JRF

A summary of recent research on everyday help and kindness

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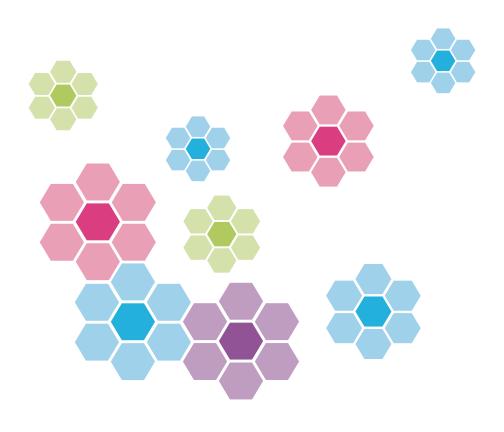**Enabling Wellbeing**

Thought

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Executive summary

A smile and 'good morning' in passing, taking in a parcel, sitting down and listening over a cup of tea, giving a lift, or babysitting for someone once a week… small acts of help and kindness and the relationships that are formed through these play an important role in making our lives 'liveable'.

As such, they are an essential – if often overlooked – part of the social, emotional and practical infrastructure of daily life. While they tap into wider, long-standing societal concerns about trust, kindness, generosity, solidarity and the common good, surprisingly little is known about *how* exactly they come to happen and what might help to encourage (or constrain) such supportive relationships. This paper summarises learning from a body of recent JRF research.

Key points

- Everyday help is often mundane and practical and frequently goes unnoticed, but it can have important emotional consequences. Relationships cannot be simply viewed as 'gateways' to help or cables along which it flows: relationships are themselves created, sustained and sometimes eroded through interactions such as help.

- Powerful and complex emotions and moral considerations are attached to the giving and receiving of everyday help, such as the expectation of reciprocity. In particular, people strive for a balance between revealing vulnerability (e.g. needing help) and maintaining dignity (how they want to see themselves and be seen by others). Rigid notions of self-reliance and independence can impede people's ability to accept or ask for help.

- Strategies and practices to manage these complexities and make help 'palatable' include helping 'by the by', minimising the effort involved, making help appear as not help but some other activity; and on the reverse side, 'helping the helper' (i.e. accepting help in order not to offend or cause disappointment).

- The physical characteristics of residential and public spaces shape everyday help by creating, or restricting, opportunities for engagement and civility. But the *perceived* image of places and neighbourhoods, attachment to place and shared narratives about it also play an important role. The same mechanisms can be means of inclusion, but also exclusion.

- Groups, organisations (including commercial ones) and associations occupy a 'middle layer' between informal person-to-person help and formal service provision. They act as 'junction boxes' connecting diverse strands of the community and social networks through shared interests and proximity.

- Insights from this research can be used to enable everyday help to happen, for instance through simply allowing it to happen and where appropriate, cultivating the conditions for it to flow. Applying key insights when designing activities and services also ensures that these go with the grain of how everyday help and support works.

Introduction

Everyday, routine, often mundane, acts of help are surprisingly complex, but poorly understood.

This topic is hard to research, interpret and directly connect with dominant public debates. Yet assumptions about how such support happens and expectations about what it can do are often implicit – for example, in discussion about the relative roles of the state and the third sector, or the need to strengthen the capacity of communities.

Building on its long-term interest in places that enhance quality of life for people, JRF commissioned a number of studies to build understanding of this little explored territory and identify ways in which the new insights can influence the design of public policy and action, as well as everyday decisions to help achieve kinder communities and a good life for all.

Noticing the everyday and the mundane

How central relationships (with friends, neighbours and others) are to a good life is a recurring theme in much of JRF's recent work (e.g. Katz 2011, Blood 2013; Stock *et al* 2014).

It tends to be unsatisfactory relationships, or the absence of relationships, that become visible first, in the form of loneliness, isolation, tension, stress, or abuse. Relationships that 'work' tend to draw less interest: what happens in them, what makes them work, what conditions help encourage and sustain them, and how they come to happen are questions rarely examined. This is especially so with everyday, run-of-the-mill, interactions, such as 'looking out' for someone, small acts of practical help, 'ordinary' kindness, neighbourliness – the 'stuff of life' that we don't even have a single common expression for.

Researching informal, everyday help is not only unusual, it is also hard to accomplish. How do we observe, let alone analyse, the ordinary, the everyday and the informal? For example, the participants of the Glasgow research (people across the age range except children) were asked to record instances of everyday kindness, small favours, a bit of practical help, a helpful chat and similar interactions, that they gave or received over a week or two. This could be from, or given to, friends, neighbours, acquaintances or even strangers. This was then followed by a conversation about selected instances, to investigate more deeply how everyday help happened in the specific context of those relationships.

The act of rendering visible and being asked to think about these often barely visible relationships was illuminating: one study suggested it was akin to 'spraying water on a spider's web' (Anderson et al 2015a). Participants were often amazed at the size of their networks of everyday help, and also that these did not always consist of the people who they would have immediately thought of. On a few occasions, people were made aware of the absence, or limits, of their networks (ScotCen Social Research 2014, Anderson et al 2015a).

> **"** 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. **"**
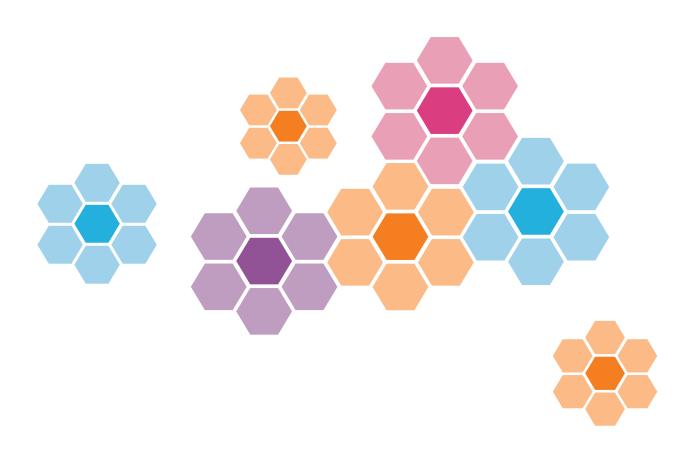>
> (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, GLASGOW, ANDERSON *ET AL* 2015A:9)

Recent research projects commissioned by JRF related to everyday help:

- Research in Hebden Bridge and its surrounding areas (Spandler *et al* 2014; Allen *et al* 2015) and in three areas in and around Glasgow (ScotCen Social Research 2014; Anderson *et al* 2015a, 2015b) investigated how informal, everyday help happened between individuals and in neighbourhoods.

- An individual account published in a diary format showed what could be achieved when someone made a decision to become a better neighbour (Telfer 2015).

- Projects looked at dealing with risk by community activist groups in four localities in Yorkshire (Allen *et al* 2014) and assessing the capacity of individuals and their networks to absorb risk as a result of welfare reforms and service cuts in Scotland (Asenova *et al* 2015).

This is a largely unexplored world for policymakers and service providers too. People are increasingly encouraged to help reduce loneliness and provide practical help to others, particularly to older people, in their neighbourhood. If thoughtfully done, this approach can increase mutuality, reciprocity and quality of life for all involved (e.g. Bowers *et all* 2013) and effective support for informal groups by local organisations (e.g. Allen *et al* 2014). At worst, it means transferring social risk to – and potentially overloading – individuals and their networks with limited capacity to absorb and mitigate such risk (Asenova *et al* 2015).

It is clear from the body of research that the relationships which give rise to informal help are not simply gateways to 'resources' (e.g. practical or emotional support) – they are constituted, maintained and renewed through helping and other exchanges, and as such, are inseparable from them. Webs of relationships are carefully built over time; they form an essential infrastructure that helps to make life 'liveable' (Anderson *et al* 2015a). In order to keep the infrastructure intact, it is particularly relevant to understand how everyday help happens in relationships, and what can and cannot be asked of these relationships.

Emotional significance and moral framings

The evidence is clear from the research (Allen *et al* 2015, Anderson *et al* 2015a, 2015b) that even though the interactions in which the giving and accepting of help and kindness happen are everyday and mundane, they have great emotional significance.

In other words, alongside the social and physical environment where these exchanges happen (or not), the emotions and moral framings that govern them also matter a great deal. These seemingly insignificant decisions can gain great importance and may even evoke much anxiety.

The research found that the emotions and moral framings involved in giving and receiving help are sometimes in conflict. Moral framings, which underpin decisions about everyday help, emphasise the importance of helping others, but also that of independence and stoicism in the face of difficulties (Anderson *et al* 2015a).

Research participants seemed to be well disposed to offer help, and moral framings fed into key narratives about themselves (e.g. 'I'd help anybody'), but when it came to accepting – let alone asking for – help, many admitted that they would 'struggle'. This was often associated with a fixed notion of *independence*, not wanting to rely on anybody else. As to why this may be, Allen *et al* (2015) used Arthur Frank's theory (Frank 2011), according to which people strive to hold a balance between *dignity* and *vulnerability*. When they refuse help, it may be because they want to maintain their dignity in their own eyes, as well as in others', and do not wish to be seen as 'not coping', or presenting as vulnerable.

One person who made a conscious decision to try to become a better neighbour, reflected that the willingness and ability to help others had dominated her own narrative about herself, but her experience had changed this:

> When I started this diary, I was thinking about how I could support my older neighbours. One thing I wasn't expecting was to find that being a good neighbour is as much about receiving as giving. When I've been having a bad time, my older neighbours have been there for *me*.

(TELFER 2015:20).

People managed conflicting moral framings and messages in various ways: for example, by assessing specific requests for help against the criterion of 'genuine' need, looking for signs of reciprocity, expecting that some people should be asked before others, and seeking to avoid burdening or imposing on others (Anderson *et al* 2015).

The emotional and moral conflicts involved in asking for or accepting help means that *making help 'palatable'* can be a big task in itself (Allen *et al* 2015). People tended to use a number of strategies, for example, making it look as if helping did not require extra effort, it was a little thing, or it was not 'help' at all.

> 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.

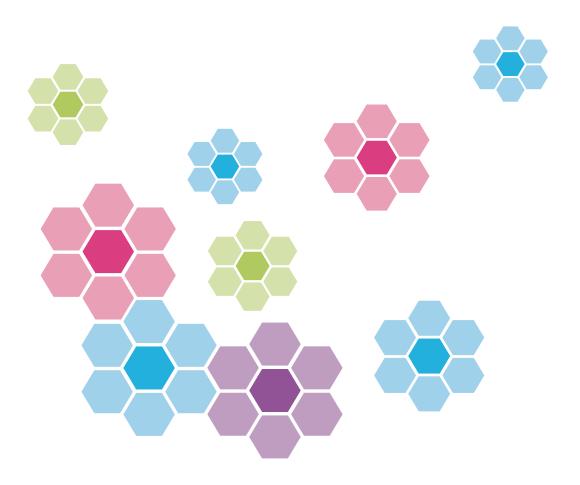(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, ANDERSON 2015A:45)

Sometimes help is not even framed or considered as such, but still happens 'in passing' (Anderson *et al* 2015a), such as people offering each other mutual support at a bowling club, in a choir, or in the form of a chat over a hot drink. A strategy for accepting help without losing face was to reframe it as 'helping the helper': enabling the other person to do something they wanted to do, and avoiding the disappointment or offence associated with refusal.

> **"** 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. **"**
>
> (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, ANDERSON 2015A:45)

Public discourse largely presents vulnerability in negative terms, highlighting shortcomings in people's capabilities. Those classed as 'vulnerable' are thought to require protection but also 'management'. This narrative also resonates with people's own desire to maintain their dignity, and compel them to present as capable and independent. This may make identifying people in ways that highlight their 'vulnerabilities' problematic (e.g. describing people as 'dependent', 'lonely' or 'isolated').

Risk and trust

Although research participants' accounts sometimes described physical or financial risk, concerns about *affective* risks – related to how we see ourselves, or how others see us – were more common.

Among individuals, such risks may include the risk of a request for help being rejected, the risk of encouraging dependency on someone's help, or being seen as 'needy' or imposing on others (Allen *et al* 2014, 2015, Anderson *et al* 2015a).

Affective risks also played a key role in the process of decision-making within groups about local community action. Allen *et al* (2014) found that this was largely dependent on the local context: when a group was inexperienced and/ or lacked confidence, becoming locally visible (or being seen as a 'busybody') could be perceived by its members as a big risk. Over-committing to, or possibly failing to accomplish, an activity could also represent significant risks.

> **"** I'm setting up a Pilates class. Will anyone come? I'm on my own. It's also about accepting that some things will fail and that we'll learn from this. **"**
>
> (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, ALLEN *ET AL* 2014:21)

Perceptions of difficulty along the way, or of being burdened with an excessive amount of paperwork and regulation, led some groups to self-censor and discard potential ideas for action, whereas others found ways around them.

> **"** … the film nights were something I really wanted to happen … there were lots of difficulties in setting it up, insurance, licensing, equipment, etc, etc. I found the number of an existing film club and rang them. We visited the club and they gave us all the answers and provided us with some old equipment. All the massive barriers were removed by visiting this other club and it became relatively straightforward. **"**
>
> (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, ALLEN *ET AL* 2014:18)

Organisations supporting community groups have an important role in creating an environment that nurtures activity and treats regulation as a necessary, but not onerous, aspect of community action. Even though organisations are often under great pressure to demonstrate success, they fulfil their supporting role best when they are able to take the risk of failure and work with the groups they support to learn from a project going wrong or not delivering outcomes as expected (Allen *et al* 2014).

At a social policy level, evidence suggests that in Scotland (and in the UK as a whole) an increased responsibility for dealing with social risks has been placed with individuals and communities regardless of their ability or capacity to absorb them. Recent welfare reform and public service spending cuts are the most visible contributing factors to risk redistribution, creating a longer-term 'risk shift'. Individuals and local groups have assumed an informal role to mitigate against increased risks faced by family members or members of the community. For example, older people reported taking on more childcare responsibilities to enable family members to work (Asenova 2015).

Particularly in a person-to-person context, *trust* has a significant role. In asking for help, the person who asks for help trusts the other person not to exploit the situation in which he or she has acknowledged their need and have thereby created a temporary imbalance between their own dignity and vulnerability. The research also suggests that this kind of trust can be slow to build, but quick to dissipate (Anderson *et al* 2015a).

The 'middle layer'

The studies on everyday help describe a rich and varied 'middle layer' between informal, person-to-person, relationships and formal help and care.

Many organisations, groups, associations and businesses greatly contributed to interactions of help happening in a locality – whether this was their overt mission or business objective or not.

Examples in the three sites in Glasgow included more formalised services, such as 'Good Morning Scotland' (a telephone befriending and alerting service), a local library, a healthy ageing group in a local mosque, an informal gardening group which decided to tidy up and transform a derelict gap site and also a local supermarket (Anderson *et al* 2015a, 2015b).

In Hebden Bridge, many groups formed around common interests such as the Trades Club, the local cinema, or the Women's Institute. The 'middle layer' also included local businesses, cafes, a farm shop, as well as 'third spaces' where people could meet, for example the rejuvenated Town Hall, the town square, or a dog walkers' path in one of the surrounding neighbourhoods (Allen *et al* 2015).

Online networks and communities clearly play an increasingly important role in many people's lives, but it should not be assumed that these belong to an entirely separate realm. Often, these were associated with 'offline' networks – for example the gardening group in Glasgow ran a blog site and some of the other groups and neighbourhoods had Facebook pages or Google groups.

The 'middle layer' has an important role to play in creating the conditions for everyday kindness simply by encouraging social interaction. Groups, organisations and associations draw people together through shared interest or purpose; they provide spaces for interaction; and sometimes actively facilitate access to those spaces. In effect, they serve as junction boxes, connecting diverse strands of community and social networks (Anderson *et al* 2015b).

Attachment to place

It was found in a number of studies (Allen *et al* 2015; Anderson *et al* 2015; Asenova *et al* 2015) that attachment to place can be an important emotional 'glue'. This often went beyond geographical rootedness to become imaginative identification. In Hebden Bridge this identification was sustained by a love of the landscape, an attachment to an idea of community, to a way of life and to trusted people (Allen *et al* 2015). In Glasgow, this attachment was evident too, exemplified by the popular notion of Glasgow as the 'friendly city', but mixed into this, local neighbourhoods had their own narratives also, sometimes various positive and negative ones running side by side (Anderson *et al* 2015a).In themselves, these stories about particular places have consequences for how people interact. In Craigneuk, North Lanarkshire, despite hardships experienced by many, people talked warmly about their tight-knit community, which they described as supportive and caring, particularly for those who had been residents for many years (Asenova *et al* 2015).

In Hebden Bridge, but also in some of the Glasgow areas, having shared values and building common cause acted as a medium through which help and kindness was given and received. In Hebden Bridge, examples included movements to defend the landscape, people helping each other to respond to crises such as those caused by floods, or buy heating oil together to gain greater bargaining power. In Glasgow (Hillhead), an additional example was the community gardening project. The common cause uniting community activists in four neighbourhoods of Bradford and York was the wish to reduce loneliness (Allen *et al* 2014).

Informal help in diverse places

The shape of the 'middle layer' varies across neighbourhoods. Spaces and opportunities in this layer are also experienced differently by people in diverse social and economic contexts.

For example, the studies undertaken in Glasgow (Anderson *et al* 2015b) and in Yorkshire (Allen *et al* 2014) suggest that those from middle-class, professional backgrounds tended to feel more confident about, and were more experienced in, engaging with *self-organised*, often interest-based, groups and associations. In contrast, in the predominantly working class area of Maryhill (Glasgow), in Craigneuk, North Lanarkshire, as well as in the Dodd Naze estate in Hebden Bridge, people relied to a greater extent on known, informal connections.

> " 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. "
>
> (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, MARYHILL, GLASGOW, ANDERSON *ET AL* 2015A:13)

In Maryhill, there was a greater role for '*provided*' spaces and activities too, such as those based in local community centres (Allen *et al* 2015, Anderson *et al* 2015b; Asenova *et al*

2015).

Connections need to happen somewhere: this means both physical *spaces* where people can get together (whether it is a building or even a path that local dog walkers use) and organisational *settings* (such as interest-based groups) that bring people together.

In Hebden Bridge, communities were often marked by sub-divisions and smaller 'nodes' of association based around neighbourhood and friendship or interest groups. These smaller networks were permeable and partially overlapped (this is not always the case, as observed in other localities by Allen *et al*, 2014). The area seemed to benefit from having '*bridgers*' (Putnam 1996, quoted in Dalley *et al* 2012), people who were members of different networks, such as organised interest groups, or links with different communities (e.g. with a hill farmer or working class family as well as a perhaps more cosmopolitan 'incomer' community) (Allen *et al* 2015).

The mechanisms which include some,

The architecture and geography of Hebden Bridge and the surrounding areas have facilitated people coming into contact with each other. The long rows of terraces often share access at the back and people regularly use common space around their houses. The footpaths in the hills and valleys are interwoven and criss-crossed. People must descend to the centre in a steep valley in order to access shops, services and buses. Some of the public spaces such as the pedestrianised town square have been purposefully created to bring people together at least incidentally, but some members of the community often use it as a meeting place with friends and neighbours. In addition, there were many examples of people taking the initiative to develop shared green spaces, for example, for dog walking, shared gardening or play areas. In Dod Naze people talked about the way in which the fields around the small neighbourhood created a neutral space and a relaxed atmosphere which facilitated connections between people.

simultaneously exclude others. For example, some of the local cafes in Hebden Bridge, which serve as a meeting place for some of the more 'cosmopolitan', newer residents, might be less inclusive of older, more established members of the community (Allen *et al* 2015). In Maryhill, Glasgow, one of the research participants reported that he had no personal network of help to draw on, which he attributed to his poor health as well as to moving into the area as a student and not having developed a local identity (ScotCen Social Research 2014).

Time is a key factor in shaping individuals' willingness and ability to engage in practices of help and support. The most obvious example of this is retirement, but sometimes, experience of apparent adversity (such as redundancy or ill health) also creates the space in people's lives to allow them to interact differently with those around them (Anderson *et al,* 2015a).

At research sites in both Glasgow and Hebden Bridge, everyday help and kindness was evident in *corporate or commercial settings* too – whether supermarkets, cafés or local shops. The significance of these settings varies by neighbourhood, depending on what other facilities are available and the extent to which people live highly local or more geographically extended lives. For example, in one area in Glasgow, the local supermarket was associated with interactions of kindness and help. In another area the local café served as a meeting point and a source of help for local parents with children. In Hebden Bridge, many small businesses, co-operative ventures and social enterprises had business aims going beyond the 'bottom-line', and these often functioned as

In Maryhill, the local supermarket (with its cafe, post office and other facilities) represents a focus for accidental or planned interaction. The social function of the branch is explicitly recognised by the company itself, which employs 'community champions' to build links with local voluntary groups and to facilitate engagement and interaction more generally.

> " 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, ANDERSON ET AL 2015A:18)

local hubs of help.

Within more formal organisational settings in the 'middle layer', it is often when individuals *transcend* their formal or scripted roles that there is the greatest scope for small acts and relationships of help and support. People may feel that it is safe to share a pressing issue with a staff member whose job does not include dealing with that issue, for example with a member of staff at a supermarket café. While this might carry some risks for organisations, such as potential distraction from core tasks, it can also be seen as congruent with good customer service and part of what attracts people to that setting in the first place.

Working with the insights gained

This new body of research on everyday help offer important insights about allowing everyday help to happen and where appropriate, actively cultivating the conditions which help make it flourish.

The insights are also applicable in the course of organisations and individuals making and implementing plans, as they help ensure that activities go with the grain of how everyday help and support works.

Some of the findings simply generate awareness of what *not* to do, as the 'doing no harm' principle is particularly relevant to the delicate webs of relationships binding together places and people.

'Doing no harm' in the context of language and public discourse means not making it difficult for people to accept help until damage has already occurred, or until needs have become acute. Wrapping offers of help in the language of dependency and vulnerability (such as 'help is given here to the lonely') is unlikely to make it attractive to the people who the offer is aimed at.

Further more, everyday help is dynamic: it varies across time, place and life stage. It is also emotionally and morally significant: people may have the desire and capacity to offer help even if they need help themselves. Not representing help as static and one-way, and not dividing people into helpers and 'the helped' allows it to flow better.

Informal, person-to-person help is not a universal resource that can be tapped into whenever the need arises: it cannot be separated from the relationship where it occurs; if and how it happens is specific to the relationship. Neighbours, friends, local groups and organisations cannot be uniformly expected to 'step in' and help out without regard to how it would affect the balance of giving and receiving within their relationships.

Developing an awareness of the availability or absence of a person's networks, including both important individuals and group memberships, is a good investment of time because it highlights sources of support and opportunities to contribute. For example, meeting up with others in a café, a pub, or through an online interest group may be a source of support as well as a way of passing time. These links can all be part of the networks that help sustain people.

Having opportunities to give help may make it easier to accept help too. Giving help does not have to be of the same kind as the help provided, as long as there is an opportunity for making a contribution. On the reverse side, being perceived (or fearing to be perceived) as a 'taker', or a 'needy' person, can be a powerful reason to refuse help.

Much everyday help happens 'in passing', or appears as 'non-help': individuals can use various strategies and practices to represent the effort they make to help others as small and thereby make it 'palatable', including lending a hand 'by the by' and making help appear as some other activity. On the other hand, 'helping the helper' (i.e. accepting an offer of assistance in order not to offend or disappoint) can be used by those being helped without losing face.

Groups and associations in the 'middle layer' are worth supporting and fostering because they bring people together, which gives rise to interactions and relationships. It is important not to impose outside agendas on them (for example as conditions of funding) that do not fit with their purpose. Organisations in a supporting role can help community groups to deal with risk positively, rather than in a risk-averse way, particularly if they are able to take the risk of failure.
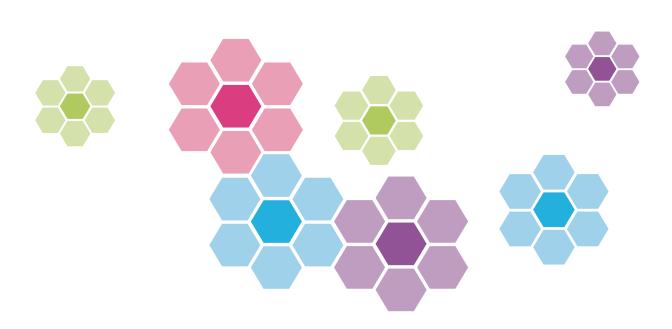
At the more formalised end of the 'middle layer' helpful connections often come about when staff 'transcend' the roles assigned to them, i.e. act in a way that isn't necessarily scripted or articulated for them. This can be valuable but has implications for equipping and giving carefully thought-through permission to staff to respond.

Informal help has important place aspects. Understanding how person-to-person help happens and what networks exist in a neighbourhood helps to establish how much confidence and appetite there is for self-organised action, but also what need exists for support and 'provided places'. This understanding also guards against the assumption that no help happens in neighbourhoods where people prefer less visible, informal, person-to-person interactions (as was observed in some working class neighbourhoods in the research).

Recognising the value of interactions of informal help and kindness in commercial settings can help to create a 'kinder economy', where local businesses can become 'hubs of helping' among customers and also between businesses.

The physical characteristics of residential and public spaces shape everyday help by creating, or restricting, opportunities for engagement and civility. Access to these places is an important element: it can mean transport, but just as importantly, an inclusive setting and atmosphere.

The *perceived* image of places and neighbourhoods, attachment to place and shared narratives about a place, also play a role in facilitating or constraining interactions. The same mechanisms can be means of inclusion but also exclusion.

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