Muslim community (at the time of the research, there was no equivalent group for older females, although funds were being sought for such provision). Sessions, which are run by the Imam with support from young volunteers, typically involve a spiritual talk and discussion on questions of faith, a talk or activity (often involving exercise) led by someone visiting the group, and a social element involving tea, biscuits and food. There are occasional joint events involving groups from the neighbouring day centre. Although some 40 older men were registered with the group, attendance is typically between 5 and 15 on any one occasion. A lack of transport for those with mobility problems is felt to be a factor in limiting attendance.

Bearsden and Milngavie Ramblers

This group was not studied directly during the project but was mentioned by several of the main study participants. It is a well-established part of the wider ramblers network, with more than 300 members, and organises a range of walks and social activities. In addition to walks every weekend, there are mid-week walks every couple of weeks, and

occasional weekend trips or walking holidays. The group also has an extensive social programme, encompassing activities ranging from day visits to sites of interest (such as the Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh), quiz nights, restaurant visits and an annual Burns supper.

Bringing people together: purpose, spaces, access

Essentially it is by *connecting* people to one another that such groups, organisations and associations help to create and maintain the conditions for low-level help and support. But what are the specific mechanisms through which 'bringing together' is achieved? There are three main elements here: people need a **reason or purpose** to connect with each other; they need a **space** (physical or otherwise) in which to do that; and they need to be able to **access** or reach that space (in most cases, physically but sometimes via other means, such as the internet).

The reasons that people come together are, of course, infinitely varied. Some involve the basic needs, functions and crises of everyday life – food, healthcare, employment and so on – others, the pursuit of leisure or shared interests. In all settings, however, the thing that ostensibly brings people there may be overtaken, or accompanied, by other needs and motivations. So the person who goes to the library to borrow a novel may find themselves talking to a Macmillan cancer volunteer; the older Muslim man attending a healthy ageing group at the mosque may ask those around him if they know of a good plumber; the widower in a walking group may find himself unexpectedly opening up to one of his fellow walkers. This sense of the potential multiple meanings of particular organisational settings is captured in the following extract from an interview with a member of staff at the supermarket in Maryhill.

I think for some people it's the only thing they've really got. If they're maybe elderly or they're living alone, this is the only place that they've got to come to have maybe a proper chat to someone or a laugh, or find out some information, maybe what's going in the community, and if they're looking for a bit of help they don't really know where to go with certain things. I think it's all those things as well.

Member of staff, supermarket, Maryhill

Groups, organisations and associations have to work with both the acknowledged and the unacknowledged motivations and meanings associated with their activities, sometimes deliberately drawing people in through one thing in order to achieve another. Further examples of this might be the family fun day at a local sports club, or using a particular activity (such as walking or knitting) as a means of tackling social isolation.

One of the most important ways in which groups, organisations and associations contribute to everyday help and support is through the provision of spaces within which help and support can either happen directly, or relationships can be developed that offer the possibility of such acts developing. These environments, in all their potential diversity, have increasingly come to be thought of as 'third places' (Oldenburg, 2000) – gathering places that are distinct from the first and second places of home and (for many people) work. Community centres (such as Maryhill's Community Central Halls) would be an obvious example here, as would the library; but pubs, cafes, parks and even shops or shopping centres can also have this role, offering possibilities for both planned and contingent social interaction.

In the course of the research we saw diverse examples of such spaces. Sometimes, as in the case of the library, there was a conscious attempt to cultivate a 'big social space' – a space in which individuals can interact on a casual basis but also one in which organised groups can meet. While individuals are generally drawn into the space by the services available, for groups the library is, above all, just a space – although one that is sympathetic (and sometimes free) (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2008).

It's used as a social space. A big social space. There's a lot of people – they come, they meet. They all – they know each other, even if it's only through actually coming in and out of the library. And as I say, we've got regulars who come in...the regular newspaper readers on a Sunday, they all know each other, which is quite interesting, because they don't know each other (otherwise). They're just coming in for a chat and ...most of the ones that come in like that will borrow books as well. Lot of studying. [...] The spaces are used – we've got Falun Gong come in here on a Sunday, and we give them this space free of charge. They meet here; this is their meeting place. And we're more than happy for them to have this space and use it... it's a nice quiet space to be undisturbed. They don't want anything, they don't ask for anything. They just want a space.
Member of staff, Hillhead library

Of course, different spaces have different character, and it cannot be assumed that interaction will simply happen. In the context of the library, for example, some forms of social interaction have to be actively encouraged, because of a residual feeling that one should treat the space itself with a degree of deference and not raise one's voice.

You've got to engineer opportunities like that – like the youth clubs, the book groups. You've got to engineer things like that and then people totally embrace doing social things in libraries because I think sometimes they might need a bit of

an excuse to raise their voice and, you know, talk about what their needs are, other than a book, reading a newspaper...

Member of staff, Hillhead library

While there is an emergent literature on libraries as civic or third spaces that can encourage social capital (Bourke, 2005; Vårheim, Steinmo & Ide, 2008; Svanhild and Audunson, 2012) there is less on libraries as spaces where help and support, of an emotional and practical kind, can happen (Johnson, 2012). The library hosts volunteers from Macmillan cancer support and they have to balance a need to be public, accessible and visible with considerations of privacy. The open plan layout of the library is consistent with the first of those needs – ‘People have said if they had to walk through a door they wouldn’t come in’ – but a degree of visual shielding is also helpful, even if people are (perhaps surprisingly) willing to talk about very private experiences in a broadly public setting.

It is important to remember, however, that even deliberately social spaces like the library are never entirely neutral territory, equally open to all sections of the community. Some groups and individuals are better equipped – through education, experience and knowledge – to make fuller use of such facilities. Others may feel excluded, to a greater or lesser extent, by cultural or linguistic difference, while even free-to-use public spaces can cost money to get to, hence the crucial importance of the proximity of local libraries. Not all ‘third spaces’ are consciously developed as such; some other settings are less deliberate but nevertheless provide different groups with a convivial, comfortable or familiar space within which to interact. The research produced various examples of these, ranging from a garden centre cafe in Bearsden, which served as a neutral meeting point for a mother and toddler group, to local pubs in all three areas.

Of course, the character of these ‘third places’ is also shaped by the nature of people’s access to them. Sometimes it is a relative *lack* of mobility that renders particular places significant. In a community like Maryhill, for example, many people’s lives are geographically constrained by lack of income or access to a car, ill-health or physical incapacity. That means that those spaces that *are* available, like the Community Central Halls or the supermarket, take on a particular importance; and the scope for meaningful interaction and sociability within them is amplified by the fact that the people using them are more likely to be known to each other.

This restricted mobility in less affluent communities, however, can also mean that access to other types of spaces – for example, green space or arts or leisure facilities – may be more constrained than in more affluent areas. For some of those working with

the oldest and most vulnerable, this is one of the most fundamental obstacles to connecting individuals to potential help and support.

Ideally, if you gave me a magic wand and asked me what I wanted, I would say give me a bus. I would have our own transport to go and pick clients up and take them to wherever we go. I'd also use it to take them to their health appointments, for their shopping, for, you know, what they need it for. Because although my bus exists, you can only get four journeys a month. It's not great.

Manager, Good Morning Service

Even when activities are focused relatively locally, physical incapacity can constrain, or bring to an end, particular ways of life. Involvement in sporting or leisure activities, for example, can play a central role in people's lives and give them access to wide range of supportive relationships. But the continuity of that involvement can be tenuous, especially for those who lack (or lose) access to transport. For that reason, finding ways to maintain individuals' connections, as they age or become incapacitated for other reasons, to the activities, groups and networks that matter to them could help to sustain independent living and minimise demands on state and third sector bodies. While organisations might intervene directly to help do that, individuals also help each other to maintain such connections, as in the case of one of the interviewees whose lifelong involvement in bowling is sustained by the regular lift she gets from another club member. There is a clear need to think about the interplay of locality and social demographics in understanding if and how people use (or not) third places. The same practices – going to supermarkets, attending clubs – can have very different meanings in different areas.

While the focus here has been on groups, organisations and associations that exist within particular localities and physical spaces, the middle layer has an online dimension too – what have also come to be thought of as 'third spaces' (Wright, 2012). While it is even more difficult here to work out where the interpersonal shades into the organisational, the notions of space, purpose and access are all clearly relevant. Like libraries, pubs and shopping centres, social networks like Facebook provide spaces for both planned and contingent social interaction; countless other community sites bring together people with particular interests or concerns (whether mothers, those with a disability or owners of a particular type of car). The research supports other work suggesting that issues of access mirror those in the 'real' world – in other words, those who lack resources (whether financial, educational or social) are less likely to benefit (Chen and Wellman, 2004). As such, and as we argued in the main report, the online tends not to be a direct replacement for the offline but – for most people – complements and reinforces offline experience. As such, many of the offline groups and associations

encountered in the course of the research – such as MIN and the community gardening group – also have an online presence, via Facebook, blogs or other sites.

What everyday help and support looks like in the middle layer

The above discussion highlights the mechanisms – of purpose, space and access – through which some of the groupings, organisations and associations in the middle layer are able to create social connections; and those connections are an obvious prerequisite for acts and relationships of everyday help and support to occur or develop. In themselves, however, they do not necessarily explain the form that such ‘ordinary kindness’ takes in such settings, or how it comes about.

There are a number of ways in which involvement in groups, organisations and associations can help to enable ‘ordinary kindness’. The first is perhaps the most obvious: some groupings explicitly provide such support as part of their *raison d’être* – for example, a lunch club, a befriending scheme or an advice centre. In such contexts, a group of staff or volunteers are effectively providing a low-level service to a group of users – in other words, the model is close to one of formal service provision, even if the roles and expectations around that service are less clear than they would be in relation to, say, formal healthcare. Sometimes there is an absence of any expectation of reciprocity or mutuality here – help or support is simply provided by one group (consisting of staff or volunteers) to another (the users of the service). In other contexts, however, mutual help and support may also emerge as an intended or unintended consequence of bringing people together – for example, in a peer support setting.

Mutuality is certainly a defining feature of many less formal groups and associations in which the benefits of involvement are jointly created and experienced. The walking or rambling group would be an example of this. While some individuals may play a particular role in organising or facilitating such activities, ultimately the group exists only because people jointly take part.

And, finally, there is the very low-level help, support and everyday interaction and sociability that is enabled by the spaces of the middle layer and is, in other respects, unrelated to the main purpose of the groups, organisations and associations involved. In such settings, everyday help and support happens in passing – as an unintended or unexpected by-product of other activity – but can nevertheless be extremely significant. The social network that grows up around participation in a leisure activity; the friendly chats with familiar staff in shops and cafes; the space to meet friends afforded by cafes,

pubs and restaurants – all are part of the underlying infrastructure of everyday help and support.

Just as people's reasons and motivations for engaging in and with organisations can be primary and secondary, acknowledged and unacknowledged, so too can be the benefits that they derive from it. Perhaps most obviously, people often derive emotional satisfaction and support from – or at least, during – their engagement in outwardly physical or practical activities. The first two of the following examples relate to walking groups, while the third relates to the community garden project in Hillhead.

I joined Ramblers two or three years ago, walking with a nice woman who was widowed a few months before me. I mean I don't really know her but... we passed something and it just sort of struck a chord in both of us – a place we'd both sat and had a picnic or something with our [partner] – and we actually had a one of the more intimate conversations I've had about bereavement [...] She'd never told anybody else this, I certainly hadn't responded to anyone like that, and it was just obviously, you know, we'd both had very close relationships, and we hadn't shared this information with anyone. And I mean she's not someone that I – I mean I see her walking every few months and, but we're not friends or anything, but we were able to talk about this in terms which very few people understood. Because I think we'd both had the same, you know, sort of experience.

Nancy, Bearsden

I find I spend a lot of my life looking after other people, like my friends and relations all seem to have problems. So the walking group, because you know them at that level and you like them all, you can actually unburden some of your problems as you walk along without feeling that you're [...] for instance, I wouldn't like to say to my daughter how much my sister is annoying me because she's ill but she's also been moaning. Whereas it's the sort of thing you can say when you're walking, 'oh I've had a rotten week' and ...everybody will listen to one another's problems but not be too involved.

Morag, Hillhead

I think that's probably about at least 50 per cent of it, getting to meet everyone, you know, and finding out about how one's lives are going – like [name] had the flu and [name] is going through something as well. [...] a bit of social interaction as well I think, yeah.

Member, community garden

While social contact and emotional support is one potential benefit to participants in collective activities, a simple sense of achievement can be another, especially for those involved in charitable work aimed at making a difference to the lives of individuals or communities.

[T]his morning, it was a horrible rainy morning and you think, 'I just want to turn over the other side, pull the duvet over', then once you're out there, you think, 'Gosh, this is great, isn't it?'. [A]nd then when you leave, you think, 'Oh' [...] and when [name] or whoever takes photos as well and then brings them up, you think [...], 'Gosh, I didn't realise I had done that much', you know, because you're enjoying it, so you don't realise you're actually working, you know, in there.
Member, community garden

Finally, of course, people's involvement in groups, organisations and activities can create, extend or reinforce networks of friendship or acquaintanceship that stretch into other aspects of daily life. These networks are often built not only on simple personal connections, but on a sense of a shared identity (as bowlers, drinkers, musicians, lunchclub users and so on). As we highlighted in the main report, such connections can create a strong sense of familiarity and belonging, and sometimes an almost kinlike sense of obligation and involvement.

See, this is it, you're in a wee community like that, you end up with a wee hard core of people. I've been going to that particular one [dance club] for 10, 12 years, so you've got a wee community what you see quite regular, and you help each other out there constantly, you know?
Leonard, Hillhead

At church, the pastor and his wife, in terms of kind of support and stuff, they're very good, in a sort of semi-official kind of a way. But I've also got maybe one couple in particular, who are really good friends from there, and then there's others at the church, some of whom are quite close friends; others of whom we know maybe more at a distance... it's kind of a funny thing: it's a bit like a family. You know, there's some people, like, who are cousins that you don't see very often, but you have a connection with them. It's kind of a bit like that with church, I think, really.
Joanne, Bearsden

For all these reasons, it would be wrong to view the world and work of organisations as somehow separate from – or in tension with – that of everyday help and support between individuals. In fact, the former is a key domain through which it may be

possible to strengthen the latter. It needs to be recognised, however, that the scope and means to do so will vary across communities and sections of the population – an issue expanded on below.

Factors affecting involvement and engagement in the middle layer

It appeared from the main interviews for the study that there was a considerable difference in the level and character of organisational engagement between Maryhill and the two more affluent areas. While some participants in Maryhill were involved in informal and semi-formal groups and associations, these tended to revolve around a few main community hubs such as the housing associations, and community resources such as the Community Central Halls and Maryhill Burgh Halls. In Hillhead and Bearsden, by contrast, there appeared to be a more geographically dispersed and wide-ranging network of community and leisure organisations (ranging from church groups to walking clubs and environmental activism) and a greater degree of what might be termed self-organisation. This is likely to reflect the range of opportunities and individual and community resources available, prevailing orientations towards such participation – shaped by lifetimes of familiarity or unfamiliarity with different forms of engagement – and, as a growing body of research suggests, the critical importance of state welfare policies for civic engagement, including by older people (Warburton and Jeppsson Grassman, 2011).

Differences in community engagement were especially apparent in older age and retirement. Many of those interviewees from professional backgrounds living in Bearsden and Hillhead had carried involvement in semi-formal and formal organisational settings into retirement, drawing on skills, experience and networks that would not necessarily be available to others. Indeed, some of these retired participants listed numerous ‘commitments’, ranging from adult education, to sport, politics, local history and genealogy. The following extract from an interview in Bearsden gives a flavour of the demand for such involvement and of the organisational capacity and confidence of the local population – in this case in a local branch of the University of the Third Age. It also highlights the role that organisational involvement can play in an area like Bearsden in connecting and reconnecting people when their paths don’t cross in other ways.

[A U3A group] has just opened up in Bearsden Milngavie, which launched in November last year, and they put an advert, a wee thing, a wee bit of copy in the local paper, 'Do you want to be part of this? If you do, turn up at this meeting', right? Over 100 people turned up at a local place or meeting, and so from there,

you know, it's sort of got set up with the structure that you need to go through to set it up properly. And it's now running regularly, it's now, now a proper U3A group. And where they have this monthly meeting, but also the members create groups that they want to be interested in and you form into these groups. So I'm part of that [...] at that I have met a whole lot of people, to be honest, mainly early-retired [professionals] who I know from years gone by, where our kids were at school with each other and maybe they still live locally but our paths haven't crossed in other ways.

Shara, Bearsden

As part of this cultural familiarity and ease with organisational involvement, those from middle class, professional backgrounds often have a clear sense of their own needs and expectations of what organisations and services should deliver (and of what opportunities are available). This was noted, for example, by the staff in the library at Hillhead, who wondered about the profile of those who made the most of the various activities on offer.

But is it a cliché, a myth? I don't know. Middle class people join groups and working class people don't...take up those opportunities without either a very strong, a motivating force where someone's pushing them into it, like to go to the Citizen's Advice Bureau [...] the 16 book groups for example that we've got, um I'm not sure how many of those people will be people who use the library almost as a place of refuge, you know. I think the people in the book groups will come and they'll absolutely get the best out of all the services that you've got to offer because ...they [feel they] are enabled to do so, you know.

Member of staff, Hillhead Library

The absence of a similar sense of confidence is evident from this interview with a woman in Maryhill, as she describes her feelings about making initial contact with a local women's centre.

The lassies – they're all nice, sitting .. just sitting blethering about, and I came oot and I thought, 'I'm no going back there myself. No way'. You know what I mean? So I grabbed [name of friend] and got her to come. It was just the initial walking through the doors. Once the girls got to know me, then I wouldnae mind going myself. It didnae bother me. But because I didnae know them, I didnae want to walk in. And especially it's two doors, if you know what I mean. You've got one big heavy door and then you've got the reception, and then you've got to open the other doors to go in, and all these women are sitting, and they're all looking at

somebody coming in the door! Although they're all 'Hiya' – you know what I mean? – it's daunting.

Susie, Maryhill

That is not necessarily to suggest that those in the more affluent study areas experience a richer and more supportive set of social connections. Indeed, it could be argued that – despite their lack of organisational affiliations – many older people (and others) in areas like Maryhill are better integrated and less isolated than their contemporaries in more affluent areas, simply because they are more likely to have longstanding relationships with neighbours and to have close family living nearby. That said, regardless of age, for those living in Maryhill who *lack* access to such informal support the possibilities to develop links through joining groups, organisations and associations are more constrained. All of this suggests that broader strategies for tackling isolation need to take account of such differences and to build on forms of association that are familiar to – and comfortable for – the target group in question. It also touches on the need to maintain a critical perspective on participation such as volunteering, including that by older people. Such a perspective involves questions not just about accessibility to, and awareness and sustainability of, such opportunities but also the ways that involvement may increase integration for some, while excluding those most in need (for example those with poor health). In the case of older people, such polarisation might lead to some being positioned as having failed to age successfully (Hank and Erlinghagen, 2014)

There is, of course, also a gender dimension to willingness to engage in different forms of collective activity. Other research (Wyllie *et al.*, 2012, Brownlie, 2014) suggests that men are certainly less open than women to organisational settings that are explicitly geared towards the provision of help and support, but they are also arguably less likely to be 'joiners' in general. In this context, less formal sites of involvement and engagement, ranging from drop-in facilities to 'men's sheds' and local pubs may be more natural contexts for everyday help and support. The general theme that everyday help and support is what happens 'around the edges' in such settings is illustrated by the following example from the healthy ageing group for men run from a mosque in Maryhill.

I think the basic idea was for people to socialise in each of the areas to talk to each other. You know for example I retired seven, eight years ago. You know it's become now a forum for me to socialise and to talk to somebody about something rather than sitting at home in front of the TV or, you know, doing nothing at all...So for me this is a good forum to come here and chat with them and socialise with them. Sometimes we talk about some difficult situation or we

have been having a health problem or you know somebody is diabetic you know I'm a diabetic too... So, all this kind of stuff which goes on ...and then you know, an example today, I had an issue with my boiler and I came with the intention to ask people here, 'Does somebody know a really good plumber?'

Member, healthy ageing group, Maryhill

While the indirect character of everyday help and support is perhaps especially pronounced for men, it is a factor for many women too. Indeed, it would be a mistake to draw rigid gender-based conclusions about emotions and admissions of vulnerability, as other factors, such as age and (to a lesser extent) social class are also important. Previous research (Anderson and Brownlie, 2011) has suggested, for example, that gender interacts strongly with generation and that older women more closely resemble men in their attitudes towards emotions talk and help-seeking than they do women in younger age groups. This raises questions about whether the language of vulnerability (often used to describe target groups for particular interventions) may in itself be problematic.

Making the connections: groups, organisations and associations as junction boxes

While groups, organisations and associations in the middle layer may or may not directly provide help and support, they are undoubtedly an important part of what we described in the main report as the 'infrastructure of kindness'. One of the ways in which they help to constitute that is by acting as connection points or 'junction boxes' – consciously or unconsciously connecting different parts of an individual's support network and adding new connections. An example of an organisation consciously doing this is the Good Morning Service (GMS). While at one level, GMS acts as a failsafe mechanism, intervening when others have failed to notice a problem, it does so by ensuring that those in an individual's network are aware that help may be needed. So if, after several calls, GMS volunteers have been unable to reach someone, they will contact a neighbour, a close family member, a friend, or someone else in a position to provide immediate support.

Semi-formal and informal organisations can also act, of course, as connections to more formal services – through direct referral, signposting or help with transport or other access difficulties (such as language). GMS will refer clients to the community Falls Prevention Service, for example.

Individuals within organisational settings can perform a similar function, by sharing knowledge or encouraging others to pursue particular types of support. The following

extract, is drawn from an interview with a woman in Maryhill who actively encourages a neighbour to attend classes with her at a local community centre – indeed, the two women support each other to go.

They run classes from the centre, so we would sign up for all them, and then, any other classes outwith the centre that they got sent information on, we would dae that. But I always took [name of friend] wi' me. She was always at my side. I wouldnae go withoot her. We have done quite a lot. We've got hunners o' certificates. So that saved me. D'you know what I mean? And I think in truth it saved [name of friend]. She didnae want tae go oot, and sometimes I would be at her door banging the door and ringing the bell till she actually came, because I wasnae accepting 'no' for an answer, which .. Coz she used to say, 'You'll no get me to go if I'm no going', and I was like, 'Trust me. I will'. And I was just...sitting ringing the bell and ringing the bell, and eventually she'll be, 'All right. Right. I'm coming'.

Susie, Maryhill

Going above and beyond: transcending immediate roles and contexts

Although we tend to think of people in organisational settings as operating within defined roles, the research suggests that in, the context of the middle layer, people tend to move in and out of those roles and sometimes relate to each other on a more personal level. This highlights a fundamental aspect of how organisations that involve a service of some kind (such as the library, befriending scheme or supermarket) often contribute to a culture or infrastructure of kindness: they do so primarily through those moments in which people connect as individuals, even within an organisational setting. This should not necessarily be seen as antithetical to the work of the organisation but as an important by-product of its formal purposes and functions. Examples of this can be found in a range of organisational settings examined in the research. The following extract, for example, is drawn from an interview with a member of staff at the café in the supermarket in Maryhill:

We've got like wee [name], she's in at the back at five, so we know she's usually there. And then you start getting that used to your customers and building up that much of a rapport with them, so when they're not in, you start worrying. So you do, 'cause there's like old [name], he's in every single morning, and then he comes back in the afternoon. [...] Being a mother as well, I know what I want when I go out, so I try and give that to the mothers as well. When a lot of the

grannies come in with their grandchildren, I've got to know half the kids, when they were all born as well.

Member of staff in café at supermarket

This movement between the organisational and the interpersonal, the formal and the informal, the scripted and intuitive, is further illustrated by another extract from the same interview in which the interviewee is describing supporting a customer who has experienced relationship breakdown. The reference to 'that greeting' invokes the training in customer relations, and yet the subsequent conversations with 'regulars' transcend the context and formal relationship, creating something that appears to have a wider significance for both parties.

[S]he keeps on coming back, and she's not from this area, but she still keeps on coming back in. And she came in one day, and I was like, 'Oh hi, how are you?' I was like, 'You're looking a wee bit better within yourself,' and she's like, 'I can't believe you remembered me.' But you – I don't know, it's always been something that I've done. I pick something off of somebody, like their glasses, and I try to remember that for the next time that they come in, so that you can give them that greeting, as well as, you know... Every customer is greeted the same, but then when you get your regulars, you get to know them.

Interviewer: So what's the official greeting?

Just good morning, good afternoon or good evening. Do you know what I mean? How can I help you?

Member of staff in café at supermarket

At the same time, it would be wrong to see this as entirely separate from or unrelated to the commercial context. In this specific setting, there appears to be a conjunction between the needs of the business and the instincts of the staff: 'I don't know, the customers just like it, so they do, but again, if you're creating an open, welcome environment for your customers, then they're going to come back. So that's what we tend to do.'

Although the creation of an 'open, welcoming environment' clearly has a commercial advantage, other actions on the part of staff transcend this: for example, enquiring after potentially vulnerable people who have not been seen for a day or two, even intervening in a situation in which a carer appeared to be taking financial advantage of the person they were accompanying to the store. Examples of everyday kindnesses of this kind were present not only in the interviews with staff, but in those with individuals

interviewed as part of the main study. The following extract is drawn from an interview with a relatively isolated single mother who moved to Glasgow from another country.

In the supermarket I know most of the people because I'm so often to that shop and we starting saying 'Hi!' to the staff. The staff members, the staff they say hello...and we even exchanged the phone with the one lady who works there but it never happened yet...and one day we went to the shop, it was the wintertime, she said 'I have a present for you'. I said 'what kind of present?' And it was a school bag for [name of child] – 'oh okay!' So [daughter] actually got this school bag which is a very good school bag. All year she's been carrying this school bag, nice school bag, from this lady from the shop, a present, she got it...[the staff member] didn't need it the school bag so she said okay, I have a small child.
Ana, Maryhill

Of course, like other forms of social interaction and trust, the kinds of relationships described above tend to be built up gradually, through familiarity and routine. It is not just that many customers have set routines – coming to the café at the same time or on the same day each week, ordering the same food – but that there is continuity in the staffing. And as relationships develop that transcend the immediate setting, there is the potential for simple acts of kindness to flow in both directions. The similarity in the following accounts – from the supermarket and the library – is striking.

Everybody's always been constant in here – there's never been changes of faces, and I think that's what they like as well. So I see the fact that they're building a relationship with that, with the staff in here too. 'Cause I've like started to get gifts. Birthday presents. I mean when I had my son, oh my God, the presents just wouldn't stop.

Member of staff in café at supermarket

Books in and books out are a tiny part of what we do. The majority of what we do is customer service in a much bigger sense. Some of these people have nobody else to talk to, so they'll come in here, which is nice, that they feel comfortable enough to come in and chat. We've got people that come in and – I'll have people who will come in here today and they will ask me how my eldest daughter's leg is. Now, they don't know me; they don't know my daughter. It's my birthday next week on Saturday. I will have birthday cards from people in here. We have boxes of chocolates handed in.

Member of staff, Hillhead Library

These overt acts of kindness and support can be accompanied by something less tangible that also grows out of familiarity and routine – a sense of one’s immediate environment as benign, unthreatening and containing ‘friendly faces’. In other words, our encounters with those who represent collective or corporate bodies – like those with friends, neighbours and other informal acquaintances – are a potentially important part of our landscape of security and belonging (Morgan, 2009).

There's people who work in Asda, there's people who work in Marks & Spencer here and the butcher. They're all sort of friendly faces to me. There's a few ladies I've spoken to – seen a few times from the church that I see about...

Sophie, Bearsden

And they went to Tesco and they looked at different vegetables and stuff like this, and [daughter] took a shine to this girl, and now every time we go in we speak to her and we say ‘Hi’, don’t we?

Emily, Hillhead

There was a suggestion from one staff member in the supermarket in Maryhill that the relationship between staff and customers was especially close in that area – something that would perhaps fit with the observation in the main report that many of those living in Maryhill have a highly local existence, living, shopping and socialising in a relatively tight geographical area. This obviously lends itself to the development of local connections and routines.

I wasn't there long, but from working in [name of other area] I think it's a lot different. I don't know, it's maybe just because it's [name of other area] and it's politer, posher, I don't know. So they come through, they have the shop and then they're away, and they might have a chat of how's the weather, but the relationship we've got in this shop ...that the customers have with the staff, they've just built that theirself. I mean the customers will come in at a particular time and a particular day when that staff member's in and that staff member will be in the shop and they'll know who's coming in at 7, who's coming in at half eight to the shop, and if they're not there, they're like where are they today?

Member of staff, supermarket

And for those within organisational settings, there can be comfort too in the familiarity and routine of encounters with ‘regulars’, even if this takes the form simply of everyday exchanges and civility. For both parties, changes in those routines can be disruptive and disorientating. The withdrawal or closure of services is an obvious cause of that but so, too, are simple or frequent changes of staff. Interviewees in organisational settings

commented on this and, indeed, on the scope for relationships to be maintained outside or beyond the original setting.

These people genuinely engage with us and think of us as friends. And when the reorganisation happens and some of the staff move on, some of the customers will be gutted. Absolutely gutted. And possibly even seek them out elsewhere. [Laughs] That'll happen too. You know, if I went from here to Partick, for example, I know that there'll be several customers'll follow me to Partick.
Member of staff, Hillhead Library

In many, though not all, organisational contexts then it seems possible for the interpersonal to co-exist with the organisational. For an appropriate balance to be struck, however, both staff and members of the public need to remain sensitive to the functions of the specific setting, as in the following example where a member of staff at the library describes how she accommodates the 'chatting' alongside the rest of her work.

Most of the people who come in that do want a chat are very understanding that we're busy, and they will chat and wait. They don't sort of monopolise our time. [Name] who's a lovely lady who comes in, she'll come in and she'll have a conversation with me and she wants to talk about her cat, and she wants to talk about her nephew, and she wants to talk about this and this and that: she's lovely. But [name] has no problem - she'll turn round, she'll say, 'Oh, right.' She'll step to the side, and let you carry on and get the queue down a wee bit, and then she'll come back and she'll chat again...
Member of staff, Hillhead Library

Risk, trust and control

Organisations often assume that public trust in them will be bolstered by tight control of risk and adherence to demonstrable procedure. While there are undoubtedly contexts in which that is true, a highly procedural approach can also have the effect of reducing the scope for the development of social trust.² That is perhaps especially true in the middle layer – especially in situations in which we need some kind of help or support and are having to manage the 'affective' risks (to how we see ourselves or how others may see us) that such needs involve. In other words, when people are anxious about acknowledging or revealing their own isolation or vulnerability, the ability to trust others to respond sensitively and appropriately can be critical. As we saw above, it is often in those moments in which people step outside or transcend their formal organisational roles that meaningful connections of this kind are formed. Such moments may involve

little more than a departure from an expected script or pattern of behaviour, but can still carry significant emotional cues. Sometimes these may be experienced as actual 'role breaches' – in situations, for example, where a member of staff or volunteer actively does something they are not meant to (for example, a bus driver letting a passenger off between stops). On other occasions, it may simply involve interaction which, although not expressly forbidden, is not part of the 'written' job description – for example, checkout staff moving beyond 'scripted' interactions to enquire about a known customer's health or family.

Some organisations in the middle layer may see such behaviour on the part of staff or volunteers as risky. It certainly has the potential to interfere with the delivery of core functions, reduce the extent to which interactions with members of the public can be tightly managed and controlled and raise concerns (among customers/users or staff) about health and safety or other forms of regulation. In many contexts, however, organisations appear to recognise that a degree of flexibility can bring benefit to all concerned. In the following example, a member of staff at the befriending service GMS reflects on the advantages of sharing aspects of her own life with those who are using the service.

All befrienders don't have to [share anything personal with callers], but, to be honest, you couldn't be a good befriender if you were going to be Joe Bloggs, you know, and make up your life. You need to give a bit of yourself too, for them to feel comfortable... We're a friend [...] like, you know, there's boundaries attached to that as well. It's not like we can meet up and go for a coffee or anything like that. There are boundaries, but we are, we're their friend. Oh, yeah, the clients know lots about me; lots.

Member of staff, GMS

This sense of leeway or space for unscripted, more 'human' forms of connection is present even in the context of some large corporate enterprises like the supermarket.

I mean one of our women, she's one of the ones that's part of the furniture, she comes in with sweets every day, she has a bag of sweets in her seat, sitting down at her till and they know, and the customers go over to her...they've started doing the same back. They buy sweets and give her sweets back...If you start going into health and safety and all that sort of stuff, then the chances are it's probably not allowed, but who is it harming? The kids come in, the elderly customers come in and they're always up at her till and ... and she's giving them a wee sweet, then there'll be a wee mint or chocolate éclair.

Member of staff, supermarket, Hillhead

Such forms of everyday kindness in organisational settings may sometimes be passive rather than active – for example, a tolerance of behaviour that is not strictly in line with organisational purpose or expectations. The library staff exhibit such a response in the face of individuals whose primary need is for physical comfort rather than information.

They're getting an environment they can come and sit in relative safety, that's fairly warm, you know? ...I mean, as long as somebody doesn't come in and, you know, and open up their fish supper and spark open a beer, we're not really too bothered about somebody coming in and, you know, with a cup of coffee and, you know, their doughnut from Greggs or whatever, so they can come in and maybe sit somewhere and read a paper... you know?

Member of staff, Hillhead Library

Across all these organisational contexts, however, there is a need to manage (formally or informally) the limits of such flexibility and to identify when it may be appropriate and when not. More generally, organisations in the middle layer have to move between the formal and the informal, the personal and the impersonal, the fluid and the structured. To return to GMS, for example, the need to 'give a bit of yourself for them to feel comfortable' is balanced by '70 pages of standard operating procedures' that govern organisational response when a service user fails to respond to a phone call.

In the context of the more formal end of the middle layer, several related questions arise from this. The first is where organisations opt to draw the line between procedure and the kind of flexibility that allows for a more human response, and whether they might consciously seek to shift the balance from the former towards the latter. The second is whether organisations currently recognise, acknowledge, value or even reward ordinary or everyday kindness among their staff. To do so, even within clear boundaries which respect organisational context and purpose – such as profit – might have a permissive effect and so amplify or encourage similar behaviour. Finally, to what extent do those working or volunteering in middle layer settings themselves benefit from these kinds of interactions? The research suggests that the kind word or gesture from a client, customer or user can also be an important part of the way that everyday kindness is enacted.

Issues of risk and trust are also present in the less formal contexts of groups and associations, like the community garden or the ramblers, which are based on mutuality and have 'members' rather than users or customers. There may be concerns here about regulatory risk and liability, although as Allen *et al.* (2014) point out, these are frequently overstated. More commonly, they take a slightly different form – closer to the affective risks associated with everyday help and support in the wholly informal sphere

(explored in the main report). For example, there are anxieties about 'walking through the door' in the first place – about being new and unknown, and sometimes about revealing vulnerability of other kinds. There are anxieties about taking on too much and becoming over-committed, about being taken advantage of, or about not being able to offer enough.

Well, I used to be one of these people in school where somebody would say, 'And who could...?', and I'd put my hand up before they'd actually expressed what it was. So, I am a joiner but I get to the stage sometimes where I think I've got too much on my plate, you know. I don't find it easy to say no.

Member, community garden

Actually after my husband died, a lot of people asked me to do a lot of things. So you've got to... which is probably why I'm in for too many things, you know? 'Cause we did a lot of things together so that, you know, I've probably over-joined things.

Nancy, Bearsden

Some of the very aspects of involvement that help to create the conditions for help and support also carry risks – of unwanted 'visibility' (Allen *et al.*, 2014), of other members of the group 'knowing your business', or of ongoing involvement. In the first of the following extracts, a woman reflects on her reluctance to become involved in a local voluntary initiative because of concern about extricating herself; in the second, in a similar situation, another woman (in her seventies) simply feels that she has 'put in' her hours.

I think if it was something you could sort of put a term to, you know? If you raise this and get it running, that it can be left to run, that's reasonable. But I don't feel I want to get involved necessarily in something ongoing.

Claudia, Hillhead

Very active choice [not to get involved] – I mean, it would be nice, and I could help people, and I do have the knowledge, but I feel I've put in my hours doing that, and I just don't want to be involved anymore.

Elizabeth, Hillhead

Lessons from the wholly informal sphere

The main report of the study highlights that even low-level help and support involving friends, family, neighbours or acquaintances can involve complex moral and emotional considerations. Indeed, this complexity is often skilfully managed in the course of

everyday relationships and interactions. The way in which that happens – and help or support is accomplished – has potential relevance in the realm of groups, organisations and associations in the middle layer, too.

One of the subtleties that is tacitly acknowledged by the supermarket – and in many other ‘customer service’ environments – is that **people generally find it easier to accept help offered than to actively seek it** in the first place. The following example of this is interesting not just because it involves a conscious attempt to offer help, but because the assistance that results has both commercial and non-commercial aspects to it. It is perhaps also worth noting the expectation that the offer of help will be declined most of the time.

We've got a thing in store just now that comes in under Making Moments Matter and ...you ask the customer before they ask you. So we'll look at the customer first and, don't get me wrong, sometimes three-quarters of the time I'll ask people, and they're like 'Oh I'm just waiting on so and so, or no, I'm fine I'm just having a wee look through this', but other ones are like, 'Oh yeah, can you help me?'

Interviewer: So what do you say to them?

'Are you okay there? Can I help you? Can I give you a wee hand? Are you stuck with something or are you needing me to get you something?' I mean the other week I think it was about three weeks ago now I seen a lady and she didn't look very well, so I'd taken her into the café, got her a cup of tea, ended up getting her a bit of toast as well because it turned out she was really unwell and she thought she'd be okay, but when she got out in the cold air I think it really hit her. When she started feeling a bit better, I ended up, 'Right, what do you want? What are you needing?' I wrote a whole shopping list down and we went to get her shopping list.

Member of staff, supermarket, Hillhead

This alertness to potential need is also evident in the work of the Macmillan volunteers at the library. Rather than always wait for individuals to approach, they sometimes engage in conversation those who show an interest in the organisational posters or leaflets – although judging when this is likely to be welcomed is a skilled task. Indeed, unlike the staff in the supermarket – and reflecting the more sensitive context within which they operate – they would look for subtle cues and not simply adopt a blanket ‘can I help you?’ approach.

Another theme already touched on is recognition of the **emotional significance of apparently practical or mundane acts**. Sometimes this can involve little more than a sense of someone being there or an exchange of pleasantries. Nevertheless, this needs to be recognised in thinking about what people are actually doing in the course of a particular organisational role. The main task of a driver in a community transport scheme, for example, is simply to move people from one place to another; but they potentially also develop relationships with those people, pass the time of day and bring deeper meaning to the exchange. To understand the value of such services – and especially the potential losses if they are withdrawn – this emotional dimension needs to be acknowledged.

The scope for practical acts to lead to emotional engagement and disclosure, already highlighted above, is worth reiterating – especially in relation to men, who often find it easier to address emotional difficulties obliquely rather than head on. There may be a physical dimension to this, in that ‘side by side’ activities – such as walking, woodworking or gardening – might sometimes enable people to articulate feelings or needs in ways that might not happen ‘face-to-face’.

Such examples also illustrate the idea that **help often happens most easily in passing**, when it is not framed as such and can be accomplished ‘by the by’, with little fuss. While this is related to the notion of offering help before it is asked for, it goes even further to alleviate the affective risks to one’s sense of self associated with help and support.

The main report also highlighted the way that, in some situations, **accepting offers of help can ‘help the helper’**. Because most people are reluctant to see themselves as vulnerable or needy and maintain a commitment to the general idea of reciprocity, being able to give something back can make it easier to accept help. Just as individuals can allow others to help them so, too, can groups, organisations and associations allow individuals to contribute to their work or activities – through time, skills, sheer physical capacity or even money – and, in doing so, make it easier for help to flow in the other direction. As we argued in the main report, this has particular relevance in the context of an ageing population, although it carries its own risks if older people come to experience this less as rewarding than as exploitative (Harper and Hamblin, 2014)

Conclusions

What can we conclude from this brief look at the role of groups, organisations and associations in the ‘middle layer’, between the realm of the inter-personal and that of formal service provision?

The first thing to note is that organisations at this level have a potentially important role to play in sustaining the ‘infrastructure of kindness’, even when that is only tangentially related to their overt form or function. At the most basic level, they do so by promoting social interaction, drawing people together and connecting them through shared interests or purpose, providing the space within which interaction can happen, or transporting them from one place to another. As such, they can serve as junction boxes – connecting the wiring of social networks and community.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that access to such organisational settings and resources is not equal. Social class is an important factor here – not just because the affluent are more likely to have the skills, confidence and connections to make the most of whatever organisational opportunities are available, but also because of access to other basic resources, such as money, physical capability and transport. Gender, generation and ethnicity are other obvious factors that shape the willingness and ability of individuals to engage with particular types of groups, organisations and associations in the middle layer. For example, interviews highlighted the greater resistance from men to engage with organisations directly concerned with the provision of emotional support, while the need for culturally-appropriate opportunities was evident from the Maryhill Integration Network and other groups working with minority ethnic populations.

While individual characteristics and experience are critical here, the broader social and geographic context is also likely to alter the way in which particular organisational spaces and opportunities are likely to be experienced. So, for example, a space like a supermarket – which may look identical in many respects to similar stores elsewhere – is likely to have a very different function in an area in which there are relatively few other amenities and in which people tend to live highly local lives. Indeed, in such a context, there is likely to be much greater scope for ongoing social interaction and the gradual ‘layering up’ of relationships and trust than there might be in a store in an out of town or city centre location.

All of this reminds us that there cannot be a ‘build it and they will come’ approach to the provision of opportunities for collective action and interaction. Such opportunities need to reflect the needs, preferences and resources of particular groups. ‘Third spaces’, for example, need to be physically accessible, culturally appropriate and inclusive in design. An effective focus for informal groups and associations is most likely to emerge organically from the needs and interests of local people, even if there may be scope for external help with practicalities. Getting the ‘fit’ right is likely to involve a process of dialogue and participation, rather than off-the-shelf solutions, but may sometimes involve little more than creating the spaces within which groups can develop collective and mutual action.

The example of the supermarket also reminds us that corporate or commercial settings are not necessarily antithetical to the development of strong local relationships and trust, even though they are often associated with the displacement of smaller businesses that are more obviously 'human' in scale and operation. Indeed, there may even be elements of congruence between the commercial needs and objectives of a large business and the social needs of individuals: the pursuit of 'excellent customer service', for example, may lead to opportunities for interaction and to the identification of needs for help and support that are not wholly related to purchasing decisions. Equally, it may be the small gestures and kindnesses of staff – the 'slightest of interpersonal rituals' (Goffman, 1963, pp. 84) – that draw people to particular businesses rather than the more obvious levers of price and promotion.

One thing that all organisational settings – large and small, commercial or non-profit – have in common is the scope for the individuals within them to transcend their formal or scripted roles and connect with others at an inter-personal or individual level. It is in these moments that there is greatest scope for small acts and relationships of everyday help and support to emerge. While some organisations may be nervous about such blurring, because of the potential impact on the delivery of core functions or the introduction of other kinds of risks, others recognise that these moments of unscripted 'humanness' can also be seen as congruent with aspects of their overall purpose – whether excellent customer service in the case of the supermarket or effective befriending in the case of GMS. Perhaps, however, more could be done to notice and recognise such 'small kindnesses' within organisational contexts. Such recognition could be seen as having a permissive quality, in the sense of giving people the message that such interaction is both allowable and valuable – yielding advantages both to the organisation and to the individuals and the community it serves.

Groups, organisations and associations in the middle layer not only contribute to informal acts and relationships of help and support, but also have a role to play in relation to formal service provision – sometimes obviating or reducing the need for such provision (for example, by enabling people to remain in community settings or providing an outlet – as in the case of GMS – for anxieties or concerns that might otherwise be channelled through a GP or other professional), at other times helping to direct or connect people to appropriate services. In doing so, they help to mediate between the world of kith and kin, on the one hand, and that of formal care and support on the other.

Just as groups, organisations and associations can help to sustain a broader 'infrastructure of kindness', so too can they learn from the way that help and support operates in the wholly informal sphere. There are lessons here about the difficulty that

people have in asking for help; about the way that help and support often happens most easily 'in passing' or how it can be downplayed or minimised; about the potential emotional significance of apparently mundane acts; and about the way that people can be encouraged to accept help if they are given the opportunity to offer it themselves. This latter point touches on the relational character of all help and support – the way in which particular acts can help to transform the relationship within which they occur and, indeed, the way in which the significance and benefits of an interaction can be jointly and mutually realised.

In conclusion, it may be worth returning to the imagery of the title and to the notion of a middle layer, between the realms of interpersonal relations and formal services. In practice, of course, these levels are not separate – either in terms of their operation or how we experience them. As this report and the main study have shown, all three are animated, linked by and help to constitute the infrastructure of kindness. While acts and relationships of everyday help and support are sometimes easiest to see in informal relations between kith and kin, acquaintances and even strangers, such relations are partly enabled and sustained by the work of collective bodies – public and private, large and small, local and non-local, more and less formal. At the same time, those organisations and services operate best when the individuals within them are allowed at times to be just that: individuals, relating to each other flexibly, sympathetically and above all humanely.

The work of strengthening and sustaining the infrastructure of kindness is, in part, simply about recognising it: in noticing, naming and valuing acts and relationships of everyday help and support, wherever they occur, we help to (re)create the conditions that make them possible in the first place.

Notes

- 1 Formal interviews and/or observations were conducted with five groups, organisations and associations across the three study areas (typically involving recorded interviews with two to three staff/volunteers at each site). Information about involvement or engagement with other groups was also gleaned from scoping work in the three areas and from 62 interviews conducted with individuals as part of the main study.
- 2 In the wider context of public services, this ‘paradox of managerialism’ – declining trust in public services despite increased transparency and accountability – has been highlighted by Taylor-Gooby (2006).

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