CDF has long supported the need for sustained community spaces – safe places where people can interact, create and find information about local services. This summary draws on the most recent of CDF’s work with community organisations through three grants programmes: Connecting Communities Plus, Community Grants (CC Plus), the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (FCCBF) and the Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF).

Summary

- Community spaces benefit local people and community groups in many ways. They offer safe spaces for interaction between people from different backgrounds and provide information about local services and learning opportunities. Community spaces could be physical or virtual; all-inclusive or serving a particular section of the community. All of these are important. Support for new and existing community spaces needs to be available to maximise their benefits.

- Central and local government need to support affordable and accessible community spaces that are fit for purpose within local communities.

- Local councils and second tier voluntary sector organisations could further support the development of community spaces by offering room and venue hire to community groups at subsidised rates or free of charge.

- All inclusive community spaces are important and need to be made accessible. Government policy interventions need to take into consideration that separate community facilities for women might also be necessary. Community consultations and engagement are necessary to ensure that community spaces and facilities are suitable.

- Faith based community spaces help people from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds to interact and find a shared ground. Secular community spaces might provide a safe and neutral alternative for the development of new cross cultural and inter faiths initiatives.

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1. Findings about the availability of community spaces are largely taken from the evaluation of the CCPlus programme. Evidence on the benefits of community spaces are drawn from all three grants programmes.
Availability of Community Spaces

Community Spaces need to be affordable

Community groups need better access to affordable and subsidised community venues as they often struggle to find them in their local area. One group funded by CC Plus had to reduce the number of days it opened because venue costs were too expensive.

Community Spaces need to be accessible and available within the heart of local communities

Some CC Plus groups had to compromise a location in the centre of a community, due to lack of venue availability¹. One group perceived a drop in number of visitors to an exhibition after they had to move from a main shopping area to a less central location.

CC Plus funded community groups frequently had to locate themselves where accommodation was cheapest. This might have impact on accessibility of their activities to local community members. A CC Plus funded group which served a city in the East Midlands, ran their activities from the city’s outskirts where the rent rates were lower.

Community Spaces need to be fit for purpose

Community spaces must be fit for purpose. One CC Plus group in the South West reported that in an area of the city, community groups were provided with space in tower blocks by the local authority. As a result, the potential activities they could run were limited.

Value of Community Spaces

Community spaces benefit local people and community groups in many ways.

Community spaces are used to provide information and signposting

Community spaces provide neutral spaces for information provision. They can target communities that statutory authorities may not be able to reach in their everyday interactions. A community organisation in the South West provided a one stop shop, in order to signpost the local BME communities to the statutory services that were available.

Community spaces provide opportunities for people to develop new skills

NSF grants supported community spaces where young people gained computer and music production skills². Projects that were funded in round one of the FCCBF provided a range of courses for community members, from IT to ESOL classes for Bengali women³.

Community spaces provide safe places for people to come together to meet and interact informally

A CC Plus group based in the South West of England, said:

‘As you can see members come … not [because] they need something to get … but … to socialise’.


Community spaces provide an environment that helps increase the confidence of community members

Community spaces provide places in which members can feel confident. One CC Plus funded community group found that refugees who used the centre felt more confident to ask questions that they would have felt embarrassed asking local service providers.

Community spaces also allow those whose opinions may not be heard in everyday life to actively engage. Young people and women involved in FCCBF funded projects felt more confident about influencing decision making within their organisations, than in their local areas.

Community spaces help people of different faiths and cultures to interact and collaborate on shared issues

Inter faith initiatives provide opportunities for those of different faiths and cultures to cross boundaries. FCCBF round one showed that they created spaces where people of different faiths came together, shared experiences, learnt about different cultures, ethnicities, religions and beliefs, found commonalities and understood their changing social environments. Secular community spaces such as community centres and libraries often provided a safe and neutral alternative for the initial stage of cross cultural and inter faiths initiatives.

FCCBF organisations saw single faith organisations working with many different faiths. People were willing to interact across religious, ethnic, social and cultural boundaries.

In round two of CC Plus, only 15% of organisations (14 organisations out of a total of 91) stated that they worked with only one ethnic group. Some CC Plus funded organisations brought together people from different ethnic and faith backgrounds. For example, one organisation brought together Caribbean, White, Mixed race, and Asian young people.

Women only community spaces provide important support and a safe space for women

Women-only community spaces and facilities are of important value. Women surveyed as part of FCCBF round one expressed the importance of having spaces to come together to share experiences and support one another. These spaces were understood as spaces of support, and helped alleviate isolation.

Community spaces add to the credibility of community groups

One organisation noted how having a community space increased their credibility with local service providers:

‘And because we are here, with an office … the local service providers … tend to … recognise existence of the group …’

CC Plus funded organisation, South West

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5. 90% and 82% of women and young people surveyed respectively ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ they could influence decisions in their FCCBF funded organisation, whilst only 61% of women and young people surveyed ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ they could influence decisions in their local area.


8. Please note that a survey of women was carried out as part of the FCCBF evaluation. There is no data to compare this with for women not involved in Faith organisations. Only 2% of respondents stated that they had no faith.
Information on the grant programmes

Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (FCCBF) distributed over £11m in two rounds of funding to more than 900 groups and organisations, including single faith and inter faith groups. The fund sponsored any such faith work that improved community cohesion in England and Wales. The fund is sponsored by the Cohesion and Faiths Directorate of Communities and Local Government (CLG).

Connecting Communities Plus, Community Grants (CC Plus) is a £3m fund distributed over three years. So far, £2.338 m has been distributed in two rounds of funding between 249 groups across England. Groups funded through CC Plus are small voluntary and community groups working on local cohesion and equality issues or improvements to public services. The fund is sponsored by the Race Equality and Diversity Directorate (REDD) and the Cohesion and Faiths Directorate (CFD) of Communities and Local Government (CLG).

Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) was a £90m Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funded programme in the 40 most deprived areas of England. Its aim was to fund and assist community and voluntary organisations to work with 13–19 year olds who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. It operated from 1 January 2000 to 31 March 2006.

www.cdf.org.uk

For further information and research on these programmes please go to www.cdf.org.uk/services/rea/introduction.asp