



# Creating Space for Kindness

An experiment with public libraries in Scotland

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## Kindness & Libraries

### Practice

Creating Space  
for Kindness

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# Introduction

Kindness is at the heart of our wellbeing. While much has changed since the arrival of COVID-19, the last 18 months have only reaffirmed the fundamental importance of relationships and human connection.

We know that public libraries play a key role in providing space for communities, and indeed that many people already consider public libraries to be 'kind places'. And so, in a world pre-pandemic, we sought to bring the two together, by inviting public libraries in Scotland to be part of a conversation about kindness that aimed to build on existing strengths and create opportunities to enhance the reach and quality of engagement with communities.

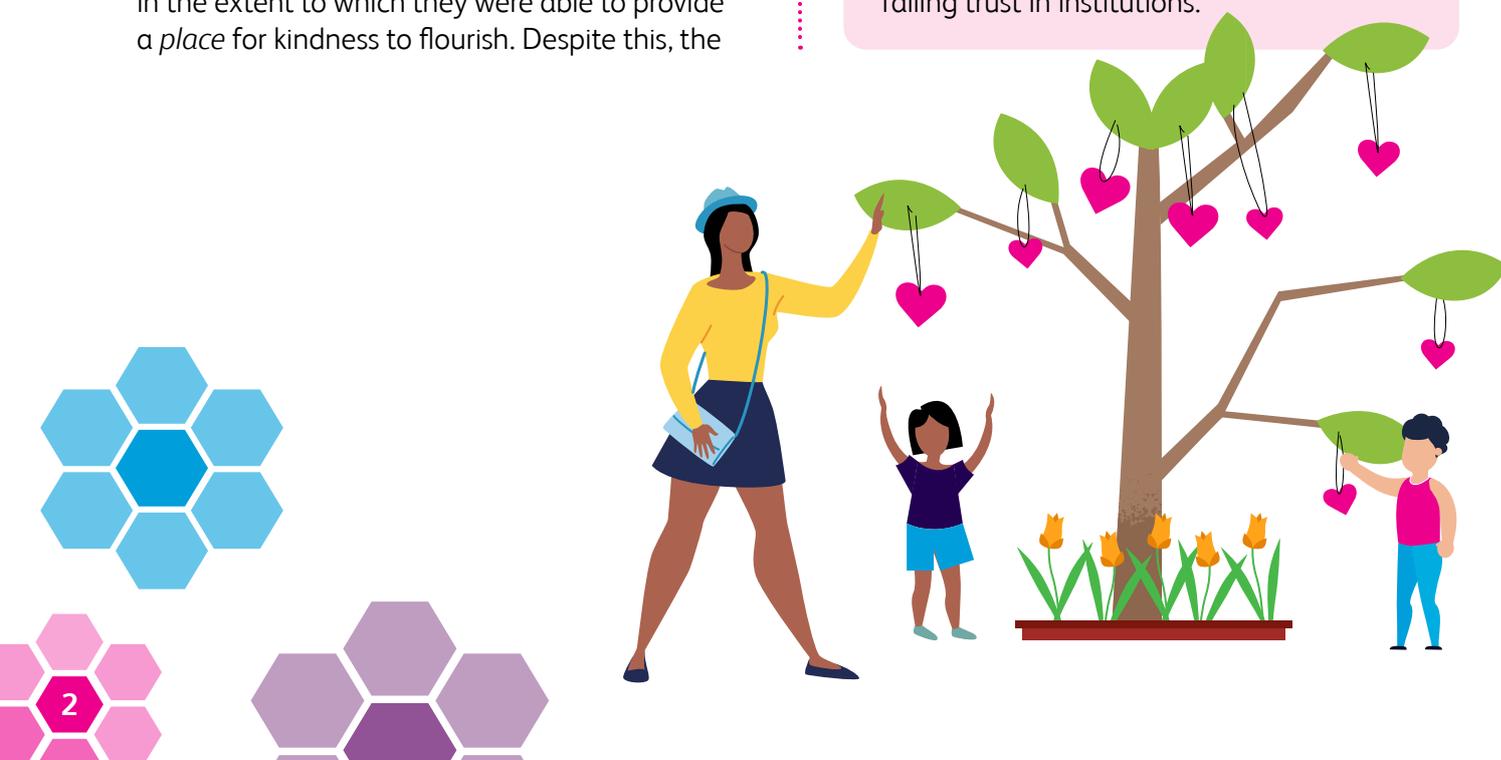
This short report sets out why kindness matters to wellbeing; and why it makes sense to consider how libraries can enhance this core aspect of wellbeing in local communities. It then shares the practical experiences of small 'kindness initiatives' led by staff in ten library services in Scotland and the learning that emerged from these innovations.

Naturally, the nature of the kindness initiatives enacted by libraries changed significantly over the course of the project, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Libraries were significantly limited in the extent to which they were able to provide a *place* for kindness to flourish. Despite this, the

collective learning from the way that services adapted to this context highlights the value of creating *space* to talk about kindness – within services, with particular beneficiaries and users, and with communities more broadly. Beyond the creativity and inspiration of particular interventions, it is this commitment to a conversation about kindness that we hope will sustain and grow across the public libraries sector.

## Why does kindness matter?

Over the past five years, the Carnegie UK Trust has been looking at what can be done to encourage kindness in communities, in organisations and in public policy. Why? Because we know that the relationships we have with those around us and the quality of our interactions with organisations and public services are fundamental to improving wellbeing outcomes. Kindness is one of the building blocks for thriving communities; by building social connection, it can help alleviate isolation and loneliness; and it is of growing importance within the wider context of the loss of civic space and falling trust in institutions.



# What can we do to encourage kindness?

At the Carnegie UK Trust, we have sought to move beyond the idea that kindness is simple, risk-free and easily operationalised into a set of actions. Instead we recognise that kindness is subjective and experienced differently by every one of us, and so it requires us to engage with people at a human level, to pick up on cues and notice when others might need a bit of support more than usual. This understanding has led us to think less about encouraging kindness and more about *creating the conditions* for kindness, exploring how to foster environments where people have the confidence and permission to act in kindness.

We recognise that embedding kindness into organisational systems and processes, and into public policy decision-making, is challenging and radical.<sup>1</sup> However, at a more local level, we have found that the things that you might do to create the conditions for kindness are relatively simple, and we have distilled this learning into three core themes.<sup>2</sup>

- **Welcoming places:** The places we have to gather or even just bump into each other have an impact on our ability to connect and to deepen our connections to form relationships. Physical design matters hugely. So too do the attitudes and behaviours of people who use and manage spaces.

1 J. Unwin (2018) *Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy*. Carnegie UK Trust.

2 Z. Ferguson (2017) *The place of kindness: combatting loneliness and building stronger communities*. Carnegie UK Trust.

- **Informal opportunities:** Evidence suggests that low level interactions – for example, a greeting or a chat with a member of staff at a checkout – can make a big difference to the quality of daily life for people who might otherwise be isolated and/or lonely. Opportunities matter, but they don't automatically promote kindness. We need to be able to take risks to engage informally.
- **Values of kindness:** The stories that we tell about people and place matter: they have a real impact on the way we feel and the way we act towards one another. Creating space to talk about and notice kindness, and building shared narratives about the things we value as a community, can help to shift attitudes and change behaviours, and build kinder communities.



# Why explore kindness and public libraries in Scotland?

A very high proportion of the population – 93% – agree that people are treated with kindness in public libraries in Scotland.<sup>3</sup> This is a remarkable result, and it is clear that public libraries are perceived as a safe and welcoming space by those who use them. Indeed, if kindness is a building block of community empowerment, it follows that, seated at the heart of their communities, libraries have the potential to support this through their work in connecting people to one another as well as to ideas.

The intersection between the kindness agenda and work of public libraries motivated us to explore whether there was a way to build on the strengths of Scotland's public libraries – as trusted, safe spaces – to develop kinder communities which enhance wellbeing.

3 J. Wallace and B. Thurman (2018) *Quantifying kindness, public engagement and place: experiences of people in the UK and Ireland*. Carnegie UK Trust.

In particular, we were keen to explore:

- **Places:** As safe places in which people of a local community can interact, how can public libraries use existing space (or create space) to facilitate quality connections? What role do libraries play in narratives of place and belonging that facilitate a sense of community and kindness?
- **Opportunities:** How can public libraries create conditions that enable members of the public to take the affective and personal risks involved in acting kindly? How can public libraries support members of the public to take and manage these risks positively?
- **Values:** How can public libraries facilitate conversations for people in their communities about what kindness means to them and how they can both notice and encourage it further? How do public libraries' own values, or those of the council or professional bodies to which librarians are affiliated, filter through the services that are delivered?

## What did we set out to do?

In February 2020 we invited interested public library staff in Scotland to be part of a conversation about kindness in libraries, to develop ideas and – crucially – to do something. We provided time and space for participants to come together in a series of workshops to develop ideas that might enhance public libraries' contribution to wellbeing in their communities through the lens of kindness. We also offered a small amount of funding (up to a few hundred pounds) to test out a small initiative in the workplace.

Twelve out of Scotland's thirty-two library services responded with a range of ideas. These included: creating large and designated 'kindness areas' within the library space, engaging the community about how the library space could help encourage acts of kindness, foregrounding kindness in learning programmes, supporting and creating community art themed on kindness as a touch point for further engagement and discussion about kindness. The majority of services planned to work with partners and people from outside the service, including care experienced young people, local groups and school children.

# Adapting to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on public libraries across Scotland and it was a time of constant change and uncertainty for library staff. The pandemic also effected the Creating Space for Kindness project as staff across services were redeployed, furloughed, working reduced hours or working remotely, which had an impact on staff capacity to develop and deliver kindness initiatives. The capacity of partners to engage with proposed initiatives was likewise compromised. Meanwhile the closure of the majority of library buildings, switch to digital service delivery and limitations around using and sharing physical space and items meant rethinking initiatives. Another challenge participants faced was communications; specifically, getting the word out to members of the public about the initiative that didn't depend on formal library or council channels of communication.

To support our participants, we extended the project timeframe by seven months, introduced more workshops than originally planned and put a buddy system in place. The workshops created a space not only for peer support and a sense of being on a shared journey, which is vital, but also engendered a remarkable level of creativity and innovation that allowed participants to adapt flexibly and responsively to various cycles of lockdowns and restrictions. As a result of a more agile approach, participating libraries were supported to respond flexibly and in different ways:

- They developed scaled-back versions of initiatives.

- They had staff deliver initiatives that they had previously planned on having partners deliver.
- They rethought processes (for example, finding ways for members of the public to exchange messages without the paper on which messages were written being passed between people, to reduce risk of infection).
- They ran initiatives in different libraries from those they had initially planned to operate in, so as to keep in line with library service plans regarding phased reopening of library buildings as lockdown eased.
- They worked delays into timeframes.

In this way the pandemic highlighted libraries' creativity, adaptability as well as their commitment to kindness.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This correlates with findings elsewhere about how well-suited library staff were for responding to challenges faced by communities during lockdown. See: J. Peachey (2020) [Making a Difference](#) Carnegie UK Trust.



# The kindness initiatives

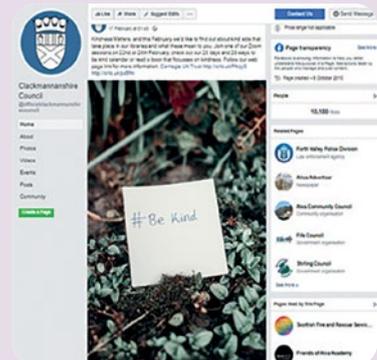
## Origami Kindness Garden, Aberdeen City Library and Information Services

Staff created a small display on a pillar of paper origami flowers with a few messages of kindness for people to read. Some paper flowers with kindness messages were kept separately for people to take away. All the flowers were created by library staff who chose the message for each flower. The aim was to get people thinking and talking about kindness.



## Kindness Conversations, Clackmannanshire Council Library Service

A series of online chat sessions were held to open up dialogue on kindness. This was supplemented by a kindness information sheet that was used to publicise the sessions. A '28 days and 28 ways to be kind' calendar for the month of February and short reading list of fiction that highlighted kindness was also developed.



## Connecting communities, City of Edinburgh Council

A postcard exchange between pupils at local schools and older members of the community was set up to share cross-generational messages of kindness and support. The aim was to build empathy and promote the idea of kindness in the community as well as building relationships between school pupils and more vulnerable and isolated housebound library members and care home residents.



## Story Cafés and Women Making It, Glasgow Women's Library

An online Story Café on kindness engaged women in stories and poems, providing a route into reflecting and discussing women's own experiences of kindness and how kindness shapes communities. A kindness reading list was shared with participants after the Story Café event. The Women Making It was a craft workshop where women made things for others whilst they discussed kindness. The Library posted out 'kindness craft bundles' in advance, so women had everything they needed to participate. The aims of the initiatives were to celebrate and create dialogue about kindness in communities and creating a welcoming, inclusive space for women to chat about their own experiences of kindness, particularly in response to the pandemic.



## Inverkind: embracing kinder communities through your local library, Inverclyde Libraries

Inverkind involved creating a bespoke logo to create a visual reminder of kindness to help focus hearts and minds on this topic. This was added to merchandise and launched on Blue Monday with virtual Chatty Cafés to encourage togetherness and connection. The branded merchandise was also integrated into the Books on Wheels service, whereby housebound library users and those shielding received items alongside messages from young Library Club members. The aim was to facilitate a sense of intergenerational connection and to get people thinking about kindness.



## Kindness Tree, Midlothian Library Service

A cherry blossom tree was crafted with heart-shaped leaves on which staff, local groups and library users could write memories and messages of kindness that reflected what helped people get through a tough day and acts of kindness they had experienced over the past year. The aim was to give people reading the notes a chance to reflect on kindness and be buoyed by, and connect to, everyday examples of kindness in their community.



## Kindness Garden Space, North Ayrshire Libraries

The creation of an outdoor space for the enjoyment of the community and to provide space in which to grow local produce. The library worked with their local Men's Shed organisation and local growing and gardening groups. The aim was to create a space for people to come together and make connections as well as capitalising on the mental health benefits associated with gardening and being outdoors.



## Library Letters, Culture Perth and Kinross

Library Letters paired Books on Wheels library customers with staff volunteers in a pen-pal partnership. Letters were exchanged via the delivery and pick up of book bags. The aim was to create meaningful connections through cheery, chatty letters to and fro. The benefits were mutual: reaching out to some of the most vulnerable and isolated library customers throughout lockdown, boosting their sense of wellbeing whilst equally providing opportunities for staff, especially those who were furloughed, to feel they could continue to be of service.



## Kindness and Wellbeing Packs, South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture

300 kindness and wellbeing packs were created for distribution across South Lanarkshire, to be explored as part of a series of informal Chatty Café sessions. The packs and sessions were launched during a 'Kindness Week' at the end of May. The aim was to get people thinking and talking about kindness in their communities.



## Kindness Tree, West Lothian Library Service

A kindness tree was installed in each library across the service. The trees enabled library users to write messages of kindness to others on the leaves. Bookmarks bearing a quote about kindness were also designed for sharing with library users. The aims were to create visual reminders to take time to reflect on kindness and to facilitate a sense of connection through the kindness tree.



# What did we learn?

The learning from these varied initiatives stems both from the experience library staff had of delivering small kindness initiatives and the experience of being part of a small cohort on a shared journey during COVID-19. Some learning relates directly to the context of delivering and meeting during the pandemic and perhaps would not have been gleaned in a different context. It is worth noting that delays experienced due to the pandemic meant that attendance at some events was not as high as anticipated and a couple of initiatives were live at the time of writing, making it difficult to ascertain the full impact of the efforts made.

## Connection that transcends the physical

The need to rethink activities in light of the pandemic led to a handful of initiatives being substantially pared back and a shift in focus from the curation of a large physical space for kindness activities, to the interactions between people that were meant to happen within that space. This process of adapting (and readapting) projects to work during the pandemic demonstrated the ability of library staff to respond creatively to changing circumstances and to provide opportunities for little moments of connection that contribute to community wellbeing.

**“When I initially became interested in the project I wanted to be involved to literally create a social space for kindness within our largest and busiest branch to encourage acts of kindness within the library space. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19 the importance of kindness has come to the fore as has the realisation that small gestures can make all the difference to someone’s day, particularly if they are isolated and/or lonely. It has also become apparent that acts of kindness can transcend the library buildings and be just as effective.”**

Simple acts of sharing experiences of kindness and words of kindness on a pillar or ‘kindness tree’ were effective in engaging people and facilitating a sense of connection to others in the community as people responded to messages others had written. The sharing of experiences of kindness also provoked conversations between members of the public and staff about kindness. Again, whilst not delivered in a physical setting, engaging people in a story café or in the act of crafting together in an online environment nevertheless enabled quality reflection and conversation about kindness, with participants feeding back their sense of community connection as a result of engaging in the events and gratitude for putting a spotlight on the quality of kindness.

## Creating time to think about kindness is in itself powerful

The majority of initiatives were focused on creating a moment for pause and reflection. One service reported how creating this space for kindness proved uplifting for people using the library. It also proved a point for reflection about what kindness means to staff which proved, in some instances, to be powerful. One service reported how their initiative had enabled staff to reflect on the relationship between kindness and belonging, the importance of kindness in a healthy library service, building and forging relationships with individuals and communities and the role of staff in creating kind services. Staff also reflected on the value of creating space to think about kindness in terms of enabling and giving people permission to act in kindness, rather than prescribing or mandating particular behaviours.

Time and space to consider kindness has provoked participants to reflect on where else they can promote and incorporate kindness beyond the scope of this work. One service created a kindness advent calendar for Christmas 2020 whilst another service is planning to create dedicated outdoor kindness spaces in other branches and to “continue to have kindness at the forefront of our

planning and ongoing work”. Another service plans to engage in World Kindness Day and feature a kindness poster and book display across all branch libraries. In this way, it is hoped that the act of creating space to talk about kindness will lead to an ongoing commitment to kindness as a value that goes beyond the timeframe of individual library initiatives.

## It doesn't take a lot to do something impactful

The initiatives were low cost. The majority of participants applied for no more than £250, with one participant not asking for any funding at all, just the opportunity to connect with others interested in the kindness agenda.

“Small is indeed beautiful!”

Whilst time was, of course, required for planning – especially given the shifting context of the pandemic – where initiatives were tied to existing strengths or delivery mechanisms, there was scope for incorporating the initiative on an ongoing basis by making simple, small adjustments. This was demonstrated in particular by two services who used existing Books on Wheels services as a vehicle to encourage connection, highlighting the potential for services that appear transactional to act as a vehicle for kindness.

“We found with the Books on Wheels part of the project, that small projects which are delivered alongside current service provision can be very successful and well received. We will continue to incorporate and encourage kindness within our service provision for adults, children and young people where possible and continue to use the model used for the Books on Wheels service with other projects.”

“We are continuing with the project and cannot foresee any reason why it shouldn't continue for as long as is wanted: the Books on Wheels structure provides our framework; feedback demonstrates that our volunteers and participant customers are clearly getting much from it; it costs nothing but time and kindness.”

## It's important to create space for library staff to connect and to think

Participants fed back the value of having the opportunity to meet with others outside of their service in order to “think outside the box and connect with people” on a given topic or focus. Many fed back how much they enjoyed the opportunity to hear about other services as well as their kindness initiatives and how the experience had encouraged them to connect with other colleagues throughout the pandemic.

Having a cohort had a galvanising effect and boosted confidence and provided inspiration. For some, the space provided to step back and reflect in a context where there was a real (and necessary) focus on delivery was a welcome opportunity that energised and helped provide perspective.<sup>5</sup>

“Sharing ideas about kindness and how to encourage it with others in the network has been so interesting and thought provoking. The ideas have been varied in how to create connections and it has inspired me to look to do more.”

“It's been wonderful taking part in the project and getting to share experiences with professionals from other local authorities... The ethos behind the project is so very important and we will continue to have kindness at the forefront of our planning and ongoing work.”

“It was lovely to connect with different library staff from all over Scotland, I found that particularly important during lockdown.”

5 The importance of a space to pause and think, to share ideas and to offer informal peer support links to findings elsewhere. See Ilona Haslewood (2021) *A review of the evidence on developing and supporting policy and practice networks*. Carnegie UK Trust.

# So what?

The small experiments that participating libraries ran reveal that it doesn't take much to do something impactful – but it *does* require time and freedom for staff to think and be creative. The experiments described here were able to go ahead because services made a commitment to supporting ideas to encourage kindness and participants were given the time and space to do things.

If you are interested in developing small kindness initiatives in your library service, you might like to consider the following:

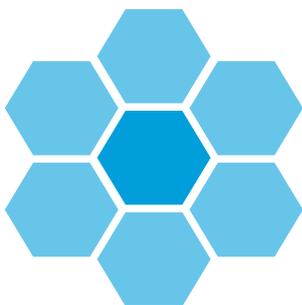
- **Keep it simple:** Small, simple interventions can be effective.
- **Give people permission:** How can you create the conditions that enable members of the public to take the affective and personal risks involved in acting kindly? How can you support members of the public to take and manage these risks positively?
- **Think about existing spaces and places:** How can you use existing places to create small moments of connection? What role do libraries play in narratives of place and belonging that facilitate a sense of community and kindness? How can you facilitate conversations for people in their communities about what kindness means to them and how they can both notice and encourage it further?
- **Think about existing assets and mechanisms:** Do you have a way of working that lends itself to delivering an idea? Are

there existing services or activities (e.g. books on wheels or book groups) that you could use to encourage (more) kindness and connection?

- **Find co-travellers:** Could you reach out to staff in other services to see if they would like to experiment and learn with you? What about people who work or live locally who share your vision and would like to partner with you?

These principles, hints and tips, and the wider learning from the project may provide a useful steer for libraries and library staff who are interested in developing their interest and ideas on kindness. But the biggest thing that we have learned from these initiatives is that public libraries *can* use kindness as a way to enhance wellbeing at a community level. If staff are given just a little bit of time for a conversation, and a little bit of freedom to innovate, good things can happen. Moreover, it has shown that – rather than being a distraction from COVID-19 – focusing on kindness and the wellbeing benefits that this can bring is of particular relevance during times of uncertainty and challenge.

We are grateful to all the libraries who reaffirmed their involvement in the project when it might have felt easier to push such conversations to one side. Because it is when creating space for kindness feels most difficult, that it is of the greatest importance.



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