

# THE LIVEABLE LIVES STUDY

## UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY HELP AND SUPPORT

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**This study** highlights an overlooked component of social cohesion – everyday acts of informal help and support within communities. While such acts are often mundane and practical – small loans, lifts, help with shopping – they can also have a significant emotional dimension. Although these acts are often simple, navigating them is not: the researchers find that opposing moral forces complicate this picture. Concepts of the ‘deserving’, of stoicism and the imperative to help others all feature in this illuminating study.

### Key points

- The character of informal support among family, friends and even strangers is shaped by the social and physical characteristics of areas but also by the narratives that attach to them.
- In the often unspoken moral framework underpinning these interactions, both reciprocity (giving back) and mutuality (where both parties benefit from the interaction) are important elements.
- Public policy needs to recognise both the interactional complexity and the emotional significance of everyday help and support. In the context of political debate around austerity and the scope of the state, the infrastructural qualities of such relationships need to be recognised. While such support makes possible other aspects of social life, it also requires maintenance and repair in its own right

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Liveable Lives study examined the everyday acts and relationships of help and support that exist outside our households and closest family relationships, and the role that these can play in allowing us to lead ‘liveable’ lives. It highlighted the contrast between the unremarkable form that such acts often take and the difference they can make. It explored the ways in which the experience of help and support is shaped by social context, biography and relationships. Finally, it sought to untangle the complexity around how such acts and relationships come to happen (or not), and how they develop and are sustained over time.

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The findings are based on a qualitative study of the experience of everyday help and support of people living in and around Glasgow, in three areas – Maryhill, Bearsden and Hillhead – which have diverse physical, social and economic characteristics. Participants were asked to note and reflect on specific examples of everyday help and support and, in discussion with the research team, to try to unpack some of the richness of the interactions, emotions and negotiations involved.

## Noticing the unnoticed

One of the challenges was ‘surfacing’ aspects of everyday life that might otherwise have passed unnoticed. To do that, participants were asked to keep a log of help or support given, received, withheld or refused, primarily to provide a focus for detailed discussion at subsequent interview. But the logs produced rich accounts in their own right and many participants found this simple act of ‘noticing’ interesting and rewarding in itself, revealing dependencies and interdependencies that they had been unaware of. The

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content of the logs also prefigured many of the themes that were explored in detail via the rest of the research.

## Places, spaces and communities

The research showed how the characteristics of particular areas combine with local and broader narratives to shape both needs for help and support and the response to those needs.

The overarching narrative of Glasgow as the ‘friendly city’ gives people licence to interact with each other in particular ways, especially with others they do not know, or know only slightly. At the same time, this can be experienced as excluding of those who do not have roots in the local working-class culture on which such interactions draw. There remain counter-narratives of the city, too – of deprivation and danger – and other local narratives play out within and across areas.

For example, some of the associations with Maryhill are negative ones, involving poverty, physical decay and crime. However, it is also seen as the kind of area where people ‘stick together’ and where there still is a sense of ‘traditional’ community. This permits certain very basic kinds of help – for example, small loans to ‘tide people over’, a roof for the night or something to eat – which might be considered unusual (or even threatening) in some other areas.

Hillhead, by contrast, is defined by a narrative – and the experience – of relative diversity and transience. Its large student and ‘multiple occupancy’ population is seen by some as disrupting ‘normal’ neighbourly relations, limiting the scope for interaction and mutual help and support. And yet, from within, the student community is often experienced as highly cohesive and supportive.

Because Bearsden is seen as suburban, middle-class and sometimes ‘posh’, its narrative clashes with the dominant idea of Glasgow as an open and predominantly working-class city. And yet the area also has well-used local amenities that serve as accidental or intentional meeting points; and many of the research participants described close and supportive relationships, albeit often with a residual sense of reserve and the importance of not ‘overstepping the mark’.

In all three areas, physical place was by no means the only or most important marker of community. Many people belonged to multiple ‘communities within communities’ – revolving, for example, around the church, the pub, child-rearing or particular leisure activities. Despite the diversity of such networks, they appeared as powerful enablers of belonging and low-level support, ranging from the minor and ostensibly practical to explicit emotional support or simply an awareness of others potentially ‘being there’ in case of difficulty.

Non-local and virtual communities are also increasingly important sources of help and support. For participants, these seemed to complement as much as substitute for local relationships.

## Individual narratives, life events and the life course

Individuals draw on narratives of character and upbringing to explain their attitude towards informal help and support. Like the area narratives, these are not straightforward reflections of ‘how things are’ but still have real consequences in terms of enabling, constraining or justifying particular

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courses of action. Sometimes such accounts explicitly reference religious or spiritual beliefs; others relate to the influence of particular individuals (typically, parents and grandparents), class of origin or generation. But while these narratives often emphasise the importance of ‘helping others less fortunate than yourself’, they often also constrain the ability to seek or accept help for oneself – by emphasising, for example, independence and stoicism.

Individual need for – and the capacity to access or offer – help and support varies across the life course. Early adulthood, for example, often involves a broad network of acquaintances, rented accommodation and limited income and a corresponding ‘moral economy’ of sharing, lending and ‘wee favours’. For many, the experience of parenting (particularly in the early years) creates both an acute need for help and support, but also the potential networks through which such support can be achieved. Ageing, ill-health and bereavement can also radically alter individual needs for low-level help and support and, equally critically, the ability to offer it. The impacts here are not simply on social networks, but also on the extent to which individuals feel able to ask for or accept help when they no longer feel able to give it.

But life stages and life events are not experienced uniformly and are shaped by broader contextual factors, individual relationships and social resources. For example, while parenting can lead to the creation of mutually supportive networks, it can also reinforce isolation, especially for single mothers, those who lack English as a first language or recent arrivals in an area. Similarly, the negative impact of health crises and physical incapacity on experiences of help and support can be compounded by poverty, the absence of strong social networks and poor local amenities.

## Negotiating everyday help and support

Interactions around low-level help and support are underpinned by powerful moral framings pulling in different directions – emphasising the importance of helping others but also of independence and stoicism in the face of our own difficulties – and involve a range of other complexities. People need to find ways of managing those, for example by assessing requests for help against the criterion of ‘genuine’ need, expecting that some people should be asked before others, and seeking to avoid burden or imposition on others.

One of the key moral framings around help and support is an expectation of reciprocity, although the research highlighted the ways in which that can be stretched across time or relationships – for example, ‘repaying’ a debt from many years earlier or helping a friend or relative of someone who helped you. It also pointed to elements of mutuality, where both parties benefit directly from an interaction or where the ‘helper’ can be positioned as indirectly getting something back.

Although participants’ accounts were sometimes informed by physical or financial risk, concerns about *affective* risk – related to how we see ourselves or others see us – were more common. In this context, the affective quality of trust matters – in asking for help, in particular, we are trusting others not to exploit the relational asymmetry, however temporary, that can result from a situation in which one has to acknowledge one’s own need. The research suggests that this kind of trust can have mundane beginnings – in everyday civility, for example – but can be slow to build and equally quick to dissipate.

People deploy a range of strategies and practices in order to manage the complexities of helping and being helped. These include helping without

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appearing to help; minimising the demands (or ‘burden’) on the helper; offering help before it is asked for; and accepting help as a way of ‘helping the helper’.

Relationships of everyday help and support are most likely to be sustained where these ‘rules’ and norms of helping are respected. Over time, however, normal expectations of reciprocity can be diluted through habit and routine, and relationships with friends or acquaintances can take on a quality of kin-like obligation. This illustrates why help or support cannot be separated from the relationships within which it occurs.

## Conclusions

While it may not be possible to legislate for ‘kindness’, we can try to avoid damaging – and where possible, seek to foster and extend – the conditions in which it occurs. That means recognising its ‘infrastructural’ qualities – the ways in which it makes possible other things, but also requires maintenance and repair in its own right. The research helps to do that by highlighting, among other things, the interactional complexity (and emotional significance) of apparently mundane acts; the role of residential and public spaces in fostering everyday civility, public sociability and trust; how some forms of ‘cohesive’ community can be excluding of others; and the potential role of both new technologies and more local communities of interest in enabling ordinary relationships of help and support. By recognising the interactions between socio-spatial context, biography and relationships, we can perhaps help to break down some deep-rooted dichotomies around help and support that have the potential to become politicised in the context of austerity – between state and community, the deserving and the undeserving, the helpers and the helped.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Liveable Lives study is about the low-level, everyday acts and relationships of help and support that exist outside our households and closest family relationships and the role that these can play in allowing us to lead ‘liveable’ lives. It highlights the contrast between the unremarkable form that such acts often take and the very significant difference they can make. It explores the ways in which the experience of help and support is shaped by social context, biography and relationships. It seeks to untangle some of the complexity around how such acts and relationships come to happen (or not) and how they develop over time. Finally, it asks what might make them more common or sustainable within our lives and communities.

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By comparison with the focus on ‘services’ provided by the state or voluntary sector, or on relationships of ‘care’ within households or families, informal relationships of help and support are relatively little studied – at least directly. There are extensive and long-established literatures in a number of related fields, including neighbourhood or community studies, social network analysis, voluntarism, informal care, social capital and so on. But the micro-level interactions and exchanges that occur within – and, in fact, help to constitute – ‘ordinary’ relationships tend to feature only in passing. And although we understand something about who tends to be there for us at moments of particular crisis or difficulty, and what people do for one another, we know far less about *how* very low-level support comes to happen, its social context, and how it might be sustained or encouraged.

There is a highly topical policy backdrop to such concerns, centred on the implications of austerity and the expectation of more-for-less in public-service provision. The aim of this report is not to amplify calls for the transfer of responsibilities from the state to the non-state, community or individual

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actors, but simply to understand more about what already happens and how, with a view to identifying both possibilities for, and potential pitfalls of, future action at all levels. That said, it does raise important questions about the politics of kindness, and in particular about the extent to which a ‘harsher’ Britain – expressed in both political action and public attitudes (Clark and Heath, 2014) – may be reflected in or begin to shape the way that we relate to one another as individuals.

Through an intensive qualitative study centred on three geographical areas in and around Glasgow, the study aimed to render visible these often unremarkable and unnoticed practices – that ‘little bit of help’, the ‘wee favours’ and ‘chats’ with friends, neighbours and acquaintances. As such, its primary focus was not on ‘random acts of kindness’ between strangers, nor on the obligations of immediate family, but on the things that happen in between.

In doing so, the study drew on four overarching and inter-related themes: those of reflexivity, narrative, practice and emotion. A focus on reflexivity allows us to take seriously the ways in which we try to make sense of ourselves in relation to the social world we are a part of. Narrative is key to this sense-making but it also shapes our lives, in particular by justifying or enabling (or not) particular forms of social action. At the same time, an attention to practices allows us to recognise the significance of what we do, often in habitual or routinised ways. Finally, emotion is built into all three – what we think, what we do and the stories we tell about both – which is why we cannot treat decision-making or ‘rationality’ as somehow opposite to or separate from emotion.

The study was multidimensional, balancing an emphasis on socio-economic and cultural context, individual *biography* and specifically what goes on within particular *interactions and relationships*. Of course, the distinction between these levels is largely artificial – in practice, structure, biography and relationships are not easily disentangled. Nevertheless, it remains a useful means of forcing alternative and hopefully complementary readings of a complex issue. Thus Chapter 2 is broadly about context, Chapter 3 about biography and Chapter 4 about relationships. The concluding chapter attempts to summarise some of the key messages from the study and to highlight potential implications.

## Why Glasgow?

We chose to centre the research on three areas in and around Glasgow because the city offers both a generalisable, post-industrial urban setting and a strong and distinctive sense of its own identity. It also has a high degree of internal variation and the three study areas – although geographically close to one another – have very different social, economic and physical characteristics. Bearsden lies just outside the city, and is a relatively affluent suburban environment, with a high level of home ownership, and of families with children and older, retired households. Hillhead lies in Glasgow’s West End and is dominated by Glasgow University. Much of the area consists of traditional sandstone tenement housing, and the population includes a large number of students and young professionals, many of who are living in multiple occupancy, privately rented flats. Maryhill is a largely working-class area, with relatively high levels of unemployment, poor health and other markers of deprivation. But as well as differences between areas, there is also considerable variation within them – particularly in the larger areas of Bearsden and Maryhill, both of which contain a range of housing and

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tenure types and distinct sub-areas. Despite these differences between and within, the three areas are linked not only by transport but also by individual biographies and everyday lives.

## What the research involved

Over the first few months of the project, we set out to understand more about the character of three specific areas in and around the city by carrying out walking interviews and observation of community spaces, reviewing local histories and statistics, and conducting a number of both naturally occurring and structured focus groups. We then conducted a series of interviews with some 44 individuals about their experiences of everyday help and support. These took place over two meetings, with participants keeping a log in the intervening period of instances of help and support given and received, offered or accepted, withheld or declined. Participants kept the log in a variety of different ways, including handwritten notes, audio recordings, drawings or a text-diary. Whatever the method chosen, the log served two main functions: first, to surface or capture instances of everyday help or support that might otherwise have passed unnoticed; and second, to prompt recall and discussion at the second interview. In a smaller number of cases (n=15), we also conducted interviews with family members, friends or acquaintances (secondary participants) of the core research participants.

The study also involved work with a small number of informal and semi-formal and commercial groups and organisations providing either direct or indirect help and support or simply a space where small acts of help or supportive interactions may unfold. For reasons of space, this element is drawn on only briefly within this report.

## Spraying water on the web: noticing everyday experience

The rather imperfect metaphor of the spider's web seemed to speak both to the character of everyday help and support and to the potential difficulty of researching it. It is a structure composed of individual but linked threads, combining fragility with considerable flexibility and strength. Equally importantly, it is often almost invisible to the naked eye, until revealed by the angle of the sun, a sharp frost or droplets of mist.

Perhaps the first important finding from the study was an unintentional one, and relates to the power of the act of noticing – a theme we return to in our conclusions. For some participants, the act of keeping the log was affirming, in that it revealed to them the richness, depth or quality of their everyday relationships. For others, of course, it served to highlight their relative isolation, or led them to reflect on how they live or the 'kind of person' they are.

I guess I quite liked the fact that it showed me that people do help each other out on a daily basis really, but it's a subconscious thing. And so it's quite nice to see actually: you might think you're alone, but then you see all these different situations where you're helping or people are helping you.

Sophie, 30–39, Bearsden

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## 2 PLACES, SPACES AND COMMUNITIES

How are experiences of everyday help and support shaped by the specific places, spaces and communities in which we live? What are the commonalities and differences across different kinds of geographic communities? And how do other kinds of community – such as virtual communities or communities of interest – interact with the social, economic and spatial aspects of place to create and constrain opportunities for informal social support?

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In choosing three areas in and around Glasgow on which to base the research, we consciously did not set out to conduct three discrete ‘community studies’ but to treat these as starting points or potential ‘windows’ onto the city. That partly involved a recognition that most contemporary lives and relationships are not experienced within neat and narrow geographical boundaries – indeed, the opportunities for national and global connections (whether physical or virtual) have expanded exponentially in recent decades. This decision also reflected our doubts about the value of trying to determine what any particular area ‘is like’ and a concern to avoid ecological determinism – in other words, the idea that the lives of individuals might be wholly determined by their postcode.

In this chapter, then, we consider some of the ways in which the specific ‘places’ of the research shape experiences of everyday help and support. We treat those places as physical locations and as ‘places of the mind’, and argue that both help to structure the beliefs and practices of those who live there. It is also worth saying at the outset that context can never be reduced to the wholly local: all three areas exist within broader systems of economics, politics and culture. At a national level, for example, the wider context includes the financial crisis and its aftermath, cuts in public expenditure and welfare, and the emergence of immigration as a key political issue. The concern here, however, is with how those – and other developments – are

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experienced locally and with what consequences for everyday help and support.

## City-wide and local narratives

Participants drew on a range of narratives of place, relating to the city as a whole, to their own or other parts of the city, and occasionally to other parts of Scotland or the UK.

### Glasgow: the friendly city?

See us... Glasgow-wegians? We're more friendly than the English people. That's the honest truth. If you go to England, nobody wants to know you. But if you come to Glasgow, they're all friendly. Every part is friendly, as far as I know that. They're all friendly. So nobody can neglect you. If you're lost, they'll tell you the way. If you're looking for something, they'll help you. Or, if you need help, they will help you. I've already helped lots of people – the older people – like carrying bags.

Fatima, 40–49, Maryhill

There is a powerful meta-narrative about Glasgow: that the city is somehow defined by the warmth and openness of its inhabitants. This is a notion that has been drawn on in municipal campaigns to rebrand the city in recent decades, ranging from 'Glasgow's miles better', to the 'friendly city' and, most recently, 'people make Glasgow'. The success of those campaigns can perhaps be attributed to the way in which they tap into, and amplify, strongly held popular sentiments. Implicit in these is a sense of a city unfairly maligned, of change and of contrast – a city that is seen as friendlier, more open and down to earth than other urban settings, including, most notably, Edinburgh.

This narrative of 'the friendly city' appeared to resonate with many participants, or at least was one they were happy to draw on. Of course the interviews themselves were also an enactment of how people living in Glasgow portray the city to strangers or outsiders (including non-Glaswegian researchers) and, as such, there may also be a particular positioning of the city, as the following extract illustrates.

I do think it's true. I've seen it time and time again, somebody looking for directions or anything like that, they practically take the person there, you know? That's the kind they are, and they'll go out of their way to help somebody.

Leonard, 70–79, Hillhead

But what are the actual consequences of such a narrative? What difference do the stories we tell about a place actually make to those who live there? Most obviously, the notion of the friendly city gives people licence to interact in particular ways with people they do not know, or know only slightly; or at least to interpret their behaviours in that way. So the apparently random conversations at bus stops, in stairwells or at the supermarket can be seen

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as opening up possibilities for connections that would not otherwise exist. In doing so, it is possible that they force us to acknowledge a shared humanity that makes it more difficult ignore the needs of others.

At the same time, of course, the 'Glasgow way' may also be experienced as excluding by those who lack the language, the accent or the familiarity with the form, style and content of such place narratives.

When you have a look at the 'friendly city', it is true, but we think that there's kind of a lot of conditions attached to it. So – yeah – it's friendly if you're white, working-class, probably Protestant, and if you definitely don't sound English... within that group – yes – it is very friendly.

Sarah, 30–39, Hillhead

The narrative of friendliness is, then, a powerful one, but insofar as it can reinforce a particular understanding of what it means to be Glaswegian, it also has the potential to isolate or exclude. For people who might well experience that – because, for example, they had arrived in the city from elsewhere – there were also some counter-narratives of Glasgow as unfriendly or unwelcoming, or (echoing older narratives of the city), dangerous.

But [the city is] also dangerous – if you go out at night and you say, 'I'm coming back home alone, walking,' your friends will say, 'Oh, no, no, no, no, please take a taxi. Something can happen.' And I have had a bad experience in my own house, so I know that it's not that safe.

Isabelle, 20–29, Hillhead

There are, of course, also powerful local narratives of place that are invested in to varying degrees both by the people who live there and by those who live elsewhere. Sometimes these narratives emerge strongly from those who live elsewhere and are resisted by those who actually live in each area; sometimes the reverse is true. Either way, they complicate the overarching narrative of Glasgow and mirror aspects of the characterisation of similar parts of other cities. In a Scottish context, for example, one could perhaps substitute Edinburgh's Marchmont or Newington for Hillhead, its Leith for Maryhill or Balerno for Bearsden. In what follows, we are interested in exploring how such narratives – whether rooted in reality or not – might reflect and constitute social relations in particular ways, making certain kinds of everyday help and support easier to achieve, and others more difficult.

### Maryhill: a 'normal' part of Glasgow

From the outside, and particularly from the relatively affluent areas of Hillhead and Bearsden, many of the associations with Maryhill are negative ones, involving poverty, physical decay and occasional danger. However, there is also a recognition that Maryhill is the kind of area where people 'stick together' and there is a high degree of 'traditional' community, familiarity and solidarity. The significance of this for everyday help and support is that, in its sense of shared challenges and difficulties, it permits certain very basic kinds of help, such as small loans to 'tide people over', a

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roof for the night or something to eat, which might be considered unusual (or even in some respects threatening) for people in more affluent areas.

It's definitely not an affluent area, and I think people help each other to get by. I think that comes just through the class that they are, or classes... People are always looking out for each other... for their neighbours, or for friends.

Fraser, 30–39, Maryhill

The character of the residential buildings in the area, with their often shared amenities and access, combines with the highly local character of many people's day-to-day lives to create multiple opportunities for contingent social interaction – at least for those whose lives are not so local as to be effectively housebound – and for the emergence of shared identities, reinforced by the fact that many inhabitants have lived in the area for years.

You're more able to mingle and that. I mean every second person you know. And they're passing by, 'how are you doing?' and things like that... They've all got cars up there [Bearsden] anyway, so I mean, they're not going to be chatting to one another on the way back. No, it's that way, I can walk from here to over there [name of shop], and meet about half-a-dozen people. You know what I mean, probably not by name but I know he came from north Partick, he came from [...] and they've all got family history in Maryhill.

Alan, 70–79, Maryhill

There is perhaps a particular resonance between the local narrative of working-class Maryhill and that of the city as a whole, powerfully captured in the second extract below in which the interviewee likens the area to other 'normal' parts of the city.

Marion: I don't think [Maryhill] differs a lot fae, as I would say, normal parts.

Interviewer: What are the normal parts of Glasgow?

Marion: The Castlemilks, the Gorbals, the Bridgetons and some pockets, I'm sure even Easterhouse, where there's a sense of community.

Marion, 60–69, Maryhill

The significance of this classed narrative for everyday help and support is that it facilitates solidarity and a sense of 'we're all in this together'. This narrative is, in turn, shored up through resistance to negative external perceptions and stigma, and through the contrasting narrative of Bearsden, where individualism and aspiration – 'keeping up with the Joneses' – are constructed as prevalent. As such, the narrative and experience of everyday help and support in Maryhill can arguably be seen as typical of the type of

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social capital observed in other traditional working-class communities. In sum, it involves a high degree of bonding and an emphasis on 'getting by', but less in the way of help to people wanting to 'get on' or 'get out', or encouragement to others wanting to come in.

### Hillhead: diversity, transience and tolerance

In contrast to 'settled' and 'traditional' Maryhill, Hillhead is defined by a narrative – and the experience – of relative diversity and transience. Its very large student and 'multiple occupancy' population is seen by some as disrupting 'normal' neighbourly relations – as taking little interest in communal issues such as keeping the stairwell clean or maintaining the 'back greens', and disturbing other residents with parties and a general lack of consideration. This can lead to mutual suspicion between students and more established residents, limiting the scope and opportunities for interaction and mutual help and support – even though the character of tenement housing might otherwise lend itself to this.

Perhaps paradoxically, from within, the student community is often experienced as highly cohesive and supportive. Indeed, interviews with students generated multiple examples of low-level help and support, facilitated – as in Maryhill – by the highly local character of individuals' (term-time) existence, and extensively supplemented by the use of new technology. In addition to this sheer 'density of acquaintanceship' (Freudenberg, 1986), student lifestyles and households often necessarily involve a high degree of cooperation, shared interests and mutual help and support. These rarely extend, however, beyond the bounds of the 'student community'. As in Maryhill, then, the closeness and 'effectiveness' of this particular community of interest can also contribute to a sense of exclusion and separation from other groups within the same area (on the broader consequences of 'studentification', see Smith, 2008).

If you are a student and you come here, you do actually feel there is a community, because you know so many other students – you actually feel like you know so many people in your area – but then I don't know the neighbours who live below me.

Focus group participant, Hillhead

The narrative of a 'lack of community' in Hillhead is, to some extent, self-reinforcing. Whether rooted in direct experience or not, some of the more settled residents of the area come to see students as inconsiderate and hedonistic, and as uninterested in the lives of those around them. This makes them less likely to initiate contact with their student neighbours, to turn to them for help and support or to offer it in return. Students, for their part, can pick up on this ambivalence or antagonism, which makes them equally likely to keep themselves to themselves.

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Well, we're the only students in our building. We live on the top floor, and most people just keep themselves to themselves in there. But, like, we had problems with getting our internet and stuff, so we asked to borrow our neighbour's phone to check if we had a phone line, and they were happy to give us it, so even though we didn't know them, and there are, like, some families in the building that kind of distance themselves from us because we're students and, I don't know, they maybe just don't think we're very alike.

Focus group participant, Hillhead

Although these mutual expectations and narratives of separateness can sometimes be punctured by specific experience – by the development of particular relationships or one-off acts of help – they clearly have a structural reality, influencing not only relations between individual neighbours but the composition and characteristics of tenements, streets and areas.

[Name] Street now just seems a no-go area, 'cos there's all students all partying.

Focus group participant, Hillhead

The narrative of transience is offset by counter-narratives such as those associated with the diverse and cosmopolitan 'urban village' and the ways in which this is experienced by particular groups – for example older people or parents. Despite the fact that there are relatively few families within the area, for example, several of the parents interviewed for the research felt that there was a high degree of contact and support available from others with children. Like many of the students, some parents talked about the impossibility of getting down Byres Road without meeting friends and acquaintances, while others mentioned the key focal points of the local playparks and the Botanic Gardens.

### Bearsden: affluence, reserve and respectability

From the outside, the dominant narrative of Bearsden is that of well-heeled suburbia, keeping itself apart and slightly aloof from the rest of the city. Indeed, of the (relatively numerous) middle-class neighbourhoods in and around Glasgow, Bearsden tends to be seen as the example of suburbia *par excellence*. Despite – and perhaps because of – the fact that the area sits just outside the city boundaries, Bearsden seems to be an especially powerful 'place of the mind' for residents of the city itself. Certainly the residents of Maryhill and Hillhead had more to say about Bearsden than the other way around.

Part of that characterisation of Bearsden as suburban involves a suspicion of people who, in the pursuit of material wealth, have lost a sense of community.

The likes of Bearsden, I mean it's all just like couples living in a big fancy house and keeping up with the Joneses and things like that as far as I can see.

Alan, 70–79, Maryhill

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While notions of reputation and stigma often attach to residents of deprived areas (Kearns et al, 2013), they are relevant here too, in that residents of Bearsden were often conscious of others' reaction to where they live and keen to resist the idea that they should be judged – or excluded – on that basis. Some were at pains to counter the image of Bearsden as affluent and privileged, highlighting their own status as 'normal working people' or social variation within the area more generally.

Others were overtly critical of the mind-set and lifestyles of those around them. The participant quoted below, despite having lived in Bearsden for several decades, felt 'stuck' among people with whom she felt little in common. This absence of any sense of fellow feeling is actually amplified by the limited but transactional contact that he does have with his neighbours.

Community, hmm, you'd be lucky to find it here; I don't see any community. It's totally people live in their isolated little boxes and, yes, you might know some of your neighbours, but can I tell you that where I've lived for 28 years there's still some people that live two doors opposite me down the road or whatever, no idea who they are. I've never met them, never spoken to them, they've never spoken to me. Some of these people I've taken a parcel for them, and they're very lovely when they come, they were to get it, but they don't even nod at you, or wave to you, or smile to you if you're out doing your bin.

Shara, 50–59, Bearsden

Others framed this sense of people 'keeping themselves to themselves' more positively – as respecting each other's privacy and not being 'in each other's pockets'. This sense of reserve was nevertheless accompanied by a belief that 'people are there if you need them' – that friends, neighbours or acquaintances would offer or could be asked for help should the need arise. This, then, can be read as a belief in the importance of 'friendly distance' (Crow, Allan and Summers, 2002); or as a narrative of a dormant community emerging at particular moments.

### **High hedges, back greens and closes: how the character of residential spaces shapes everyday help and support**

In areas like Bearsden, where housing is typically not only privately owned but physically separated and demarcated by gardens, hedges and fences, the scope for everyday interaction is reduced. While chats 'over the garden fence' may still occur, it is possible for people to live lives that are physically separated from those immediately around them. This does not mean, of course, that they necessarily do – and there were plenty of examples of strong and supportive relationships with neighbours here as in other areas – but it does mean that such connections have to be more consciously developed, especially in the context of a car-oriented community in which there is less scope to bump into people on the street, at least outside the main shopping areas. This may also speak to the importance of cafes and other neutral meeting places in Bearsden – a theme returned to below.

In the tenement housing of Hillhead, there are specific shared issues (such as the maintenance of the back green or the stairwell itself) that provide opportunities and a need for people to come together. Simple

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awareness of other people's lives and needs and the scope for everyday interaction, borne out of proximity, also create the potential for low-level help and support of various kinds – from enquiring after the grandchildren to putting the bins out. In practice, however, the extent of interaction within communal stairs is also often limited – in large part because of the very different rhythms, routines and concerns of the students, young professionals and older residents who make up the bulk of the population.

I can't say that there's a great amount of interaction in these closes... I'm retired and there's another lady who's retired and we tend to do more in the gardens and chat to one another and in the sense that new people would come, although I've only been here since 2010 I'm regarded as one of the older residents and people would come to us for information about, you know, the bin collections and things like that.

Morag, 60–69, Hillhead

In fact, for some, the stairwell and its potential for interaction is something to be managed as not all interactions are necessarily positive. One participant, for example, described in detail his attempts to avoid stairwell encounters with neighbours who have mental health problems through strategic use of his spyhole. There was also a sense from the accounts of those in flatted accommodation that help and support can take the form of things *not done* (for example, rubbish left on the stair, loud music, or moving furniture late at night).

These kinds of issue were of particular relevance in Maryhill – where the physical fabric of the buildings and social housing policies had the potential to create conflict between neighbours – but it was also here that there seemed to be the clearest positive interaction between shared spaces, routines and interests. While there is obviously a wide range of housing types within the area, many people live in accommodation with shared access or amenities, although here too there was some sense of such spaces being marked off and privatised. There was also, unlike in Hillhead, more of a sense of people being around during the day and of connections built up through interactions in such spaces, for example, through shared barbecues or cups of tea 'out the back' when the weather is good.

That said, in Maryhill too, there were issues around involvement with and responsibility for these shared spaces. Older residents, in particular, often felt a lack of engagement from others – seeing younger people as either too busy or as simply indifferent to the state of communal areas. Frances, for example, takes it upon herself to sweep up the leaves in the stairwell and in doing so, is passed by several younger residents.

Well, probably they would see it themselves, you know? I know that [name of friend] – one of the girls – said to me, 'That's some mess, isn't it?' I said, 'Oh, it's terrible'. She says, 'I'm away out just now'. Whether, whether she meant she would help me if she wasn't going out... they've got to see to things; they've got quite a lot of work to see to, you know?

Frances, 80–89, Maryhill

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The fuller account of this exchange is notable for the strength, complexity and ambivalence of Frances' feelings about this – again – relatively mundane act. These range from a sense of resentment (at being left by those younger to tackle a major practical task), to satisfaction (at a job well done and at being able, in her late eighties, to do it), nostalgia (for an era when everybody took pride in and a turn at cleaning the stairwell) and sympathy (for those younger residents whose lives are dominated by work). We return to some of these themes in Chapter 4.

## Public spaces and 'third places'

While the character of residential accommodation has an important role to play in shaping people's needs for everyday help and support and the responses of others to those needs, so too does the nature of public space within particular areas. Sometimes this can be a question of mobility and accessibility; for example, for those with limited physical capacity or private transport who need help to access shops, healthcare or other facilities. This was perhaps most likely to be the case in Maryhill, where there are limited local amenities, and in Bearsden, where amenities are heavily clustered and many areas are wholly residential.

But the availability of shops and other facilities matters in this context not only because people need to be able to use them, but because they represent a focus for accidental or planned interaction. The Cross in Bearsden and Byres Road in Hillhead, for example, serve these functions, through the mix of cafes and small shops; while in Maryhill, the local Tesco (with its cafe, post office and other facilities) does likewise. Indeed, the social function of Tesco is explicitly recognised by the company itself, which employs 'community champions', whose job is to build links with local voluntary groups and to facilitate engagement and interaction more generally. While this could be viewed cynically, there is also little doubt that it has some benefits for local people.

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.

Staff member, Tesco, Maryhill

Libraries, too, have taken on an increasingly broad community function and so it is perhaps not surprising that staff there, too, emphasise the potential for sociability.

It's used as a social space. A big social space. There's a lot of people – they come, they meet. They all know each other, even if it's only through actually coming in and out of the library.

Staff member, Hillhead Library

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For some, this is about the library offering a place of shelter and social connection – ‘getting an environment they can come and sit in relative safety, that’s fairly warm’. For others, it is about semi-formal support, such as in the following discussion about the presence in the library of volunteers from Macmillan Cancer Support:

If that is there, it’s in a very non-intrusive way – you’re not joining a club, you’re not signing up to go and get help and support. You know you can sit down there and read a book, it might take you half an hour before you mention actually, you know, ‘Me grandma’s [...], got a diagnosis’, so that’s a good example of, well, unobtrusively being there.

Staff member, Hillhead Library

It is worth noting, however, that spaces that can feel welcoming to some may be experienced as excluding by others, for cultural or financial reasons (or both). The following example comes from a young woman in a focus group in Hillhead who had moved there from a less affluent part of the city.

I cannae afford to go into half the cafes in Byres Road, you know? It’s just far too expensive. So I’d rather go back up to Maryhill and I walk through to Partick, you know, because there’s got **normal** cafes there... Instead o’ having a roll and sausage, you know, it’s ciabatta rolls, and ciabatta this, you know? I like all that kinda food as well, but it’s just so expensive sometimes, you know? And just being able to sit in [a] cafe and pass the time o’ day wi’ somebody, you know, just to chat and ask somebody how they are.

Focus group participant, Hillhead

There is a sense that ‘coffee-shop culture’ is particularly pronounced in Bearsden, in part because the local culture of ‘friendly distance’ makes it important to have access to such neutral spaces, especially at an early point in friendships. Cafes are certainly a key resource for mothers of young children in the area, most of whom are able to afford to use them on a regular basis, and through such meetings are able to build networks of friendship and support.

First of all we’d meet in [name of cafe], sort of neutral ground and there was a big group of us. And then people start, you know, breaking off and the group got smaller and then we started meeting at people’s houses and stuff so we still do that.

Sophie, 30–39, Bearsden

Of course, child-rearing is also strongly associated with other kinds of public spaces – with swimming pools and other sports facilities, libraries, public parks and the school gate itself. All of these locations ostensibly lend themselves to the development of networks of informal help and support, since parents are typically dealing with similar demands and pressures. Here, too, the character of the local community can matter. One young mother in Bearsden, for example, noted that because so many children were picked

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up by professional child carers, there was little scope for her to ask for incidental help (for example, to look after one child while she picked up the other).

Some writers (such as Oldenberg, 2000) have talked about the potential of ‘third places’, separate from the worlds of home or work as a focus for public sociability and networks. Aspects of this idea can be found in a variety of commercial spaces – for example, in cafes, pubs or even Tesco – but are perhaps more obviously present in some of the community resources funded by the state and not-for-profit sectors, such as libraries and community centres. Whether or not these meet the characteristics of true ‘third places’, such spaces existed in all three areas – for example, Hillhead Library, Community Central Hall in Maryhill and the Bearsden Burgh Hall – and offer a focus for local interest groups and for ‘public sociability’ more generally. The activities in such settings can generate their own needs for help and support (such as someone to help set tables out or collect money); address some needs directly (for example, by providing access to health and wellbeing classes) and others indirectly (by creating a sense of connection between participants that has value in its own right but can also yield benefits in other settings).

### **‘A bit like a family’: communities within communities**

One of the limitations of area-based narratives, whether relating to Glasgow as a whole or to particular neighbourhoods, is that they rarely speak to the fact that the most powerful communities that people belong to (outside family and friends) tend to be defined not by geography – even if they often have a local dimension – but by some other sense of shared interest or involvement. The lives of the study participants contained countless examples of such ‘belongings’ – for example, to a particular ethnic or religious group; a specific church; a sports or leisure club; an informal group of musicians or artists, and so on. Despite the fact that such networks are rarely constituted around the need for or provision of mutual help and support, that tends to be an important by-product of how they function, and to be at least, if not more, important than interactions or relationships with neighbours. (Of course ‘importance’ here depends on the kind of support we are looking to give or receive – for some, including the least mobile, proximate help from immediate neighbours remains highly significant). It is striking how similar the following accounts are, despite the very different character of the contexts that have brought people together.

**The church-goer.** 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, 40–49, Bearsden

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**The pub-goer.** I mean people that are not pub people must think we're sort o' crazy in a way. You know what I mean?... We're like a unit. We're like one... People who normally don't go to pubs would say, "Oh d'ye do this? d'ye know him? D'ye know her? I wouldnae speak to them, you know?", but in a pub it's different... It's like 'Cheers' [the TV sitcom], you know? I want to go where everybody knows my name, and all... They're quite good. Aye... So it's 'my payday, your payday' sort o' thing, you know?

Alan, 70–79, Maryhill

**The middle-class mum.** Friday morning we have a – there's a group of mums that go for a coffee at the [name of cafe], which sounds very yummy-mummy, but it's, is a – is actually, you know, it can sometimes be like this morning, it'll just be half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, and it's a real sort of anchor in the week, I find. Just – you know, we don't necessarily talk about anything particularly deep, but it's just these friendships that we've built up... Some favours that you do people are obvious, like, jobs that get done for you, but some other things – support that you need – is much more sort of... just feeling human, feeling kind of anchored, feeling that you've got a network of friends there and that kind of thing.

Joanne, 40–49, Bearsden

**The dancer.** 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 ten, 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, 70–79, Hillhead

The language in these accounts is powerful – 'it's a bit like a family', 'we're like a unit', 'it's a real sort of anchor', 'a wee community' – and again gives a sense of how apparently mundane aspects of daily life can provide not only a sense of connection and belonging but access to a range of very tangible practical and emotional benefits.

## On not belonging

Of course, membership of such communities within communities is part of the currency of social capital. And while some are members of several, others belong to almost none. Such exclusion can be especially difficult for those who lack other kinds of connections or identities that tie them to the area or city they live in. Mobility and the lack of it are key themes here: those without access to such communities of support have often arrived in the city from elsewhere and then sometimes find themselves lacking either the financial or the physical resources to change their immediate environment or build effective connections. There is also sometimes an indication of

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the way that Glasgow's powerful sense of self – particularly in its more cohesive areas, such as Maryhill – can be experienced as excluding. The clearest example of this, reported in detail in our interim report, was from a participant living in Maryhill who was ill for the entire period and whose log was completely empty.

A 'middle-class' man who moved to Maryhill from outside Scotland as a student, Ivan's interviews tell the tale of an 'outsider' who stayed in Maryhill not by choice, but because of circumstance. Suffering long-term health problems, he was unable to build relationships of mutual help and support with those around him, but also found it difficult to connect even socially.

Most of the people I've come across aren't really similar you know, um, they're from a different background. [Where] I live there is no one there, they're neighbours; there's nothing wrong with them. But um, they're not my friends and we've got nothing in common.

Ivan, 60–69, Maryhill

While this example is extreme, there are echoes of it in other accounts, which serve to remind us of the way that community (of whatever kind) can be a double-edged sword: in including some, it excludes others (Crow, 2002).

### **'Kind of almost there': non-proximate and virtual networks of help and support**

The growth of the internet and other technology and services (such as cheap international telephone calls) has both facilitated existing relationships of help and support and enabled new ones to emerge.

The logs revealed that many of those we interviewed maintained relationships of help or support with family or friends living in other parts of the country or the world. These have become easier – and in some cases simply possible – as a result of cheap and widely available communications technologies, allowing individuals to maintain a level and intensity of contact that would simply not have been possible a decade or so ago. These technologies sometimes provide a framework within which low-level help and support can happen, but often that contact is the help or support. Where direct communication might once have been reserved for crises or special occasions, cheap and easily available ICT now makes possible a form of 'being there' in which people spend extended time together while at a distance.

[With] a phone call, you still have to be sort of... holding the phone, if I'm on Skype what I'll do is I'll just flick it up and put it on... or my mum, or my dad, or whatever they'll be in there... they'll have it in the room, they'll be chatting, my mum will be doing the washing-up or something, I'll be playing my computer game, we'll be chatting but we don't need to think about it as much as... it's kind of almost there, and it's just a nice way to converse.

Danny, 20–29, Hillhead

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In that sense, the transformation of the communications landscape has clearly altered the landscape of help and support by helping to disembed such relationships – at least for some people – from particular locations.

However, it is clear that for many, such technologies are also a critical part of how relationships of help and support are managed locally. For example, the low-level monitoring of social media such as Facebook can become the equivalent of glancing across the road to ensure that a neighbour's curtains are opened – and status updates can prompt concern and contact, whether virtual or direct. They can also give people an indication of who might be available to talk or meet up.

You can go on Facebook and things like that, and... if you're having a naff day, you can always see what your friends are up tae. Maybe go over and sit in their house and have a wee change o' scenery for yourself.

Gregor, 30–39, Maryhill

Participants in the study talked about the use of texting to coordinate help and support, particularly at short notice, but also about its role in signalling 'reachability' or in providing low-level emotional support ('R U OK?') at critical or difficult moments. People also used it to limit the scope for emotional engagement, something that can be more difficult in the context of face-to-face or phone conversations (Turkle, 2011). And just as it is easier to avoid long conversations or to say 'no' in a text, people also found its casualness could allow them to ask for help or favours.

For some people, the use of ICT allows existing networks to be extended (for instance, by linking to friends of friends on Facebook), but also creates opportunities to develop relationships of an entirely new kind. Some of these encounters have an appealingly random quality, such as the man who, on a whim, 'friended' someone on Facebook in the USA whom he noticed had the same name and date of birth. The two have since become genuine, if virtual, friends – regularly chatting about developments in their lives and even sharing advice about DIY and other practical issues. Others talked about the strange openness that they sometimes experienced with 'friends' they had never met.

Of course, people's use of the internet is by no means just social; participants gave various examples of how they had used it to access help and advice – for example using sites such as Mumsnet.

The development of extensive networks of online friendships was more common among, but not wholly limited to, younger people. Indeed, there were several examples from the research of older people whose use of the web was partly a response to physical incapacity and confinement at home. One of these individuals had become very involved in online community gaming and developed an extensive network of virtual friends as a result. Another older man, living in sheltered housing, had previously been involved in running an online support group for individuals with disabilities. Through this, he had connections with individuals throughout the world, many of whom had very limited mobility within their own physical communities.

In the context of everyday help and support, this has a number of potentially interesting consequences. First, there is simply the scope for human contact, with its implications for reducing feelings of isolation and opportunities for emotional connection. The following extract relates to the support group referred to above.

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Well, there was a lady see, maybe 60, 70 who wanted to chat. Just wanted to be close to you, just talking, so you let them in. All right – they didnae contribute much, but they wanted to be part of what you had there.

Archie, 70–79, Maryhill

Second, there is the way in which online worlds create new needs for both emotional and practical support. In relation to the former, online relationships are potentially no less complex than those offline and, particularly in the context of chat rooms and multiple-user forums, there were instances of individuals needing to discuss or resolve problems that had arisen within the site. Intriguingly, such relationships also sometimes give rise to a need for practical help and support. The participant who is heavily involved in an online gaming community, for example, talked of asking online friends to look after her virtual farms during periods when she was offline.

The experience of this participant also illustrated the potential for online relationships to move offline, as she had hosted several visitors to Glasgow whom she had met online.

Overall, then, there seem to be few grounds for thinking that local relationships of help and support are being displaced by the virtual and the non-local. In fact, such technologies have the capacity to complement and extend existing relationships. For some who are geographically highly constrained, the internet has opened up new possibilities for social interaction, connection and support. However, the research also reminds us that many of those with limited access to offline support networks and resources are also less likely to be able to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the online world.

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## 3 BIOGRAPHY, LIFE COURSE AND GENERATION

This chapter turns from the ‘big stories’ of neighbourhoods, social class and collective narrative to an exploration of how everyday help and support is shaped by, and lived through, individual biography. In doing so, it recognises the social patterning of biography but also the scope for people from similar areas or backgrounds to have very different experiences and outlooks.

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### ‘That’s just how I am’: narratives of character and upbringing

I’d help **anybody**. I’m quite that type o’ guy. I would. Aye. I’m not saying I’m a good Samaritan, but I’m quite helpful towards people in general, cos my own nature is like that. I’ve always been like that... It’s a **regard** for people, you know, and I help them as much as I can. Don’t know where it’s... Just been part of a body’s own nature or their own upbringing.

Alan, 70–79, Maryhill

Just as people tell stories about place, they tell stories about themselves: about who and how they are and how they came to be that way. In relation to help and support, there were a number of recurring themes in terms of how people characterised themselves and explained their beliefs or behaviours. As with the area narratives, these individual narratives should not be seen as straightforward reflections of ‘how things are’ but as still having real consequences in terms of enabling, constraining or justifying particular

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courses of action, ways of thinking or ways of life. In Chapter 4, we will see how these themes re-emerge, reflexively, in the way that people think about or make decisions in specific situations and relationships.

When asked in interview to account for or explain particular actions – especially those that involved giving or offering help to others – participants often defaulted to the idea that such behaviours were deeply rooted in their character or upbringing. In other words, these were seen as characteristics, beliefs and practices that were fairly fundamental – a core part of who they are and where they come from. Two recurring themes were evident in this context, often from the same participants: a commitment to helping others on the one hand, and to self-reliance and independence on the other.

The commitment to helping others often had an explicitly religious connotation – whether grounded in Christian notions of good deeds, Muslim beliefs about being rewarded for kindness to others, or similar beliefs in other faiths.

I like to do a good turn. But then again if I explained that I went to chapel every week that might help you realise where I'm coming from.

Seamus, 41–49, Maryhill

Others drew on broader spiritual concepts, as in the following example, without relating their beliefs specifically to religion.

Well, you know, [my parents] said to always help somebody, and you get paid back. You get it in other ways. Other gifts. I don't mean you pay **money**, money-wise. I don't mean **that**. I mean you get paid in other ways – just through kindness.

Bonnie, 70–79, Maryhill

While such accounts often involved reference to general beliefs about how one should act in particular situations, it was also common for interviewees to cite as key influences the actual behaviour of those close to them. Not surprisingly, parents and grandparents were central to such accounts, often representing selflessness and unconditionality.

I think it's genetic also, my mother was the nicest... I know everybody would say that about their mother, she was the nicest person that you could ever have met. This lovely wee Irish woman that was... if you know what they're like, they would die for you, do you know what I mean, without thinking about it.

Dennis, 40–49, Maryhill

Some of the individual narratives offered by participants invoked social class, either directly or indirectly. Like religion, class of origin was seen as shaping fundamental beliefs, as in the following case of a woman from Bearsden who relates her extensive current involvement in community activities back to her upbringing in Maryhill.

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When I grew up in Maryhill it was very community minded... I think it was because we were a lot poorer to be honest. So what happened when we were growing up, if you had something you shared it, very much so.

Amanda, 30–39, Bearsden

Of course, narratives of character and upbringing do not relate just to helping others – they are also used to explain orientations towards seeking help or being helped. Very often, these are rooted in broader narratives of independence and stoicism – of being brought up to ‘just get on with things’, ‘do things off your own bat’ and avoid dependence on others, whether financial or otherwise. One of the interesting things about such accounts is that they often come from individuals who also espouse the importance of helping others and see that as a core part of their character – in other words, they combine a commitment to doing good deeds with an aversion to being helped themselves. The implications for our interactions with others embodying both these beliefs is explored further in the Chapter 4.

Suggestions of difference in attitudes towards help and support across generations also featured in such narratives. Again, the important point here is not the ‘reality’ of the differences that such narratives purport to describe, but the way in which these may allow individuals to position themselves, or to be positioned, in particular ways. A prevailing belief, for example, that ‘young people today’ are ‘only interested in themselves’ may deter older people from seeking their help, while beliefs about the emotional rigidity or self-reliance of the pre-war generation may similarly deter younger people from asking for – or offering – emotional support.

## Life events and the life course

Of course, people’s needs for and orientations towards everyday help and support are not just narratives: they have a stubbornly concrete quality too, rooted in individual biographies. In the sections that follow, we (selectively) highlight some of the ways in which participants’ experiences of help and support evolve across – and are sometimes radically altered by – particular life stages and events.

### Early adulthood

We have already seen that the character of help and support in Hillhead is shaped by the student population and that this particular route into adulthood tends to be characterised by dense social networks, communal or cooperative living and a high degree of mutual aid. Often, this has a ‘getting by’ quality, involving frequent give and take around basic needs, such as food, accommodation and money. The experience of higher education can also have long-lasting effects, in terms of close friendships and networks, that are carried into subsequent life stages.

Of course, not all young people experience the extended transition to adulthood that post-compulsory education frequently allows, but one thing that tends to be common to most is a density of friendship that often only starts to dilute once individuals start to partner and/or become parents.

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## Parenting and childcare

The research illustrates the way in which parenting (particularly in the early years) creates both an acute need for help and support *and* potential networks through which to achieve it. There is often a fairly directly reciprocal character to many relationships of help and support between parents – both in the sense that there are shared needs and challenges (especially around childcare) and that, as we will see in Chapter 4, some attempt to maintain a degree of balance in the flow of help in different directions. But some relationships that begin with an instrumental or transactional quality – for instance, babysitting for each other – can gradually take on a different quality, involving emotional support or other kinds of help.

Quite a lot of my really close friends I sort of met at that time in my life, actually, because you've gone through everything from two-year old tantrums to... you know, you've got a special bond actually?

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

The balance between these more transactional and friend-like relationships between parents can be shaped by many things, including individuals' relationship to the area and the extent to which they have other social and cultural connections (that may, for example, pre-date parenthood).

The presence or absence of family support in relation to childcare and parenting more generally is especially significant in this context. The nature and extent of regular support from grandparents or other close family members obviously varied greatly, though intensive involvement was more evident in the relatively settled community of Maryhill than elsewhere. In Bearsden, for example, many of those with children had relocated there from elsewhere and some felt the absence of the 'uncomplicated' input they might otherwise have been able to ask for from their own parents or other close family members. (This theme of familial 'unconditionality' is returned to in the concluding chapter.) In part, that reflects an assumption that grandparents will 'get something back' from their involvement in childcare – something that was sometimes evident from interviews with older participants themselves.

In the absence of strong local ties of the kind that exist for many (though of course not all) inhabitants of Maryhill, it is striking that, in Bearsden, having a child is often the thing that unlocks a sense of community for individuals who moved there as young professionals with lives still centred around Glasgow.

But since we've had children, and you're involved in the school, and you get to know all the parents in the school, it's kind of changed as a place for us, and it's much more a community than it probably was beforehand... Now that we've got kids there's much more focus – it's almost like your world shrinks, really, to your local place... in a good way, really.

Joanne, 40–49, Bearsden

As such, parenting can create networks and access to local resources that extend beyond the shared challenges of parenting itself.

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It is worth noting, however, that the experience of parenting in Bearsden – and, to a slightly lesser extent, in Hillhead – is a privileged one, in the sense that there are excellent local amenities and places to meet up with other parents, a higher level of disposable income (allowing ‘coffee-shop mums’ to meet regularly, for example), and effective service provision to support new parents (such as parent and toddler groups). While impossible to generalise, the challenges and resources associated with parenting in Maryhill are very different – especially for those who lack either access to material resources or a strong network of family and friends.

### Employment and retirement

Employment shapes experiences of help and support in diverse ways (as, of course, does unemployment, which for reasons of space is not addressed here). First, the study generated many examples of colleagues or ex-colleagues who became close friends, or who asked for or bestowed practical help or favours of various kinds. Sometimes such connections were ‘bridging’ ones, to use the language of social capital (Putnam, 2000): in other words, linking people to others beyond their immediate personal networks, and giving access to different kinds of resources (whether financial, intellectual, practical or emotional). But, of course, the experience of working together – and of exchanging help and support outside work – also creates ‘bonding’ (Putnam, *ibid*), in the sense of generating shared history and identity. Over time, therefore, one’s networks related to employment may become integrated with, or as important as, the personal networks growing out of neighbourhood, family or schooling.

Work also brings one into contact with other people – for example, with clients or members of the public – and here, too, there are opportunities for small acts of help and support that are not part of the job role itself. In the following extract from a focus group in Hillhead, for example, a woman recalls her interactions with older people when delivering medicines.

I was in a pharmacy for ten years, and I done the rounds, you know, delivering all the prescription medicines, and sometimes, you know, they would say, ‘Oh, I’ve no seen a soul for about two, three days. You know? You’re the only person I’ve seen in three days.’ So you spend that wee bit... an extra five, ten minutes, you know? ‘If you need anything else, you know, just gie’s a wee phone. Next time I bring the prescription, if you need something else, you know, I can always help oot,’ you know?

Focus group participant, Hillhead

Of course, the *absence* of such kindnesses was also remarked on – especially in the context of roles that were ostensibly ‘caring’ ones but where people seem to lack the time or inclination to step outside their formal responsibilities. Home helps, doctors and care-home staff all featured in such accounts.

While work can give access to potentially supportive relationships, of course, it can also generate the need for help and support in the first place. Mobility was a key theme here, with individuals’ accounts often describing ways of managing the challenges (and the costs) of transport to and from work. Work also impinged on individuals’ abilities to meet caring responsibilities, with informal and ad-hoc childcare arrangements, for example, featuring in the accounts of working parents. And it generated

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needs for advice and emotional support – for example, in relation to finding work in the first place, or dealing with difficult situations involving colleagues, managers or staff.

Finally, of course, the demands of work shape individuals' ability to help others, squeezing both time and relationships. Such pressures have potential consequences not only for individuals but also for communities. In Bearsden, for example, the fact that most adults are in employment and commute into Glasgow means that residential areas are emptied out during the day, leaving behind specific groups such as very young children, stay-at-home parents and the retired. In Hillhead and Maryhill, where full-time employment is less common (because of participation in higher education, unemployment or ill-health), the rhythms of – and opportunities for interaction within – the local community are very different.

While employment is a key influence on informal relationships of help and support so, too, of course, is the experience of retirement. For many, this brings a greater presence in and focus on the local, although there are various factors at play here – not least, variations in health, wealth and income that have the effect of trapping some in their immediate environment whilst giving others access, through holidays, second homes and other forms of mobility and social engagement, to much wider networks and opportunities.

But even among those who appear to have great social and economic advantages – for example, the affluent retired professionals of Bearsden – the transition between work and retirement can be challenging. One retired manager, for instance, reflected on how little he was left with in the way of enduring social connections from a lifetime of work, something he attributed to the distance he had felt it necessary to maintain in relationships with his staff.

There doesn't seem to be much left over from all that time working. I bumped into somebody in a shop the other day and that was nice but... I think maybe the work thing... I was a senior manager and there were a lot of people worked with me but they wouldn't necessarily be friends as such.

Mike, 60–69, Bearsden

### Ill-health and physical incapacity

Whether linked to ageing or not, ill-health and physical incapacity can have profound consequences for people's experience of everyday help and support, but it would be a mistake to assume that these always relate to an increase in need or receipt of support. Certainly that can happen, and the research provided many examples of individuals who found themselves increasingly dependent on others following a health crisis or a more gradual deterioration in their health or physical abilities. At the same time, the scope to access or participate in networks that may provide such support can be reduced.

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As I said, since my stroke I don't really go out at all, so I've lost touch with a lot of people sort of thing. I'll get the odd phone call or text from somebody I haven't seen for a year or two but apart from that, that's about it... I keep in touch with a few people through Facebook as well. But I don't actually... I used to have a lot of friends but I don't see them much anymore sort of thing, again because of my health.

Tom, 50–59, Bearsden

Ill-health or physical incapacity can also affect individuals' ability to help others, reducing opportunities for reciprocity and constraining the extent to which they feel able to *ask* for help – an issue returned to in Chapter 4. Ivan's experience illustrates this.

If you're young, fit, you've got a car, lots of money and all these kinds of things... there's a different range of things that people can ask you to help with; the less you have, the less people perceive that you... you know, the different things that they might be asking you for. In the past I've been asked to do all sorts of things but there you go.

Ivan, 60–69, Maryhill

For some, however, the experience of ill-health has the opposite effect: by increasing their reliance on others, it increases the opportunities to *offer* help too. Some of those who had suffered severe health crises had found themselves drawn into extensive relationships of mutual or reciprocal help as a result, or simply found that they had more time to involve themselves in others' lives and needs. In this context, another participant whose experiences were examined in the interim report, Suzie, explicitly linked the help she gave – and her engagement with those around her more generally – to her experience of disability:

When I [became disabled], I started to kinda be more helpful. Obviously [before], I was busy daein' things'.

Suzie, 50–59, Maryhill

The contrast between her experience and that of Ivan is striking: although both live in the same area (Maryhill), one had found the experience of ill-health or disability to be isolating, the other integrative. This difference is, in large part, to do with the range and depth of their existing networks and sense of connection to the area and those around them. As such, it illustrates the dangers of assuming that particular neighbourhoods or life events will be experienced in similar ways.

### Bereavement

Bereavement is another life event that can generate new needs for, or cut across existing, patterns of everyday help and support (Breen and O'Connor, 2011). The loss of a partner in particular can be highly damaging to individual health and wellbeing. One reason for that is that it can disrupt social networks, through the loss of an important link into those networks, but

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also through broader withdrawal from social contact. This can make it more difficult to access everyday help and support – and for others to be aware of one’s need for it – but also reduce the scope to provide help and support to others, which is often what enables individuals to access or accept support themselves (a theme returned to in Chapter 4). Although the majority of those losing a partner are women, research suggests that for a variety of reasons – including the persistence of same-sex friendships across the life course (Brownlie, 2014) – they are also better placed to maintain supportive social contacts following bereavement.

Many of those who have suffered a bereavement are aware of the danger of subsequent withdrawal or isolation and emphasise the conscious effort involved in surmounting this.

You realise that the only person that can help yourself is you, you, you, you know? So you know, you have to get on and do things? We were married a long time and were very close and we did a huge amount together. So it was, you, you know, a huge abyss, when he wasn’t here. And suddenly your life is different. But I know that sitting feeling sorry for myself at home is not going to do anything. So you’ve got to, you know, get out and do things for yourself, yeah.

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

The loss of a partner can also bring important practical challenges, especially in the context of relationships in which there was a particular division of labour (often gendered) or where the remaining partner has to take on new or unfamiliar tasks.

Visiting banks and lawyers and things like that, I did feel, find that very difficult, you know, because my husband had always kind of coped with that bit of life and these were big steps for me to actually, you know, gain confidence in dealing with, you know, financial and legal matters. With the lawyer my son did come with me and he came with my initial visit to the bank and things. I mean, I did have someone to go with but these were things that I just hadn’t dealt with, you know. It seems pathetic but it was just, you know...

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

While emotional support following bereavement is often explicit, in the form of talk about the person who has died or how individuals are feeling or coping, it can also be indirect, as in the following example in which a woman describes the consoling effects of ‘being around’ family following the death of a friend.

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**Log Entry 4: Saturday 15 March.** Get up early, need to sort out the housework, laundry etc. having very low spells, since my friend died recently, and need to keep busy and sociable, to try and keep my spirits up. I find a lot of consolation in my family, I don't talk to them directly about how I feel, but being around them, and involved with my two grandsons keeps me in touch with positive feelings about life, and certainly makes sure there's lots to do and think about – it's non-stop.

Claudia, 60–69, Hillhead

### Mobility and immobility

Cutting across various life stages and events were themes of mobility and immobility. These played out in various ways, sometimes creating needs for help and support and sometimes allowing such needs to be met. The study illustrated, most obviously, how mobility creates needs for help and support when people moved to new areas or countries. This was not only because they no longer had access to certain types of existing help (childcare, for instance), but because relocation itself created new needs (for example, around employment, accommodation or language). As we saw in Chapter 2, it can be difficult to 'break into' local networks – especially for those who lack existing links or strong cultural connections, but even for some with apparently high social capital.

[Name of private housing estate] was new, yes it was definitely, um... people were very much more friendly but I think it was because everyone was wanting to make friends, but when you move into a place like this where people have stayed for quite a number of years and are set in their ways, and they just see these people... you know it's harder to sort of make friends, I would say.

Edith, 70–79, Bearsden

Other people's needs for help and support also lead to mobility – for example in the case of adult children relocating to be near ageing parents, or parents moving to help with childcare. The same pressures can also result, of course, in immobility – individuals feel that they cannot leave an area, either because of their dependency on others or others' on them.

I would leave this area, I would go and live, I might live abroad, I might live in [name of place]... But I can't leave this area while my mum's alive, and that's the bottom line.

Shara, 50–59, Bearsden

Lack of mobility takes many forms and is often relatively trivial – both in the needs that result and its effects. These include one-off lifts given to friends, acquaintances and even strangers (for instance, people seen struggling up a hill with a heavy bag or standing at a bus stop in the rain). But, equally, routine or everyday help with mobility can also have fairly profound effects, making possible particular ways of life or socially important connections.

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[The log makes you] aware of the people around you and sometimes you don't realise. And I have, for instance, I have realised that the person that drives me to work is really important in my life.

Isabelle, 20–29, Hillhead

These issues of mobility and immobility are not only very significant in the way that they structure individual needs for, and experiences of, help and support – at an aggregate level, they can also begin to shape the needs, cohesiveness and capacity of communities through changes in the composition of local populations. Examples of this can be found in the 'studentification' of parts of Hillhead (discussed in Chapter 2), the policy of housing difficult tenants in particular parts of Maryhill, and in tension between existing residents and 'incomers' in all three areas.

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# 4 NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING EVERYDAY HELP AND SUPPORT

Having looked at the way that needs for, and experiences of, everyday help and support are shaped by specific contexts and biographies, this chapter looks in more detail at how acts or relationships of help come to be negotiated or navigated (or not) between particular people at particular points in time. As such, it focuses on interactions, practices and relationships, and on the way in which all three are permeated by issues of morality and emotion.

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How can we hope to understand what is going on between people at particular moments? One response might simply be to observe and interpret. By their nature, however, acts and relationships of low-level, informal help and support do not lend themselves to such an approach. It is possible, however, to ask people to reflect on their own experiences. One of the ways in which the study sought to do that was to take some of the specific instances of help and support captured in the logs and to unpack them gradually – exploring, for example, what exactly happened, who was involved, the nature of the existing relationship, the circumstances that led to the need for help or support, how it came to be asked for or offered, and the ways in which it may have influenced or altered the character of the relationship from that point onwards.

As those layers are peeled back, the work of negotiating or *accomplishing* relatively mundane acts of help or support emerges as complex and challenging, not least because in the background some very big themes are operating. Those include a powerful set of norms relating to help-

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seeking and help-giving, some of which are in tension with each other; considerations about whom we should consider worthy of help (or not); questions about risk and trust; expectations of reciprocity and mutuality; and issues of sustainability. In this chapter, we explore some of these 'big themes' and, in doing so, try to illustrate the ways in which they inform the highly skilled work of helping and being helped.

## Moral framings of helping and being helped

As we saw earlier in the context of narratives of character and upbringing, experiences and accounts of informal help and support are underpinned by two powerful – and potentially contradictory – high-level moral framings. The first is that, where possible, one should be helpful to others. For some, this is expressed in a pragmatic way ('it's nice to be nice') but more commonly it has a moral (and/or religious) framing – akin to Gouldner's 'norm of beneficence' (1973:266). Consequently, those who demonstrate helpfulness to others can come to be valued highly within relationships, networks and society more generally. The second high-level framing is that we – and, by extension, others – should 'stand on our own two feet'. We are often critical – in private and public discourse – of those whom we feel fail to demonstrate such independence and self-sufficiency. So while the first framing enables or justifies acts of help to others, the second constrains our own ability to seek or accept help for ourselves.

In practice, of course, we do not always help others when we could or should, nor do we always stand entirely on our own 'two feet'. That means finding ways to qualify, neutralise or suspend these overarching moral framings. Some of the most important ways in which that happens – and through which people make or justify decisions about help-seeking or help-giving – are the following.

**The need for help should be 'genuine'.** In other words, one should not seek help (or feel obliged to offer help) in situations in which one could reasonably exhibit self-sufficiency or the help being asked for appears self-indulgent, unnecessary or disproportionate. This theme emerged both in participants' reactions to being asked for help and, as in the following extract, as an explanation for a reluctance to ask.

It's okay to ask for money help if you know you're hungry or it's a doctor's bill or something like that, or whatever, but I don't know, it's different isn't it? It's an entertainment thing [being lent money for a ticket]. So it's like I'm desperate to visit New York, can I, can I borrow money? Or if I don't get my car fixed I'm going to lose my job, can you help? It's different.

Adrian, 40–49, Hillhead

Joanne (below) explicitly addresses what she sees as a danger of taking help when it is not needed – a 'cry wolf' scenario in which goodwill is used up ahead of the time at which it is actually needed.

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My mother-in-law used to come over and start cleaning and I would tell her to stop because we don't need you to do the cleaning. You know, 'One day, we'll need you to do the cleaning. When I need you to do the cleaning when we – you know, if we have kids – I'll ask you and I'll be very grateful for you helping me, but if you do it now, I won't feel able to ask you [then]'.

Joanne, 40–49, Bearsden

**The need for help should not have resulted from the individual's own actions and behaviours.** A key theme here is that people who engage in behaviour that is harmful to themselves or others – for example, use of drugs or alcohol, gambling or other forms of 'recklessness' – forfeit some of their rights to be helped.

He shouldnae be borrowing off me. He should be living on his own income. But he's a drinker. Know what I mean? He drinks like a fish. And all's he does is buy booze, and he expects **me** to feed him for the next two weeks. That's no working any more.

Dennis, 40–49, Maryhill

This is also, of course, a recurring theme in accounts, explanations and justifications of how people deal with others asking for money in the street. In such a context, however, financial help is often withheld not only because of the individual's perceived responsibility for their own plight but because of a belief that any help will, at best, make no difference and might, at worst, be harmful (for example, by encouraging or enabling further drinking).

**Some people should be asked or expected to help before others.**

Despite the general expectation that 'we' should help those in need, there is an implicit sense of who should help whom, in what order. The most obvious example of this is the expectation that one should ask household or family members for help before turning to wider networks of friends, neighbours or acquaintances. Although there were examples of participants feeling aggrieved about being asked for this reason, again, it was referred to more often as an explanation of why they would not ask for help themselves. In the following example, Bonnie explains why she would turn to family instead of neighbours or friends. While this is rooted in her own beliefs about the primacy of family ties, it also reflects her concern about what others might think, feel or say.

Well, to me, I ask a daughter or son to do a thing for me, before I would ask strangers or have acquaintances or friends... Why would it be more difficult to ask? Well, just because I'm frightened in case they say to you, 'Your family, why are you no ask[ing] your family?'.

Bonnie, 70–79, Maryhill

Although some kinds of obligations and interactions between very close family ties lie beyond the scope of the study, they are also obviously highly relevant – not least because of the way that, in their presence and absence, they interact with people's needs and experiences of help and support from

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other sources. Indeed, for many people, *the sense of obligation to family* represents a further moral framing that combines with – and sometimes cuts across – those considered above. This means, for example, that normal expectations of reciprocity (a theme returned to below) do not always apply, and that the needs of close family members can or should be privileged over those of others.

It's 'blood's thicker than water'... you just know what their motivation is and there's no dichotomy there, there's no confusion. It's just, 'I'm doing it 'cause I love you as a brother, I'm doing that, you're my son'. There's no hidden agenda, meaning, or anything... Yeah. It's – it's done, it's clear cut, it's finished, there's no recrimination, there's no, 'Remember that, remember when you didn't do that thing you said?'

Adrian, 40–49, Hillhead

In practice, of course, family ties are often more complex, contested and negotiated (Finch and Mason, 1993) than these extracts suggest, and operate differently across cultures, communities and individual contexts. The key point, however, is that these expectations about hierarchies of help and support assist in differentiating 'reasonable' from 'unreasonable' requests for or offers of help.

**We should help those who help us.** Another important way in which the general moral injunction to help others is qualified is through the notion of reciprocity (explored in detail below). While this can be framed positively, as a driver of informal help and support, it can also be used to limit expectations about help to others. In other words, it has a flipside – that we should *not* help (or we should cease to help) others who do not help us. But it can also enable people to accept help – by allowing us to seek or accept help from those whom we have helped.

The notion of reciprocity is, then, at the heart of much of our thinking about help and support. For this reason – but also because it is a more subtle and complex concept than it perhaps first appears – it is worth examining in more detail.

## Reciprocity and mutuality

Reciprocity is rarely direct – either in the sense of 'tat [sic] for tat' as Gouldner (1973) puts it, or 'I'll do this for you if you do that for me' exchange. Rather, there is a commitment to what Gouldner terms the 'norm of reciprocity' – in other words, a general expectation that we should help others who help us (there are exceptions to this and in the past children and the elderly were often automatically exempted). The converse, of course, can also be true: that we should not help (or we should cease to help) those who do not help us.

In the following extract, we can see many of the tensions in the broader moral framings highlighted earlier in the previous section. Matthew wants to position himself as the kind of person who would help, and would do so without necessarily expecting a direct return on that effort or involvement. And yet, at the very least, he looks for an *indirect* return – in the form of gratitude or appreciation – and, at the end, signals that there is actually an

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expectation of reciprocal obligation and that there will be consequences for his own behaviour if these are not met.

I'd help anybody that I could to the point where I would – I have put myself out in, in certain occasions, whether that be financially or just with a situation. I would do that but I would only do it once for somebody until I knew that it was a two-way street, you know? I wouldn't keep helping somebody that didn't appreciate it or, you know? I certainly wouldn't help somebody so as... they would help me and give something back. But like I said, it's a two-way street; if I'd helped out somebody a couple of times and they either hadn't paid me back money or had refused to help me when I needed a wee bit of help, then I don't think I would go down that road too many times.

Matthew, 40–49, Hillhead

While the presence or absence of reciprocity is sometimes easy to identify – for instance, through debts repaid, literally or otherwise, within a short period of time – it can also take on much more diffuse and indirect forms and be stretched across time and relationships. As indicated above, for example, it is possible for people to 'repay' others simply through gratitude, or through the enjoyment or satisfaction that the helper gets from helping (for instance with the care of children) – although this can also be framed as mutuality, a theme discussed below. It is also possible for the 'return' on help to be directed towards someone entirely unconnected with the original act, as in the following example in which Joanne reflects on the motivations of older women who had helped her when her children were small.

When the children were tiny, when they were babies, we had a completely different set of people who would help us. They were people that we couldn't repay but it was the kind of ladies in the church who'd got kids that had grown up. You know, they had had people helping them out when they had tiny babies and now they were very happy to come and help us out and then when my children are grown up, you know, there might be children, people with babies that I'll be able to help out.

Joanne, 40–49, Bearsden

So although directly reciprocal relationships are extremely important, and underpin many acts of everyday help and support, it can take these other forms.

The above also touches on the ways in which reciprocity can be deferred and transferred, and sometimes both. Examples of deferred reciprocity often revolved around particularly significant moments in which participants were there for others or others were there for them, and which years later remained a reference point or explanation for specific acts of help and support. Transfers of reciprocity were evident across family ties and friendships, as in the following example in which Balbir explains the support he receives from old family friends.

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Their father and my father were best of friends. So that friendship has continued. My father set up a business and their father was involved in that... So we have this much more tenacious relationship than some of the other people in my life.

Balbir, 50–59, Bearsden

Again, the significance of these obligations and expectations is neither predictable nor constant across relationships and settings. In some respects, for example, the scope for deferred or transferred reciprocity is greater in a community like Maryhill where many residents have lived there for a long time and where family ties retain an especially strong cultural and practical significance.

Closely linked to the notion of reciprocity is that of mutuality. While these are sometimes bracketed together, some forms of help and support are less reciprocal than they are mutual – in the sense of benefitting both parties, not at separate or alternate moments or through any form of exchange, but *at the same time*. An obvious example of this would be friends meeting for a chat and sharing challenges or difficulties they are facing. Implicit in this is a sense of balance, not over time but in the moment.

I met one friend who was widowed young the same as I was, so I suppose whenever we have a conversation, it is a mutual support.

Dorothy, 60–69, Bearsden

Bowers et al (2013) distinguish this understanding of mutuality from reciprocity in its most direct form ('I'll do this if you do that'). But less direct forms of reciprocity can also be seen as involving elements of mutuality. A degree of mutuality, for instance, can be present in situations in which the 'helper' derives benefit from the act of helping: for example, in the case of the isolated older person who helps a neighbour with childcare even if the neighbour offers nothing in return. In other words, mutuality may be an unintended consequence of helping or of allowing ourselves to be helped. Understanding the (unspoken, affective dimensions of) mutuality involved in such acts is akin to surfacing what Abrams (in Bulmer, 1986:107) called 'inexpressible' reciprocity. This dimension is not limited to older people but awareness of this kind of reciprocity might help those in this age group, like Anthony in the extract below, to accept help.

I think I've decided that if people offer you help because they're younger and stronger, that's something they do because they want to and being able to do that is one of their good deeds for the day and it gives them satisfaction to be able to do that.

Anthony, 80–89, Hillhead

The biographical and community narratives we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 that draw on the beneficence norm – 'I was brought up to help others', 'we're all like that in Maryhill' – give us, as Abrams (1986) pointed out, a way of talking about these less direct forms of reciprocity. As we will see in the next section, these generalised relations of reciprocity depend on trust.

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## Risk and trust

While overt calculations of risk have little place in the moral economy of informal help and support, there are some situations in which they are relevant. These include exchange type relations, for example involving money ('will they pay me back?'), or situations involving a high degree of uncertainty about the individuals involved, why they might need help or what physical risk they might pose (for example, a stranger lying in the street or asking for a lift), and situations involving children where there may be concern either about risk to the child, or to the potential helper (for instance, false allegations of abuse).

It's my policy [not to give to people begging for money on the street]. No! For my own safety as much as anything, it means opening your bag, reaching into a purse and... an older lady walking with a stick it's not... it would be silly!

Marguerite, 70–79, Maryhill

However, once the highly normative or moral character of help and support is recognised, it is perhaps not surprising that the most important risks around help and support emerge as *affective* ones, relating to how others may see us or how we see ourselves. In particular, these link to the bigger moral stories about the importance of helping others yet remaining independent ourselves, particularly in a socio-political context in which there is a growing emphasis on individual and community self-reliance. But they also involve anxieties about how a relationship might be transformed through particular acts of help – for instance, through the creation of ongoing dependency, feelings of obligation or unwanted intimacy.

While the risks of helping can be affective, so too can be the benefits. Helping offers a sense of purpose, a way of 'giving back' and 'paying it forward'. As such, it can help to neutralise the affective risks of being seen as a 'taker' and offer a sense of having something to contribute to society. While this has previously been identified as important for older people, the study suggests that it also matters to a range of other groups who might otherwise feel discredited as dependants – whether single mothers or people with disabilities. For all these groups, being able to help can be a key driver of willingness or ability to accept help and is a means of addressing some of the asymmetries that can otherwise creep into relationships. In the following extract, for example, a young mother in Hillhead describes her feelings about having her offer of help declined by another (slightly older) parent who had often provided help in the other direction.

[I felt] a little annoyed, not in like an aggressive way, but just in a 'You do so much for me. Just let me do something for you. Why won't you let me?' [way]. 'Cos it wasn't a hardship for me. I was willing to do it. I wanted to do it... and I just wanted to help, and it was like they were going, 'No.'... And then that makes me feel – again – a little bit guilty about my parenting capabilities.

Emily, 20–29, Hillhead

Where there is uncertainty and risk, there is a need for trust. But what exactly are we trusting others to do (or not to do) in the context of the

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affective risks of everyday help and support? Although sometimes we are trusting them to not to hurt us or exploit us financially, more commonly we are trusting them to 'be there' for us when we are in genuine need, to respect the norms of reciprocity, to understand our reasons and motives, and not to leave us feeling indebted, incompetent, dependent or obligated, or to make relational capital out of the exchange in some other way. Like reciprocity (though unlike mutuality), trust always involves asymmetries, however short-lived, and these have to be carefully managed on both sides.

I don't want to be told that, 'You're being demanding, you're being needy', and that goes back to the childhood.. feel[ing] of rejection, plain and simple. If you behave in a demanding way, and someone goes 'Piss off', then you feel even worse than you did before if you hadn't asked.

Louise, 30–39, Bearsden

What are the bases of trust in this context of acts and relationships of help and support? Sometimes, as we saw earlier in relation to expectations of family, there is a sense of unconditionality – an almost unshakeable assumption that another person will always 'be there' – rendering trust largely irrelevant.

You can pretty much be guaranteed that unless something really awful and dramatic's happening in their life, then they are going to drop things and look after you, and make sure you're okay.

Louise, 30–39, Bearsden

In other relationships and circumstances, where familiarity is less, the *perceived* trustworthiness of the individual concerned matters, as it can be difficult to trust those we do not know or know well.

The neighbours, I can't trust them. Because I don't know them. Simple as that.

Balbir, 50–59, Bearsden

Participants' accounts of trustworthiness in the context of emotional support, in particular, tended to be embedded in long-term histories and relationships, shared experience and knowledge of each other's lives.

Probably asking for emotional help is... more difficult than, you know, a wee practical favour, or, 'Can you lend me 30 quid?', you know? It's probably 'cos you've got to totally open up. You've got to really trust that person, and, if you're opening yourself up, and it's a serious issue, you've got to be able to trust that person I think, and they've got to have some level of understanding for it, and vice versa, you know?

Barry, 40–49, Hillhead

Relationships of this kind with close friends often stretched back so far that they were almost invisible to those involved. By contrast, acts or relationships

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of help and support between those who do not know each other, or do not know each other well, have less to draw on. In this context, minor or routine gestures of everyday civility often emerged as an important precursor to more significant forms of engagement.

Acts of everyday support involving neighbours, for example, were often rooted in apparently incidental or superficial exchanges – on the stair, in the street or across the garden fence. In the following example, Leonard, a retired man living in a tenement in Hillhead, explains how he became involved with buying a newspaper for an older neighbour.

We always had a wee blether 'cause she was always interested in my [leisure activity] and she would also start with, 'How are you doing, blah, blah, blah. You're the only one up the stair with any social life.' [Laughs] So she just blethered, she liked to hear where I was going and what I was doing. And I always made a point in talking to her, you know, and making sure, 'cause you never know it might be the first person she's spoke to that week, you know.

Leonard, 70–79, Hillhead

Participants' accounts not only illustrated the way that such encounters provide a potential starting point for the development of low-level help and support; the *absence* of everyday civility was also frequently commented upon and was thought to serve to undermine the possibility of trust. As we saw in relation to the narratives of the different areas, in each, there were complaints about neighbours who cut themselves off or failed to observe basic courtesies on the stair or in the street – even if they preferred not to be 'in and out' of each other's homes.

So the trust that allows us to ask for or offer help is usually layered up over time. But short-cuts are sometimes necessary (in moments of crisis, for example) or possibly for other reasons. One woman, for example, explained her willingness to open up to a friend not in terms of shared knowledge or history but that person's 'gift' for empathy and support. Others suggested that a warrant of trust (like reciprocity) could be extended across relationships – as one participant put it, 'if my father could trust him, there's no reason why I can't' (Balbir, 50–59, Bearsden).

While some of the bases of trust are embodied in the 'trustee' and their markers of trustworthiness, the person doing the trusting also brings to the process particular resources in the form of knowledge gained through networks or the experience to 'evaluate' risks or unknowns effectively. This evaluation or reflexivity has emotion built into it, though we may be barely aware of it – for instance, feelings of 'clicking' with someone, being 'understood' or that it is 'all right' to allow someone to help or to help them.

You know yourself, when you meet somebody you can... it's either you can click wi' them, or else you cannae click wi' them.

Liam, 50–59, Maryhill

Other research suggests that the process of 'swift trust' (Murthy et al, 2013) is facilitated by people having 'roles' against which competence, reliability and integrity can be assessed rapidly, even when these are people we know very little. These roles can be adopted quickly, often in very mundane contexts – previously unknown neighbours who start to pick up the daily newspaper, as

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in the case of Leonard above – and it is such roles in social situations that define ‘known strangers’ (Morgan, 2009). But where there are background emotions at work such as a feeling of security, rather than referring to trust as a ‘leap of faith’, it might be more appropriate to reflect on how the moment in which trust is realised is preceded by many small, individually imperceptible and apparently insignificant steps.

For this and other reasons, the process of trusting is almost impossible to observe directly. As noted above, however, we can become aware of it through what it makes move or happen. Thought about in this way, the instances of help and support logged in the course of the study are imprints of trust – ‘swift’ or otherwise – and of the things it makes possible. Equally importantly, we see it through the moments in which it is lost. While trust can be slow to build, it is often quick to dissipate.

Participant accounts contained numerous examples of the rapid loss of trust – for example, in a situation in which a key rule, such as acknowledging genuine need or not taking advantage, was felt to have been ignored. Sometimes this simply had the effect of curtailing a specific relationship of help and support. In other examples, the impact was felt more widely and a breach of trust within a specific relationship then shaped the way in which other relationships and interactions were viewed. The transferable character of trust, therefore, relates not just to how it is gained but to how it is lost: one person lets us down, and we can cease to trust all others (and, indeed, lose trust in our own judgement).

I don't trust people... I wouldn't say I don't trust them, it's just that a couple of times in my life I've been used by people, you know?... People sort of use you to their benefit and then a couple of years down the line they'll pretend they won't know you or that type of business.

John, 70–79, Hillhead

I know that there are some good people probably, they can exist!... but I change, my philosophy before was trust anyone until they prove you wrong. Now don't trust until they prove you wrong.

Ana, 40–49, Maryhill

These examples of the loss of trust also remind us that trust is a socially differentiated resource. The poorer or sicker we are, the fewer resources – material, relational, emotional – we have to create the conditions or the bases for trust in relation to help and support or anything else. Linking back to the discussion about reciprocity, generalised indirect reciprocity depends on a social milieu where trust is possible. In the case of Ana above, for example, an early experience of having her trust abused when she arrived in the city has profoundly altered her ability to trust anyone. This was directly linked to her social context – in other words, her ‘leap of faith’ was from a very constrained place as a migrant single mother with little in the way of local knowledge or contacts and without the resources to access safer, more trustworthy options.

Others, such as the socially isolated or those with serious health problems, can also experience this doubly disadvantaged position – of having to trust more because of pressing need, but having fewer resources to draw

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on in assessing or interpreting particular relationships or situations. Certain socio-cultural narratives, such as those linked to 'othering' migrants or those who are disabled, can, in their turn, interact with such relational and material deficits to further facilitate trust or distrust.

## The skills of helping (and of being helped)

Depending on their biographies and circumstances, people bring a range of practical and emotional skills and resources to interactions of everyday help and support – for example, the ability to drive, offer childcare, be a good listener, and so on. But skills are not only a valued currency in their own right in the moral economy of help and support – the accomplishment or achievement of help or support *is* a skilled practice in its own right. The reason for that can be found in the complexities described so far in this chapter – the normative character of expectations around help, the tension between helping others and maintaining independence, and the need to determine, establish and maintain trust and generally manage the affective risks of helping and being helped. What do these skills look like in practice? Some of the most important are described below.

**'Doing it by the by': helping without being seen to help.** Because people recognise the affective risks of dependency and obligation – especially for those who, for reasons of age or incapacity, may be unable to reciprocate – a common strategy is to downplay the significance of help, or to help without being seen to do so.

Like when I was looking after the elderly neighbour, he didn't feel as if he was being looked after, I don't think. You don't want them to, you don't want people to realise they're needing a lot of help. You do it by the by.

Claudia, 60–69, Hillhead

The conscious reframing of help as something else is more in evidence in relation to practical support, perhaps because emotional help, as we have seen, is often *already* framed as something else (such as having a coffee together) and, as we noted earlier, a sense of mutuality is more apparent. This reframing of emotional help within relationships mirrors, to a degree, what is going on in some semi-formal spaces such as libraries or supermarkets, where one thing (help, support, information) is accessed through another (shopping, book-borrowing, and so on).

In general, helping without being seen to help is a tricky accomplishment because – as we saw earlier in the chapter – in order to qualify for help in the first place, people have to exhibit legitimate need: the person responding to such need, therefore, has to both recognise this legitimacy while at the same time de-emphasising the effort involved in responding – signalling that, despite its legitimacy, it is not, after all, a 'big ask'. Those who breach this framing – either at the time of help or subsequently – run the risk of being seen as martyrs, because they make clear the cost of help offered.

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My mum is a martyr. My mum would help everybody and anybody... but, with me... she gives me so much help and support, but I mean I know about it – it's not like it's just done. She really likes to labour the point that she's done it and she's helped me, and I should feel guilty for it.

Emily, 20–29, Hillhead

**Minimising the demands on the helper.** The need to minimise the actual and apparent consequences for the person providing the help is also recognised by those being helped. This often leads to people framing requests for assistance in ways that allow them to be accommodated alongside things that would be happening anyway, or otherwise seeking to minimise the 'burden' or 'imposition' upon the helper. An example of this can be found in the way that Frances manages her reliance on a friend for a lift to a regular leisure activity.

I don't like putting other people out. That's why [friend] doesn't come down here and pick me up and take me there; I go up on the bus to her house, ring her bell and wait 'til she comes out. We go in the car, we come back to exactly the same place. I walk up [name of street], get the bus, back home and that's it. I don't take her a penny out of what, what she would do herself, the distance... that she would do.

Frances, 80–89, Maryhill

This is often especially relevant in relation to emotional support, where people do not feel able to 'unburden' themselves onto those closest to them because 'they have enough troubles of their own' or 'they'd only worry about me'.

I probably wouldn't talk to my grandparents. Don't really want to burden them... 'cos I know that they would worry if they thought I was worried, so I wouldn't want to bring that worry upon them.

Harry, 20–29, Hillhead

These non-burdening rules often have an inter-generational dimension – for instance, adult children not wanting to worry their parents, older people not wanting to ask for help from adult children whose lives are stressful and busy, and so on – but they also help to regulate flows of help and support in other relationships, almost always by constraining the list of people to whom we feel it is 'all right' to turn, or the times at which it is acceptable to do so.

**Offering help before it is asked for.** A further way of downplaying or reframing help completely is to offer help before it is asked for. The advantage of this is that individuals do not need to acknowledge as directly their own lack of capacity, competence or independence. Indeed, the 'unsolicited' offer of help can even be reframed as involving a degree of reciprocity – in offering, or 'asking' someone to let them help, the 'helper' signals that this is something they want to do rather than something they feel obliged to; in accepting, the person 'helped' is allowing that to happen (a theme returned to below).

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I offered it instead letting him ask because it's much harder for somebody to ask, in my opinion, if you're struggling with money... People like to think in general, I think, that 'I run my life, I've got everything sussed out, I can do this, I can do that and I'm organised'. But when it comes to the crunch that you do need help... well, for me personally, it's like I don't wanna ask.

Matthew, 40–49, Hillhead

For some, the lack of such an offer makes it impossible to ask and vice versa, so a knot develops which requires great skill to unravel. This is most likely to be the case where the boundaries between responsibilities are blurred and it is not clear who should make the first move – for instance between friends, between parents and grandparents or between residents of a block of flats.

**Reframing help as helping the helper.** Alongside the strategies of downplaying, minimising and proactively offering help is the active reframing or recognition of acts of help and support as reciprocal or mutual. Sometimes, as in the following example, there is a sense of this as a useful fiction – jointly constructed between the person doing the helping and the person being helped.

I think the first day, he was a bit embarrassed that we were cleaning his house and things, but I said to him, 'You know? You're doing **me** a favour,' I said, 'because I like cleaning, so therefore don't look at it as if I'm doing you a favour. You're helping **me** because I like doing it, so it's not a problem.'

Mary, 30–39, Bearsden

But in this and other contexts, the helper can also be seen as genuinely gaining something from the interaction. Older people, in particular, were often aware that – almost regardless of actual needs – others often wanted to help them. In such contexts, accepting help can come to be seen as an act of civility or politeness, as recognising good intent and avoiding offence and, as Anthony described earlier, 'allowing' the helper to feel good about themselves.

If people do make overtures, you know, you can't say no all the time. And, you know, sometimes it's not – it would be easier not to take their help. But, you can see that they're making an effort to ask you [if they can help] so it would be rude not to.

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

**Giving people the option of saying no.** A further strategy that relates to the management of dependency, obligation and imposition is to frame requests for help in ways that allow them to be refused. For some participants, to do otherwise would be considered morally unacceptable – akin to blackmail even. Here, the consequence of breach is being seen as manipulative and as something that can, in itself, make future acts or offers of help less likely.

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Well, you tell someone what... you need and you always give them the option of just saying no, okay. I think what is very nasty in life is where people try to present you with... what's it called... trying to morally blackmail you... You don't say, 'You're my only hope'... that is really a nasty way of doing things and I've known people in life who do that on a very regular basis! And they're just manipulative, it's a devious way of asking people to help you. So how you ask people to help you I think is also... important, so people have a choice.

Ivan, 60–69, Maryhill

**Appropriately acknowledging help given.** Just as the 'helper' is expected to downplay the help given, in some circumstances, the person helped is expected to acknowledge it appropriately, in words or actions. The most fundamental breach of this would be not to return a favour if able to do so, but there are also more subtle failures of reciprocity in which individuals do not express or signal gratitude or awareness that they have been helped. Given the discreet way in which help is often offered or given, it is perhaps not surprising to find that it is not always acknowledged. Nevertheless, perceived failures to do so were often more visible – and more likely to be associated with strong emotions – than were those instances of help appropriately handled and acknowledged.

## Sustaining help and support

The discussion in this chapter has highlighted some of the interactional work that goes into making everyday help and support happen. But how do one-off acts come to be sustained in the longer term, and what can prevent that from happening?

Relationships of help and support are more likely to be sustained if they broadly conform to the rules and practices described earlier – in other words, in which expectations about reciprocity, burden and affective risk are managed effectively; and the help can be constructed as incidental and minimal and/or as offering benefit to the person helping. The example of Leonard who, as we saw earlier, was involved in an arrangement to pick up a newspaper for his older neighbour, illustrates the principle of incidental help and minimal cost to the helper.

She would've struggled going down, you know, to get it and it made her life a wee bit easier, which was fair enough. And I'm going there anyway, so it's no problem.

Leonard, 70–79, Hillhead

Of course, sometimes the costs of helping are actually considerable, and those providing help can actually start to feel overwhelmed, or that they are being 'drawn into' a long-term commitment or a relationship that is in some other way more demanding (for example, of intimacy) than they had anticipated. In the extract below, Nancy describes the emotional costs of trying to meet the escalating needs of her neighbour who had dementia.

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She was on the alarm system and I would go in endlessly and pick her up and phone the nurse, you know, 'She's all right,' or 'She's set the cooker on fire again'. You know, and she wouldn't let carers in, 'I don't know you.' You know, the sort of classic... And... you know, she was looking at me and talking to me about going home and, 'When am I going home?' And, 'You'll keep an eye open for me.' And I felt so bad 'cause I just didn't feel able to take on the responsibility of looking after her, but she was desperately unhappy in the home... I did feel bad that I just couldn't, I couldn't, you know, cope with her any longer at home, and, you know it was just too much.

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

Where such anxieties and potential imbalances can be managed, over time, one-off acts can become *habitual or routinised practices*, and so cease to involve the same degree of deliberation, negotiation or risk. The routinisation of help is not only an indicator or measure of sustainability: it is also *how* help and support keeps going in the first place. In other words, when help and support are not experienced as 'extra' or disruptive, but as part of the flow of everyday life, they are much more likely to continue.

In this way, too, relationships with friends or acquaintances can come to take on a quality of obligation of the kind that one might associate with close family ties. An example of this can be found in the following extract in which Kamran, a young man, reflects on the regular practical help that he gives to a family friend. He explains that he had been asked to run errands for this woman by his mother since he was a child and while there have been times when it has not always been possible, or times when he has been conscious of doing so despite her having children of her own, over time he has come to regard the relationship as being 'like family'.

It feels way more like family, it does, yeah. 'Cause like she's got really, really close to us. Yeah, it doesn't feel like we've been friends over these years, it's been like a relationship has grown.

Kamran, 18–29, Maryhill

This again illustrates a key theme of the research: the way that **help and support cannot be separated from the relationships within which they occur**. Some work on social capital or social networks seems to attempt to do this – for example, by looking at the way in which particular types of relationship give access to particular types of 'resources'. In practice, however, these resources – these acts of help and support, for example – are central to how relationships are constituted, transformed and sometimes eroded or destroyed in the first place.

Even if you were to meet someone she'd be like, 'There's my son'. I think the relationship's really deep for her, just because of these years and me going about helping her.

Kamran, 18–29, Maryhill

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Other specific factors that can shape the sustainability (or not) of help and support include issues of **mobility/immobility**, the **immediacy and visibility** of help, and the availability of **‘chains’ of support**. We saw in Chapter 3 that issues of mobility and immobility are central to experiences of help and support – both to their needs and the scope for those needs to be met. Not surprisingly, then, these are also core themes in relation to the sustainability of particular relationships of help and support over time. Although physical proximity is by no means always a necessary feature of such relationships, a great deal of help and support is highly local, and can be disrupted by relocation or loss of mobility in countless ways. This ‘dislocation’ has an aggregate or collective dimension to it, in that it is more likely to be a problem for people in particular areas or groups. Recent immigrants, for example, may find that many of their contacts and supports are, themselves, living relatively insecure lives and so are often only short-term presences – though this does not rule out short, intense periods of help. The more settled character of particular groups – such as the traditional working-class community within Maryhill or older residents of Bearsden – gives greater scope for consistency of relationships over time.

That said, mobility is by no means the only factor with the potential to disrupt such relationships. Ill-health, physical incapacity and death itself generate not only needs for support but curtail the ways in which it is given. So although many older people live in contexts and communities in which there is often considerable scope to draw on, develop and sustain long-term relationships of help and support, there is an awareness of the point at which people simply start to ‘disappear’.

So you know, I’m reaching a stage where close friends are beginning to disappear... I was greatly saddened because the [foreign] friend I met when she was over here with her husband [died]... And, you know, we were great friends. She had a super sense of humour and she just [claps hands] and, you know.

Nancy, 70–79, Bearsden

Help that is proximate, proportionate and where the benefits are visible is also more likely to be sustained. Seeing a direct benefit is often one of the reasons why people are predisposed to helping individuals rather than organisations.

You can see the result... and you can actually see who’s benefitting. I mean Oxfam is maybe not the best example, but I do get annoyed with people that stop me in the street and uh... try to sign me up for direct debits. I’m sure they do good but you don’t see the good that they do in the same way that you do if it’s next door.

Mike, 60–69, Bearsden

Another key factor in the sustainability of help is the role of others in helping to sustain the helper or, even more directly, in being the provider of help. In other words, it sometimes makes more sense to think in terms of ‘chains’ of help and support rather than individual acts and relationships. Sometimes – as in the following example – this has a practical focus; at other times people

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describe needing emotional support themselves in order to continue to offer emotional support to others.

Sometimes my wife will cook something for them and just text them to come and collect it and my role is to simply to go and buy the ingredients. I have a minor role in it but my wife will do something for them once a week at least probably.

Mike, 60–69, Bearsden

But perhaps the single most important factor in sustaining relationships of help and support over time – and in preventing such relationships from developing – is simply the **level of contact with others**. That can take the form of extended face-to-face or remote contact with family and friends, and ‘wee chats’ or exchanges with neighbours, acquaintances or even strangers. Ultimately, however, the absence of such contact – in whatever form – erodes existing relationships and makes it difficult to build new ones, greatly reducing the likelihood of future help.

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## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This was an exploratory study, aimed at understanding and re-embedding experiences of everyday help and support in social context and practices and moving beyond the atomisation often implied in notions of ‘deciding’ or ‘choosing’ to help or be helped. This final chapter summarises the main themes of the research and considers some of the implications in the wider context of debates about austerity and the relationship between the state, third sector, communities and individuals.

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### Place (still) matters...

Despite the influence of globalisation, experiences of everyday help and support – like other aspects of social life – continue to be powerfully mediated by the immediate environments in which we live. Those places have, of course, a stubborn reality. Chapter 2 highlighted some of the ways in which our residential and shared spaces (whether public or commercial in character) can foster or inhibit a sense of contact, communication and public sociability, and everyday civility – interactions that are valuable in their own right but also serve as a stepping stone to the development of trust and more meaningful relationships of help and support.

But the research also illustrates – via a focus on three very different areas in and around Glasgow – the broader social realities that shape individual needs for help and support and the ability to address those needs. Those include differentiated access to individual and collective resources, and local cultures and narratives of identity and neighbouring that enable and constrain the ways in which people interact.

Because geographic communities vary greatly in terms of these social, spatial and economic characteristics, there could be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to fostering informal help and support. Thinking about opportunities for public sociability in Maryhill, for example, needs to take

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account of the shared character of much residential space, the relatively close-knit and local character of some parts of the area, but also the character of other public (or 'third') spaces and amenities. In Bearsden, by contrast, the scope for interaction around residential spaces is reduced – not only by architecture but by a stronger culture of 'friendly distance' – while the potential role of public spaces and informal or semi-formal organisations is perhaps greater.

Indeed, even within particular communities there is a need to consider the differentiated way in which help and support operate, the way that apparent 'cohesiveness' can exclude certain groups, and the resulting need to build connections within as well as across neighbourhoods. One example of this would be the student population in Hillhead. Although this provides a powerful example of everyday help and support in its own right, there is little sense of exchanges of help and support with other sections of the community – and, indeed, there is occasional conflict over things not done (music turned down, stairwell cleaned, and so on). Talk of 'bridging' in the context of social capital often implies connections with those living entirely different kinds of lives, in different places – and yet there is clearly great scope for it to occur with our immediate neighbours too. There is a need to understand more about the individuals and circumstances that allow this intra-community bridging to happen.

The research suggests that, rather than dis-embedding relationships, the growth of new technologies and the internet can enhance or reinforce offline networks of help and support. They potentially do so in a number of ways: by allowing people to remain in touch at a distance, enabling local networks to be extended, and helping to coordinate or negotiate local relationships of help and support. For some, they also create entirely new forms of social contact and support – whether in the form of online discussion boards or social gaming. While these have the potential to displace offline relationships, for those with limited mobility and access to other social spaces, they can also help to counter isolation and loneliness – as in the example of the older man in sheltered housing who had been closely involved in an online forum for people with disabilities. The challenge for policy and practice here, of course, is to find ways of ensuring that those who might benefit most from such connectivity have the skills, information, confidence and resources to do so (and to do so securely).

### **...but so do other kinds of communities**

While the research provides plenty of evidence of the importance of neighbouring and immediate locale as a focus for the development of shared identity and relationships of help and support, it also highlights the significance of communities of interest of the kind that form around leisure, politics, sport and countless other activities. In many respects – and particularly in places where a sense of neighbourhood or local community is relatively diffuse – these are very powerful if under-recognised sources of help and support. Through such belongings we may be more likely to feel connected to 'people like us' than we are on our own stair or street; and through our involvement in activities that are ostensibly focused on other things (whether gardening, dancing, watching football or going to the local pub), we access both a sense of wellbeing and practical help and support.

There is, then, a strong case for supporting such semi-formal and informal communities of interest and for helping to ensure that individuals are able to participate (or continue to participate) in them. Indeed, providing

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a weekly taxi to allow an older person to attend a much valued and longstanding leisure activity may be an extremely effective ‘intervention’ (not least because it is not experienced as such).

### **The mundane and the practical can be highly emotionally significant**

While opportunities for overt talk about emotions are clearly important, so too are the emotional consequences or accompaniments of intensely practical acts – meals cooked, lawns mowed and lifts given. This has implications, of course, not only for how we think about and value such acts in the informal sphere, but for the ways in which formal services operate and are delivered and experienced. More generally, the research highlights the importance of understanding wellbeing as rooted in the experience of the mundane, and as being associated with the little-noticed ‘background emotions’ of security, familiarity, recognition and trust that can be associated with apparently insignificant acts and exchanges. These are all feelings that are slow to develop, layering up over time, but that can be easily and rapidly disrupted.

### **The needs (and opportunities) for everyday help and support vary across the life course**

The research highlights the ways in which individual needs for, and abilities to offer, informal help and support vary across the life course and are disrupted or transformed by particular events. While some of these may seem obvious – for instance, the way that bereavement can create particular practical or emotional needs, or reduce social networks – such findings nevertheless serve two important functions. First, they remind us that networks of everyday help and support are a critical part of how we get by – or lead ‘liveable lives’ – and need to be seen and valued as such when thinking about the particular challenges of parenting, ill-health, retirement, ageing and so on. Second, the accounts of the research participants remind us that the challenges of particular life stages and events also create opportunities. Indeed, sometimes those apparently in need of help – for example, the new parent or the person newly retired or unable to work through ill-health – become the helpers as a result of changes in their circumstances and the development of mutual and reciprocal relationships of support. This has a practical significance in terms of who might be able to help whom, but it also links to critical considerations about the conditions in which people feel able to seek or accept help.

### **There are powerful affective risks (and benefits) associated with helping and being helped**

Finally, the research reminds us of the interactional complexity and affective risks and benefits associated with giving and receiving help. Although there is a powerful cultural commitment to helping others (and especially those ‘less fortunate than ourselves’), this is undercut by expectations of reciprocity and concern about not being seen as self-reliant or independent. There are lessons for policy and practice – and for all of us – in how people seek to

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manage those tensions. Three themes in particular are worth emphasising here.

The first is the power of the expectation of reciprocity. While this sometimes features in accounts of whether to give or offer help, it figures more prominently as a brake on our willingness to seek or accept help. While this sometimes reflects a concern about being drawn into an ongoing exchange or an unwanted deepening of intimacy, it more often involves an anxiety about the *ability* to reciprocate. Reflecting findings from other studies, the research suggests that being able to help is itself a key driver of the acceptance of help. While this is clearly important in the context of personal relationships, it perhaps also has relevance in considerations of uptake of semi-formal and formal services – in other words, if people have a sense of ‘giving back’, however indirectly, they will be more likely to accept help and support of all kinds that are offered to them. It is also worth noting that surfacing the implicit benefits of helping to the helper as much as to the helped – the inexpressible reciprocity referred to in the report – might also facilitate this process.

The second is the principle of offering before being asked. The research illustrates how difficult it is for people to ask for help, even when it is badly needed, but also the way in which the proactive offer of help can help to overcome that. A key theme here is the way in which this allows for an element of indirect reciprocity: by offering, one is also asking to be allowed to help. The power of this is recognised by commercial organisations – Tesco’s ‘Making Moments Matter’ customer service initiative, for example, involves staff proactively asking customers whether they can help them – but its implications are perhaps little understood in relation to public services.

Finally, there is the importance of what might be termed incidental, indirect or tangential help. Because of the affective risks associated with being helped, it is easier for acts of help to be downplayed, fitted alongside other activities or otherwise approached indirectly. The importance of this is increasingly recognised in the context of some forms of semi-formal and formal service provision – for instance, in the location of cancer-care volunteers in local libraries or the ‘men’s sheds’ movement – but it is worth naming explicitly. There is a sense here of contingent help-seeking – of enabling people to do things on the spur of the moment – but also of the possibilities for emotional openness and practical help that ‘being alongside’ rather than ‘face-to-face’ can bring.

## **In closing: austerity and the infrastructure of kindness**

One of the most obvious things that the research has done is to remind us of the power and pervasiveness of this web of small-scale and apparently mundane acts and relationships. Thrift’s (2005) notion of an ‘infrastructure of kindness’ (developed further by Hall and Smith, 2015) seems appropriate here, capturing something of the taken-for-granted quality of such interactions, and signalling the way that they enable and underpin larger processes but also require constant repair and maintenance in their own right.

The research was focused more on understanding basic aspects of how help and support come to happen (or not) than on how they relate to wider social and political developments. And yet, there is much in the wider context that speaks to these issues – most obviously, the individual and collective challenges arising from the financial crisis and resulting attempts to redraw the line between the responsibilities of the state, voluntary sector and

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individuals and communities. Individual relationships of informal help and support clearly are a powerful social resource, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that, where they are weaker, the demands on the state are often greater. However, that does not mean that one can neatly or easily substitute one for the other, as they are largely complementary rather than alternative forms of social action. To return to the notion of infrastructure, informal help and support prevent some needs from arising that would otherwise require the intervention of the state or other organisational actors; can connect people in ways that facilitate access to organisational knowledge and services; and offer a sense of humanity that may not always be achievable in other settings.

The ability of the informal sphere to achieve these things, however, depends on it being seen as having value in its own right and not simply as capable of being harnessed in place of formal service provision. Indeed, where individuals and communities are asked to take on highly demanding additional tasks and roles, the limits of everyday help and support can be reached and supportive relationships can become impossible to sustain. When that happens, of course, the demands on the state are ultimately increased rather than reduced.

One other point about the current social and political context is also worth noting. Implicit in everyday help and support is a sense of social solidarity or connection with those around us. Aspects of contemporary political discourse – relating, for example, to benefit recipients or immigrants – can be argued to undermine that, or at least to reinforce very narrow forms of social solidarity and cohesion in ways that can have the effect of excluding some of those in greatest need. The research has discussed and illustrated the role of narrative at the level of communities and individuals: it is also worth highlighting the way that national political discourse and debate have the potential to shape the way we think about our relationships and obligations to those around us.

As highlighted above, the infrastructural qualities of everyday help and support mean that they are rarely fully visible and less likely to be the focus of public policy or debate. But such help and support also often pass unseen or unnoticed in individuals' daily lives. This study has illustrated the way that bringing what might be termed a 'social mindfulness' to our relationships of informal help and support can create awareness of our dependencies and inter-dependencies, of our impact on others and theirs on us, and of the complexity and subtleties of the interactions and relationships on which they are based. At an individual level, this can encourage us to acknowledge, attend to or sometimes rebalance these relational flows. At an aggregate level, while it may not be possible to legislate for 'kindness', it may be possible to avoid damaging – and even to foster and extend – the conditions in which it occurs.

By recognising the interactions between socio-spatial context, biography and relationships, we can perhaps help to break down some deep-rooted dichotomies around help and support that have the potential to become politicised in the context of austerity – between state and community, the deserving and the undeserving, the helpers and the helped.

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