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BELFAST Friendship Club

MODELLING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY
an evaluation



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Jonathan Barnes has been a teacher for a long time. He taught for six years in secondary schools in Kenya, Malaysia and India, and 13 years in primary and secondary classrooms in England. Art, Music, History, Geography, Design Technology, Religious Education and Citizenship were his subjects.

In 1992, he became Head of a popular and successful primary school in the centre of Canterbury, his home town. By 2000, Dr Barnes had joined the staff of Canterbury Christ Church University as a teacher, educator, and researcher.

Cross-curricular approaches, unsurprisingly, have always been Dr Barnes' enthusiasm. He has written three books and countless chapters on the subject but the values within which the curriculum is conceived has been his overriding passion.

Inclusive values of kindness, respect for diversity, equality, hope, joy and friendship have led his research studies, evaluations and academic writing. His continuing practice as a teacher and researcher both in the UK and in Malaysia, has become increasingly focused on the combination of creative approaches and living values in education.

Jonathan was elected a university Teaching Fellow in 2014 and chosen by the Higher Education Academy as a National Teaching Fellow in 2015. He is now Visiting Senior Research Fellow of Canterbury Christ Church University and Education Specialist for Migrant Help UK.



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Dr Jonathan Barnes



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation was conducted by Dr Jonathan Barnes, who sought evidence for the claimed successes of the Belfast Friendship Club (BFC) and to provide Migrant Help UK with recommendations towards the establishment of similar clubs nationwide.

The evaluation broadly found that the claims for the BFC, *'a safe shared cultural space for a range of individuals from diverse backgrounds to meet others, socialise and build strong positive relationships'*, are well founded. Using a bricolage of research methods, the evaluation established that interviewed users unanimously agreed that the BFC was a safe place, welcoming, egalitarian, supportive, and important in their lives. Some had further suggestions, some felt conscious of the dependence on strong but discreet leadership, and some wanted more such clubs.

The strong leadership from a steering group and coordinator centres on their ability to be welcoming, inclusive, confident, well-linked, determined, culturally sensitive, led by clear values and personally caring. The particular strengths of the BFC are its:

- Welcome;
- Clear and lived values;
- Focus on friendship;
- Diverse membership (including significant numbers of 'locals');
- Simple and effective organisational structures;
- Successful methods of communication;
- Emphasis on the well-being of members and community;
- Success at integration;
- Reliability; and
- Efficiency in sharing and delivering relevant information.

Thirteen recommendations were made for those interested in establishing similar clubs elsewhere in the UK. Aside from the overarching recommendations that Migrant Help UK seeks to replicate this club in the UK dispersal areas for refugees, the evaluation suggested the following:

- The booklet *Be the Change* be used as a guide;
- Leaders of future clubs visit the BFC;
- Club leaders prioritise the identification of safe, accessible, neutral premises;
- Club values are constantly and consistently monitored and upheld;
- Each club has a dedicated supporting committee;
- A helpline sharing the values and aims of the Friendship Club is established to support club co-ordinators and steering group members respond to problems, dilemmas and legally sensitive situations;
- More research is done into those that do not continue membership of BFC;
- Migrant Help UK provides funds for the first year of clubs founded in dispersal areas;
- After the first year Migrant Help UK helps secure local, national and international funding to ensure the sustainability of the clubs.
- Schools consider setting up their own Friendship Clubs on similar lines to the BFC in order to support the integration of migrant and refugee young people



1.0 Introduction

1.01 The Belfast Friendship Club (BFC) is an informal social group that has been meeting in a South Belfast Café almost every Thursday evening since 2009. Its aims are simple. It is a club for those seeking and offering friendship. BFC members comprise local Belfastians and an ever-changing mix of newcomers to the city who meet to chat. BFC members, community support organisations, charities and those working directly with migrants and others with social needs, suggest that the BFC has been highly successful in providing a safe space and welcoming community for newcomers to the city or those seeking new friends.

Many claim that it has significantly helped the integration of migrants into what has been a bitterly divided community. Migrant Help UK's interest in the BFC stems from its responsibility for supporting migrants across the country and thus this report will focus mainly on the experience of migrants at the BFC. It is recognised that one of the great strengths of the BFC is that it serves as an important centre in the lives of locals too.

1.02 The newly arrived in Belfast include refugees, asylum seekers (including those whose claims have been rejected, but remain in NI destitute), European Union migrant workers, survivors of human trafficking, students, travellers, migrant unemployed and the homeless. They represent a wide range of countries, cultures and income brackets. Some are lonely, far from friends and family and seek friendly support. Local members of the BFC come from a variety of backgrounds too. They may share the migrants' need for friendship and support but they also have an interest in building bridges between communities and people.

1.03 This evaluation seeks to establish and assemble detailed evidence of the specific successes of the BFC and to examine its potential for replication elsewhere in the United Kingdom. It will rest on the following questions:

- What dominant values guide the BFC?
- How is the BFC organised?
- What is unusual about the BFC approach?
- What is the impact of the BFC on the community?
- Are the claimed successes justified?
- What difficulties and threats does it face?
- What features of the BFC can be replicated?
- What characterises the leader of a Friendship Club?



1.1 The Belfast context

1.11 Belfast is the capital of the Province of Northern Ireland (NI). It is a city of some 286,000 people occupying the site of Bronze Age settlements either side of the estuary of the River Lagan at the head of the Belfast Lough in the north of the country. Today the city stands at the centre of a European Union 'Larger Urban Zone' (LUZ) of 641,000 people occupying several NI counties. The total population of NI is 1.81 million.

1.12 After destructive civil wars throughout the island of Ireland in the 17th century, the North began to become the focus of Protestantism and pro-British sentiments. The relatively wealthy and British government-supported Protestant minority funded and led much of the development of industry and commerce in the area. Belfast, already a defended medieval town and port, grew in the 18th and 19th centuries to become a major industrial centre specialising in tobacco, linen manufacture and ship building. Continuing political and sectarian divides, and increasingly horrific violence, locally referred to as 'The Troubles', dominated most of the 20th century. The 'sects' could be roughly divided into Catholics who sought union with the Republic of Ireland with separation from the United Kingdom, and Protestants who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom. These divisions remain and are commonly more political than religious, and as always, are more complex than a simple binary division. Terror campaigns, shootings, torture, street violence and rising hatred between communities defined the public impression of the country and especially its capital. Belfast became synonymous with bombs and bullets. Unsurprisingly very few non-Irish sought asylum there. Few businesses invested in NI and its economy declined dramatically from the 1960s onwards.

1.13 An uneasy agreement between Nationalists and Unionists was negotiated in 1998. Despite the steady decline of shipbuilding in the massive Harland and Wolff shipyard and other related industries, Belfast's economy has generally improved since the agreement. What became known as the 'peace dividend' has had a positive impact on government, the police, employment, productivity and tourism. Indeed, some measures place NI output and employment figures somewhat higher than other areas of the UK. Poverty levels remain high however (see Poverty in NI website). A successful film industry has recently developed, generating such lucrative productions as *Game of Thrones*, new wind farm and oil rig contracts for Harland and Wolff, and tourism through Belfast to the whole of Northern Ireland have helped Belfast counter the negative impacts of the world economic crisis of 2008.

1.14 The buoyant economy in the early 2000s and the intensive building programmes have attracted many migrant workers and job seekers, especially from the expanded European Union since 2004. Asylum seekers and refugees have come too. Currently there are around 600 asylum seekers living in Belfast. Of around 250 annual applications for asylum, roughly 25% are eventually accepted, so many are waiting for Home Office judgments and are either in receipt of minimal asylum support, or destitute apart from the support of voluntary organisations. Unlike Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland does not have a Refugee Integration Strategy (see Potter, 2014). The local population and host communities therefore have received little or no preparation for the accommodation and welcome of numbers of newcomers. Few locals fully understand the issues migrants face.

1.15 Belfast's position as a well-established university town now attracts many foreign students. Queen's University, founded in the mid-19th century, belongs to the Russell Group with its internationally acclaimed research reputation. Together, with the University of Ulster, these higher education institutions welcome students from all over the world. The cosmopolitan areas of South Belfast, centred on the districts of Malone and Stranmillis, are rich with restaurants, student flats, charitable organisations and community support and voluntary groups, including the BFC and the South Belfast Roundtable (see website). As with many UK cities, however, the leafy streets and heritage buildings of South Belfast are in very close proximity to areas of major economic and cultural deprivation. Despite being Belfast's most international quarter and already home to a well-established Chinese community, racial incidents and hate crimes are common (Police Service NI, 2014).

INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTION

1.16 The Police Service of Northern Ireland has kept records of racially related crimes and incidents since 2004. This was a response to the fact that racially motivated incidents had begun to replace sectarian violence on Belfast's streets. The South Belfast Roundtable on Racism was established in the same year (Murphy, 2008). It brought together 85 member organisations plus many community leaders to fight against all racism and spearheaded calming and constructive responses. The city witnessed over 1,000 recorded racist incidents by 2009 when violent threats by mobs resulted in 100 Polish migrants fleeing the area following violence at a football match. That same year, a number of attacks directed at the members of the Roma community led to over 100 leaving the city, though many later returned. In the same year the BFC was founded and it was presented with the NI Housing Executive's Intercultural Achievement Award in 2010. Racial incidents and crimes continue to rise slowly (Police Service of NI, 2014).

1.17 In the census of 2011, 5.1% of Belfast's population classed themselves as non-British and 3.6% as black, Asian or of mixed heritage (NI Census, 2011). This remains a relatively low percentage compared with English and Scottish cities, but represents a sudden rise for the people of Belfast. As to country of origin, students, workers, job seekers, travellers and their families, 3.7% said they came from outside the EU (mainly Asia but including more than 1,000 African residents) and 2.8% came from old and new EU countries (chiefly, in 2011, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Lithuanian (NI Census, 2011). These figures are significantly higher than for other areas of Northern Ireland and record the position after the racially motivated intimidation of both the Polish and Roma communities in South Belfast in 2009 and 2010. It is likely that some migrants were not counted in the 2011 census.

1.2 Founding the Club

1.21 The founding and development of the BFC offers a helpful case study in community relations. The BFC was initially the brainchild of Denise Wright, the Race Relations Coordinator, and Stephanie Mitchell, the Integration Project Coordinator. Stephanie provides the day-to-day nurture of the club, while Denise coordinates the background advice and support. They receive the strong support of the South Belfast Roundtable. Committed to tackling racism (South Belfast Roundtable website), this possibly unique group of interested organisations and people described the BFC as:

“ A safe shared cultural space for a range of individuals from diverse backgrounds to meet others, socialise and build strong positive relationships. ”

1.22 Many saw the rise in racial incidents as a continuation of the intolerance, suspicion and lack of dialogue that had underpinned the centuries of sectarian violence and tension suffered by the province since the 17th century. Those interested in community development and the construction of a peaceful, more tolerant and just society in NI felt the time had come for positive action to address the tendency towards 'othering' (Said, 1978; Foucault, 1990). Funding towards the setting up of a club offering 'a hand of friendship to those new to the city' was obtained from local charities and the EU Peace III programme via Belfast City Council.

1.23 Denise, a member of the South Belfast City Church felt that its Common Grounds Café might be a suitably safe and welcoming place to invite newcomers to the area. Both she and Stephanie knew from experience of Belfast's 'Troubles' that any explicit or implicit church connection might work against a sense of security for some people. Though some sources claim that up to 80% of migrants are active members of a faith, many are not Christians but follow Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, ancestor worshipping, shamanistic or Sikh traditions. Impartiality, therefore, became key to the success of the club as Wilson (2012) stresses. As the ground rules of the BFC developed, it was confirmed that such a disparate group needed a religiously and politically neutral meeting place if bridges were to be built between them and BFC members and the local community.



1.24 Denise and Stephanie also recognised that charitable giving, although well meant, could quickly establish unequal relationships between giver and receiver. The recipients of charity can easily feel dependent and inferior, regardless of the donor's good intentions. As a result, the BFC decided to avoid religious or charitable agendas – no prayers or references to church membership, no gifts and no organisational provision of aid. If it were to feel safe for all, social rules also needed to be established. There would be no alcohol, so as to avoid offence, embarrassment or unruly behaviour. BFC founders also made it clear that there should be no sense of the club being a 'dating agency'; single people should not fear they would receive unwanted attention. The club had to be fully inclusive and so those with no money should feel equally welcome and all advertised activities in the rest of the week must be free of charge. Vouchers would be provided discreetly for those with no money to buy drinks. Such 'rules' were agreed before the establishment of the club or learned by experience and implemented over time in consultation with the steering group.

1.25 The name 'Friendship Club' was chosen by Denise because attributes of friendship, such as solidarity, love, respect, joy, welcome, trust, ease, equality and safety, were intended to dominate the BFC's values, activities and relationships. The words 'friendship' and 'club' were likely to be ones that most newcomers would either already or quickly understand.

1.26 In April of 2009 the BFC was formed. The popular Common Grounds Café donated one of its two rooms capable of accommodating up to 40 people on every Thursday evening from 7-9.30pm. The launch event attracted 39 members, but only six attended the first real meeting. By 2014, however, numbers had swelled so much that two rooms of the café were required and generously given. By March 2015, 40 nationalities had been represented at the BFC which now regularly hosts 40 to 60 members.

1.3 Current replications of the South Belfast BFC in Northern Ireland

1.31 The BFC is not the only club for newcomers in NI. There are now BFC-inspired clubs in Derry, East Belfast's Global Café, and one in Ballymena. There is also a friendship club directly inspired by the BFC in Dublin. The BFC, however, remains the first club designed to bring people of different languages, nationalities and backgrounds together on a weekly basis. It is still the only club that operates throughout the year and probably the first to make its non-religious foundation and impartiality so central to its ethos.

1.32 One BFC member described a similar club, the Global Café, in East Belfast:

“ There's a place in East Belfast that modelled... a club that's very like this place. Not as big in membership and not as international because it's based mostly in Irish Belfast, mostly Polish and a few Spanish. But more intimate than this, it's not as boisterous. It's similar, but different. The two complement each other. (Frank, Belfast) ”

1.4 A typical Thursday evening at Common Grounds Café

1.41 The BFC has met every Thursday evening since April 2009 unless the Thursday fell on a public holiday and the café was closed. Four visits by the evaluator to the club have confirmed the same pattern each time. People begin to arrive in ones, twos and threes from just before 7pm. As they arrive, someone at a small desk, perhaps Stephanie or another of the steering group, immediately and warmly welcomes them by name, if known, with a broad and sustained smile asking the spelling of their name, if not already known. Whether the arrival is a long time member or a newcomer, their name is written in broad marker pen on a large sticky label and stuck on their lapel or shoulder. They will usually be asked where they are from and perhaps whether they are newcomers to the city:

“ This means we don't know anything about their stories and backgrounds which makes other statistics impossible to collect...but it also makes it a secure place to come into because people can tell you what they want. (Stephanie, April 23, 2015) ”

INTERSECTION



1.42 Duly labelled, visitors usually go straight from their welcome conversation to order drinks and snacks or to sit at a table without ordering anything. Those without money are quickly identified and discreetly passed vouchers for free drinks. With their drinks, visitors sit at a table for four or six, and invariably an experienced club member comes to talk to them. Established friends converse about their week but frequently, gently invite newcomers to join in. Both old hands and those who have only visited two or three times see it as their responsibility to welcome and engage all newcomers. In many observations literally no one has been seen as left without a welcome.

1.43 Two evenings' figures illustrate typical attendance figures. On July 4, 2013, there were 39 attendees of whom nine were from NI. On April 9, 2015, there were 63 attendees, 13 of whom came from NI. About 15% of that evening's members had been coming to the BFC for more than a year.

1.44 There are deliberately no organised activities on a BFC Thursday evening. Although there is popular background music being played it is not loud. Animated chatter and laughter dominates the evening between 7.00 and 9.30pm. The room is crowded. People move from table to table involving and including others and shouts of recognition are heard as latecomers enter the café. Supplementary drinks are ordered and brought to newcomers. English is the dominant language between the BFC members who often represent 20 or more other languages. The vast majority of groups are of mixed nationalities. Those who share a different language rarely use it with each other, often straining to use English to include those around them and to practise it. The scenario described above seems naively positive but three detailed observations and four separate reports from visitors on other Thursdays independently describe the same scene.

1.45 About 9pm someone, usually Stephanie, taps on a glass and asks, 'Has anyone got any notices?' At this, some people raise their hands and one at a time announce free activities in the coming week that may attract club members, such as free cookery courses, Spanish lessons, films, exhibitions, volunteer services, jogs, marathons, women's football matches, meetings, arts and crafts activities, drumming lessons or a party. The announcer may give details of time and place or field further questions. On Thursday April 22, 2015, for example, announcements concerned:

- A *Talent Tribe* meeting offering opportunities for workshops, training, volunteering and possible future employment in the creative industries of film, theatre and television;
- A meeting of the *Belfast Arabic-English Language Exchange* was announced. This informal group aims to bring together English and Arabic speakers to share their cultures and language abilities in a weekly meeting based on the values of the BFC. This group originated in the BFC;
- Information about voting registration for those from Commonwealth countries who might wish to vote in the General Election of May 7;
- Information about a flash mob gathering to promote youth mobility around Europe by *Mobility for Growth, Autonomy and Employability* (MOBGAE);
- Invitation to marathon training for the Belfast Marathon.

1.46 After general invitations, Stephanie or another steering group member may announce a free BFC trip. For example, *Around the Campfire*, a storytelling session on the theme of arriving in NI in March 2015 which attracted 19 participants. Before summer, a Belfast Summer Holiday, a two-day holiday for BFC members, was announced. This holiday attracted 39 members in 2014 and 43 in the previous year. A number of successful workshops have been run at weekends and in the week. For example, *Putting Ourselves in the Picture*, a workshop where ultraviolet paint and materials were combined to create a bank of BFC images for an exhibition, and *Global Kitchen*, training for catering and the hospitality industry. Volunteering opportunities are advertised, such as painting, decorating, and cleaning up gardens, woodland or old houses, and participation in community-building events, such as the regular *Small Worlds* workshops where local groups have the opportunity to meet representatives from diverse communities, are also regularly announced. Twice a year, a Saturday Megaswap is announced. Here club members bring goods and clothes to exchange with each other. Sixty-three club members from 19 nations contributed to the December 6 *Megaswap* (BFC Tweet, December 6, 2014). When announcements are over people begin to disperse, generally appearing happier than when they came in. Nothing more happens than that.

**Belfast's former Lord Mayor taking a 'selfie' with BFC Global Kitchen trainees.
By Hannah Mitchell (photo.hjm@gmail.com)**



INTRODUCTION

A day out with BFC





2.0 Collecting the evidence

2.01 Data was collected using a bricolage approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). This research method uses a range of qualitative methods and styles gathered together to build a more rounded picture of a particular phenomenon such as the BFC. The research paradigm remains interpretative throughout – this is argued to be the most appropriate approach to researching human activities and relationships. The wide range of methods is an attempt to avoid over-subjectivity and any positive bias by the evaluator. The bricolage in this research brings together data from participant observation, semi-structured conversations between evaluator and stakeholders, member-to-member conversations, desk studies, case studies, and supplementary enquiries.

2.02 The club is founded upon a belief that friendship is possible across all cultural, religious and language divides. Some may consider these views naïve or idealistic and the aims of the club unrealistic. Some evaluators may even question the universality of concepts of friendship, trust, care, solidarity, and security, on which the club is based. Aware of different research paradigms, the evaluator has chosen to take statements made and concepts used by BFC club members at face value. In interviews and conversations it is clear that club members keep coming because they believe those they meet at the club share their understanding of fundamental human needs. Indeed, observing the consistency and cross-cultural nature of relationships sustained at the club, the evaluator has come to suspect the BFC may provide evidence of a universal aspect in many of its core values.

2.1 Participant observation

2.11 The evaluator visited and was a participant observer at the BFC on four Thursdays:

- July 24, 2014
- November 13, 2014
- April 22, 2015
- July 2, 2015

2.12 On these occasions the evaluator was not introduced but labelled like other club members. Several established BFC members, thinking the evaluator was a visitor to Belfast, immediately greeted him enthusiastically. The evaluator was rapidly drawn into conversations and invited to several tables to chat. With some explanation and their permission, the evaluator noted down some members' comments about the BFC and made fuller notes later in the evening. Some asked for particular things they said not to be noted down. Others from Migrant Help UK Dover (Cherry Tewfik, Robert McCrea, Susan Cardus, Alex Ntung and Phil Dailly) have also attended the club and were briefly interviewed on their experiences and impressions of the club on their return to Kent.

Semi structured interviews

2.13 On July 24, 2014, the evaluator held a group discussion with members of the steering committee about their motivation for association with the BFC. The evaluator also met separately with Denise and Stephanie on several occasions. Their views and personal stories were collected in note form. On November 13, 2014, and April 22, 2015, a series of more formal semi-structured interviews were held with individual representatives from the South Belfast Roundtable. These conversations were with members of:

- Belfast City Council;
- The Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- The British Red Cross;
- GEMS NI (employment support);
- City Church;
- The NI community of Refugees and Asylum seekers;
- Horn of Africa People's aid;
- Globe Café (East Belfast); and
- Belfast ELB youth service.

RESEARCH

2.14 Representatives were asked about their organisational role, how they got to know about the BFC and where it fitted into their wider roles. Conversation was then taken to questions about the performance of the BFC. Interviewees were asked if the BFC organisation and / or activities could be improved and what were the dangers or challenges it faced. Finally these stakeholders were asked their opinion on the replication of the BFC in other parts of the UK.

2.15 Interviewees were told of the purpose of the questions and informed that the final report would be sent to them on completion. These conversations were digitally recorded with the subject's permission and could be sent to them on request.

2.16 Recordings of the semi-structured conversations were transcribed verbatim and analysed for themes, properties and categories in the manner of Grounded Theory research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Themes, properties, and categories were collected and the process repeated by a second evaluator.

Member-to-member conversations

2.17 Questioning asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants requires particular sensitivity. Research amongst members of the BFC needed to be conducted in the spirit of friendship, impartiality and solidarity fully lived and expressed by its founders and members. Interviews of club members by the evaluator were rejected as a research method. The evaluator could easily be identified as 'outsider' (64 years old, with a South East England accent, not a resident of Belfast, and clearly attempting to find out about the BFC, while club members are mostly under 40 years old, born outside the UK, and some of them anxiously waiting for the outcome of asylum claims or appeals). Such people were likely to be reluctant to answer questions about themselves for a variety of reasons. Within the club, generally Stephanie, Denise and members of the steering group see themselves as gatekeepers, defending club members from intrusive enquiries and deflecting the 'scores of research requests that come across our desks each year' (Stephanie, April 23, 2015).

2.18 An unusual method of gaining data was developed in order to give club members control. Only BFC members themselves were to be involved in data collection. Conversations leading to the relevant data were to be between two volunteer members of the club. The conversationalists were encouraged to be as relaxed, normal and wide-ranging in their choice of conversation as possible. With the consent of both conversationalists these chats were digitally recorded, transcribed and sent to them and only used with their consent.

2.19 The evaluator initially trained four club members to hold these informal but directed conversations during the November 2014 visit. Protocols for interviewing and recording were established and ethical issues clarified. The four trained members held their conversations and subsequently taught four more who conducted similar recorded conversations until 16 rich and relaxed verbal interactions had been captured. These were then professionally transcribed verbatim and analysed by the evaluator again using an adapted Grounded research method (see Barnes, 2014).

Desk research

2.110 Detailed enquiries using published and internet resources were mounted into the broader context of immigration, race relations and attempts to support asylum seekers and refugees in Belfast and NI. These are listed in the References section at the end of this report. Previous research on the BFC, and in particular an excellent evaluation by Robin Wilson (2012) commissioned by the South Belfast Roundtable, was invaluable in providing further background to this study.

2.111 Stephanie and Denise receive a large number of email and letter contacts throughout the year. The evaluator was given access to these emails and was able to categorise the nature and range of these additional calls on their time and energy.

Supplementary questions and interviews

2.112 A series of supplementary questions and investigations arose from the collected interviews, conversations and studies. These the evaluator addressed to Stephanie and Denise by email in the first instance, especially where the questions related to numbers and details of weekly membership of the club. Records of each meeting from 2009 to 2015 were consulted to ascertain country of origin and language of club members, repeat visits, and Thursday-by-Thursday attendance figures. Answers concerning the ethos and activities of the club were triangulated by further questions addressed to volunteer club members and stakeholders.

Case Studies

2.113 Through case studies the evaluator hoped to be able to illustrate the influence of the BFC on some lives. Previously collected case studies, approved by their subject and the BFC, are already used in a variety of contexts in the club's work (for example see BBC, 2014). The evaluator was able to read a cross-section from this existing supply of publicly available narratives without requiring further interviews. Case study subjects were asked if they were happy for their case study to be used as background to the research. Each club member represented was asked if they wished to be anonymous or have their name included in the report against their comments or story.

2.114 The need for case studies from current BFC members required more care. Five new case studies illustrating the community impact of BFC were collected.

2.2 Ethics

2.21 Initial research used material in the public domain and did not require ethical clearance. The leaders and founders of the BFC invited the evaluator to interview them. Emails and letters between the evaluator and founding members spelled out the parameters of the research and asked for their permission to attend BFC sessions and to meet other stakeholders. It was recognised that stakeholders were likely to express broadly positive views about the club, but that their wider responsibilities to other aspects of community life in Belfast may generate reservations or suggestions for further development.

2.22 Each migrant has a different story. Some stories are simple and work-related, but many accounts are distressing. Many of the club members are in vulnerable positions:

“ We have a checklist that gives asylum seekers and refugees local sources of support and the BFC features high on that list...we particularly direct vulnerable people there, it's not only the first place we think of, but often the only one. (Neil, Red Cross, April 23, 2015) ”

2.23 All stories are highly personal. Local people, asylum seekers, some technically destitute, those with as yet undetermined immigration status, economic migrants, trafficked people and foreign students may all have reasons to want anonymity or not to risk being interviewed at all. Some interviewees had already suffered racially motivated violence and others had faced the disappointment of rejection of strong asylum claims. If such contexts were revealed both personally and in the spirit of a friendship club it was important for the evaluator to cease researching and simply become a sympathetic friend. Evidence gathering therefore needed to be planned and executed with great care and sensitivity. In the context of this research on the impact of the BFC, individual names of club members were not always relevant except when quoted directly.

2.24 The club rightly discourages questionnaires, non-participant observers and formal interviews, seeing them as unwelcome, unequal and intrusive to people whose lives were already disrupted and insecure. Stephanie assesses the potential benefits a particular research study may bring to members of the club and often meets with researchers to discuss their work before they come to the club. This evaluator, therefore, only interviewed secure stakeholders who had volunteered to be interviewed. These stakeholders included representatives of organisations that worked closely with the BFC. Some of them were once new migrants and are now club members themselves.

2.25 This evaluation sought greater objectivity through placing evidence-gathering in the hands of those being researched. Interviews with club members required a friendly, secure and sympathetic approach, commensurate with the name of the club. It was therefore decided that members would hold recorded conversations with each other. Using a table top digital recorder, pairs of participants were asked to hold 10 to 15 minute general discussions, touching lightly upon the reasons a member joined, the length of their association, what they got out of it, what they did in the rest of the week and their thoughts and hopes for the future of the club. Each pair reversed the roles of questioner and responder after about 15 minutes. In this way 16 members' experiences of the BFC was captured in what was hoped to be an unthreatening and honest way.

2.26 Each participant was given a transcript of their conversation and offered the opportunity to delete elements they were not happy with. Names were erased and the recordings destroyed after use. Every participant was asked if they wished to be represented by their real or a fictional name.

2.27 Case studies were taken from already published examples and from a selection of BFC club members approached directly by Stephanie, and again given multiple opportunities to decline the use of their story.

2.28 Final drafts of the report were sent to Stephanie and Denise for them to share with club members and stakeholders so they could be checked before publication and submission to the funders – Migrant Help UK.

Adventures on holiday with BFC



3.0 A short review of some relevant literature on friendship, community integration and migrants

3.1. Friendship

3.11 The BFC is explicit about its intention to promote friendships. It is probably a characteristic of our species to make friendships for support and comfort (see Panksepp, 1998; Goswami, 2015). The need for friendship has not declined as we have become more technologically sophisticated and developed vastly improved, global communications. Indeed, in many Western studies friends appear to have taken on an even greater significance than in the past.

3.12 Friendship is a growing focus of academic research. The burgeoning of internet-based social networks and increasing media-fed perceptions of personal insecurity have perhaps encouraged this interest. Pahl calls current and perhaps Westernised manifestations of friendship 'a challenge to conventional, traditional thinking about family and community' (Pahl, 2000, p.3). In studies of well-being, having good friends is commonly listed as a key component in subjective feelings of happiness (see for example Ryff, 1989; Diener and Seligman, 2002; Layard and Dunn, 2009; Layard and Clark, 2015). Some argue that good friends often replace family as the principal source of personal support (Vernon, 2010; Seldon, 2015). Psychologists and neuroscientists have made us increasingly aware of the damaging physical and mental effects of friendlessness (see for example, Czikszentmihalyi, 2002; Seligman, 2004; Damasio, 2012).

3.13 Friendships can be excluding however. An over-emphasis on friendship may make 'outsiders' feel uncomfortable, perhaps conscious that those sharing close friendship may privilege certain personal wants and needs to the detriment of those of the wider community. Some manifestations of friendship may weaken the desire to improve conditions for communities and counter moves towards equality and justice (see James, 2009). Some friendships may be bad for us, especially those that bolster exclusive and self-serving values. Friendships that avoid judgments, include others and build our understanding of affirmative values like kindness, generosity, joy, peace, hope and patience may however, provide vital support in the face of the risks, traumas, difficulties and accidents of life (see Pahl, 2000; Noddings, 2003; Sternberg, 2008; Hicks, 2013; Clark and Layard, 2015). In my own work (Barnes and Scoffham, 2012; Barnes, 2013) I have shown how friendships can provide a vital safety-net. A good friend catches and restores us when we fail but also gives us confidence in our 'best selves' so that we dare to extend friendship to others, principally through acts of kindness.

BFC party games



3.14 By making certain features of friendship explicit and lived, the BFC claims to demonstrate some of the claimed universal qualities of friendship:

- Respect;
- Solidarity; and
- Equality (Mitchell, 2015).

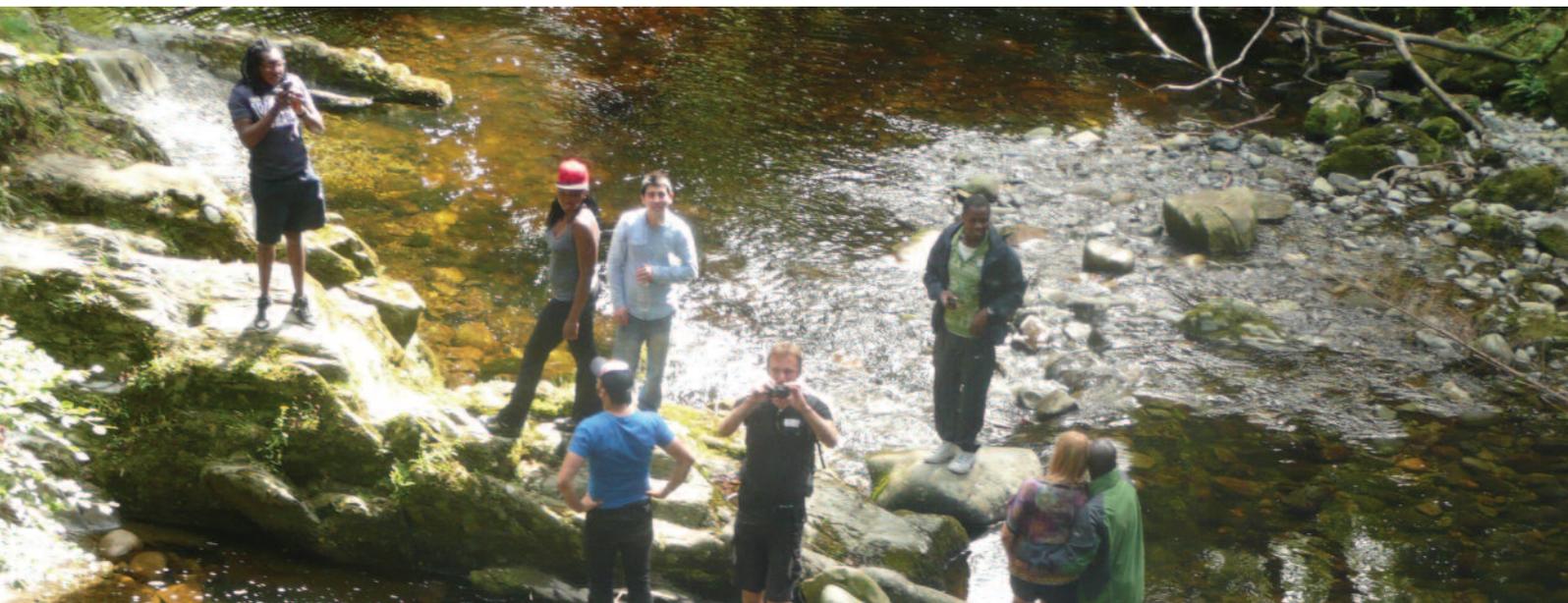
3.15 The values above are likely to be demonstrated in friendly interaction between peoples of different backgrounds and cultures and have been shown to reduce prejudice significantly (Turner et al, 2007). Despite generalised public perceptions of migrants having irreconcilable differences and a tendency to retreat to ghetto-like groups, friendship across cultures has been shown to form more nuanced understandings. In student studies, for example, racial stereotypes have been dispelled by cross-cultural friendships. These have frequently promoted relaxed socialisation across former cultural barriers and prompted a greater willingness to reach out to others (see for example, Angelo, 2001).

3.2 Community

3.21 Integration and friendly relationships across the many cultures represented in Belfast are clearly aims of the BFC. Wilson's (2012) evaluation of the BFC included helpful details on the philosophies that guided the club through its inception and development. It remains in the eyes of many a rare example of an effective and successful diverse community. The challenge of integrating communities has been on the political and social agenda of the UK since at least the 1950s. Formal and national policy related to community integration was mostly reliant on education, chiefly addressed through the emergence of a 'Citizenship' curriculum from 1998 (Crick, 1998) and aspects of compulsory Religious Education. Such initiatives made little impact on community integration as demonstrated dramatically in the Oldham riots of 2001. By 2007, in his Report to UK government, Sir Keith Ajegbo called for 'an education contextualised and relevant, to our multi-cultural society' (Ajegbo, 2007, p.19) to address a need his committee saw as vital to the present and future of the UK. At the same time, and on a bigger stage, the Council of Europe (COE) declared:

“ Dialogue is the key to our European future... [it] depends on our ability to safeguard and develop human rights...democracy and the rule of law and to promote mutual understanding....If there is a European identity to be realised it will be based on shared fundamental values: respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as respect for the equal dignity of every individual. Intercultural dialogue has an important role to play in this regard. It allows us to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides. It enables us to move forward together, to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values. (COE, 2008, p.4)

Exploring on holiday with BFC



3.22 Many would argue that progress is yet to be seen in the direction of greater intercultural understanding. The riots in UK communities during summer 2011 each involved what many saw as poorly addressed grievances concerning social exclusion. Though education may well provide the most effective means of building more inclusive and respectful communities, economic and curriculum pressures have limited its scope. Religious Education, Citizenship, and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education, Social Moral Spiritual and Cultural Education (SMSC) – fertile ground for learning about community, culture, diversity and respect – are sidelined as other curricular priorities dominate (see for example *Times Educational Supplement*, 2013; PSHE Assn, 2013; Citizenship Foundation, 2011, Barnes and Scoffham 2017). In Higher Education, the building of more tolerant communities may be expressed in vision statements but such visions are rarely apparent in curricular or organisational contexts. Yet, given the will, the construction of cross-community dialogue is not difficult. Scoffham and Barnes (2009) have demonstrated, for example, how providing student teachers with time and space to meet other cultural perspectives during an annual study tour to south India had transformed *their* thinking. Being placed in situations that promoted friendships with those of a different culture impacted significantly and positively on many student teachers' lives, subsequent career choices and attitudes about difference. The desire to promote such dialogue is essential if better communities are to be built.

3.23 Social psychologists often stress the impact of dialogue. Rogoff (2003), for example, demonstrates the transformative effects of authentic communication across age groups and between cultures. John-Steiner (2006) highlights the affective dimension in all effective collaborations, arguing that friendships, shared values and feelings have crucial impacts. She shows with many examples that when two or more colleagues confront the same challenge, their different ways of thinking engender valuable new ideas, materials, solutions or relationships. The inevitable differences in mind-set between people of different cultures, ages and backgrounds can thus be seen as a valuable societal and economic resource. As the most successful global companies have discovered, consulting across cultures with creators, clients or company members often generates more sustainable and innovative solutions. The 'cognitive dissonance' Feuerstein sees as essential to creativity (2000) often arises from the meeting of differing minds. When the meeting is across ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic or socio-economic lines, creative solutions can become more not less likely (see for example Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

3.24 Genuine interactions with environments, cultures, people, ideas or things rely upon relaxed intra and interpersonal dialogue. Wenger, for example, challenges organisations to seek *transformational experience*: taking positive advantage of the unexpected and negotiating new and shared meanings (Wenger, 1998 p. 276). Only in conditions of trust and authenticity (clearly related to conditions of friendship) can what Wenger calls 'a community of practice' develop. A community of practice where dialogue is maximised, values shared and lived and where people work to a common purpose also requires the down-playing of hierarchies and faceless, institutional, dehumanising demands in favour of a commonly agreed good. Impromptu networks of positive relationships, especially when those relationships are encouraged towards creative solutions, provide strong forces towards community (Amin and Roberts, 2008).

3.25 The concept of community requires both commonality and authentic communication. As Dewey (1916) pointed out, the linguistically linked words *common*, *communication*, *commonality* and *community* are reunited in what we would now call inclusive group behaviour. When communities work towards inclusivity, through dialogue and an emphasis on common humanity, then community itself becomes a value (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). Aiming at the construction of a supportive and caring community defines not just the destination but also the processes by which we move towards it.

A BFC member receiving his 'Inspiration' award





3.26 Cohesive communities do not ignore tensions and conflicts. These inevitably arise from diversity. However, those communities that establish meaningful face-to-face dialogue and share differences appear to thrive (see Taylor-Gooby, and Waite, 2014). An acute consciousness of the values context is essential to control the results of such dialogues. Sharing, conversation, knowledge and invention may be put to either dreadful or joyful purposes – organisations and communities attempting to build cohesive integrated cultures in multicultural settings must decide which values will guide them.

3.27 Values are deeply held beliefs that act as guides and prompts to action in the world. Values without action are just words, actions with no apparent values are aimless. Explicit values are essential to any community wishing to grow and influence. Booth and Ainscow (2011) offer guidance on what those values might be if an organisation wishes to be inclusive. With Dyssegaard (2010), Booth argues that valuing community involves:

Building mutually sustaining relationships... an encouragement to develop fellow feeling and solidarity, beyond the family, the locality or the nation state, linking ideas of public service, citizenship and global citizenship. (p. 29)

3.28 The scope of community is widening. Today worldwide circles of relationship, new and bigger communities are with us through the internet and other modern telecommunications. Klein (2015) for example, observes in the context of our potential to generate a grass-roots response to climate change that we can now:

...find community despite the fragmentation of post-modern life... Many of us are continually engaged in a cacophonous global conversation...unprecedented in its reach power.

3.29 In the past 10 years, conversations over communications like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have coordinated action in events such as the 'Arab Spring' and riots, protests, political, religious and cultural movements all over the world. The ease with which we can find and support common causes or build novel communities can rapidly generate change. Virtual communities may push for a sustainable personal, social, environmental future but just as easily can generate destructive outcomes. Values underpin every community and the South Belfast response to the issue of migration provides a relevant case in point.

REVIEW





3.3 Migrants in the UK

3.31 There are about 244 million migrants in the world today (UN, 2016). Most migrants, those living in a country not of their birth, have chosen to move for employment, education, or retirement abroad. For example, in 2014, 327,000 people chose to leave the UK and set up home abroad for such reasons. Similarly around 624,000 people came to live in the UK from other countries, mostly for work and education, in the same year (ONS, 2015). Such migration to and from the British Isles has gone on for millennia. The UK has become one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, its population reaching 97 out of a maximum 100 on the Herfindahl-Hirschman index which measures diversity (IBT, 2014).

3.32 Some people have no option but to migrate. Worldwide, around 51 million people in 2014 did not choose to leave their homes peacefully but fled them because of war, persecution and other direct threats to their safety. These migrants are the refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people of the world. Currently refugees are attempting to escape war, starvation, torture and other intense dangers in countries like Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo, Iraq, Eritrea and Myanmar. Not all are able to seek safety outside their war-torn country – 33.3 million individuals are displaced within their own country, living in camps and temporary housing sometimes for years. Some 16.7 million people, however, have sought refuge in neighbouring countries within Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific region and Africa. About 1.1 million in 2014 were driven to go further and plead for asylum in the richer countries of Europe and North America. Germany has taken on the largest numbers. Not all asylum seekers are adults. Worldwide, 25,000 children unaccompanied by their parents sought asylum last year (UNHCR, 2014).

3.33 The UK received almost 38,900 asylum applications in 2014, of which about 45% were upheld (Red Cross, 2016). The UK receives 0.47 applications for asylum per 1,000 indigenous population, the average for all EU countries is 0.91 per 1,000. Northern Ireland takes only about 1% of the applications taken by the whole of the UK (Potter, 2014).

3.34 Migrant numbers have become newsworthy in recent years. A series of horrific mass drownings of African and Asian migrants has drawn public attention to the plight of large numbers of innocent victims of war. Civil and other wars in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and recently in Ukraine and other nations of Eastern Europe have driven thousands to flee. There are a number of failed or fragile states, such as Somalia, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yemen. These numbers have increased significantly in recent years. which has increased significantly. The rise of nationalism, political and religious extremism is also argued to have driven many of these peoples to seek more liberal regimes in which to bring up their family. Whatever the reasons, there are more refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people seeking safety across the world in 2016 than ever before in human history.

3.35 The BFC is just one of many voluntary attempts by UK communities to support those who have come to these islands for safety.



A BFC Megaswap where they 're-use, recycle and relate'





4.0 Evidence for BFC's success

4.01 The BFC has grown from four to seven members gathered around a single table to numbers between 40 and 65 each Thursday. For the first six months of its existence, however, numbers were low, only reaching 21 by the first anniversary of the club's opening. Asylum seekers and refugees referred by support agencies formed about half of the membership from the beginning. All those interviewed five years later claim the BFC is successful in bringing people together, supporting newcomers and promoting friendships across cultures and languages. This evaluation tells some of the many stories of community integration. The evidence for such claims is examined below under the evaluation questions outlined in section 1.

4.1 What dominant values guide the BFC?

4.11 Inclusive values characterise the aims of the BFC. It seeks the happy integration of newcomers to Belfast into the life of the city. To do this it attempts to offer a secure place to meet, a warm welcome, friendship, and care about the lives of its members. Its stated principles are equality, respect and solidarity. In its own words, the BFC is a safe space for people from all over the world and for Belfast's long-term residents to:

- Meet in a diverse, supportive and relaxed atmosphere;
- Get information;
- Get involved in activities and events;
- Make friends and help each other (BFC website).

4.12 A previous evaluation (Wilson, 2012) rightly highlighted the importance of the affective domain in sustaining and developing the membership. More than its information-spreading and activity-organising functions, the sense of the club as a welcoming, safe, home-from-home dominated Wilson's questionnaire responses. Respondents described the club atmosphere with words like: friendship, love, kindness, respect, sharing, support, openness, awareness and trust. It is possible, however, that those responding to a questionnaire from a member of the BFC steering committee may have been overly positive. In the present evaluation therefore, member-to-member conversations were used to ascertain data that described the ethos and workings of the club. Combing the transcripts of these conversations was a moving experience because of the frequent expressions of what several people called 'life-changing' friendships and solidarity. One story, corroborated by several BFC members, was particularly indicative of values like caring, generosity, collaboration and empathy:

STORIES

“ **[I was in] a detention centre for God's sake, it's literally a prison...they start[ed] a campaign page for me, a Facebook page and stuff, to stop me from deportation and stuff and... well I just felt I was really supported morally and as I could feel that I have friends. I didn't feel alone in the cell itself and so I gained lots of wishes from phones and I got lots of chocolate because I was inside the detention centre and I wasn't able to top up my phone and my [BFC] friends were topping up and then they were calling me, everybody from BFC was calling me and talking to me and I was...I think in... less than 24 hours there were a thousand signatures and then somehow...they worked together with my solicitor as well so they were able to stop my flight and they were able to push their way through and cancel the flight and here I am now and I got released from the detention centre so it was...life-support came from BFC which I will never ever forget. (Gee, Sri Lanka)** ”

4.13 Having become increasingly aware that migrants are not the only group requiring a conducive environment to building friendship and reflecting the sheer diversity of the membership, the club has evolved organically to include people from a very wide range of backgrounds such as the LGBT community, those with mental or physical disabilities or health issues, faith backgrounds and those diagnosed with gender dysphoria. While heartening to the club, this also presents challenges regarding support and potential values conflict.

4.14 Others revealed the value of friendship when discussing the club's role in helping them live with depression:

“...so I had nobody really to go about with so basically I had to build my social circle from scratch again... At the time I was at a very weak point in my life so it [BFC] came along as a godsend for me – I don't want to go into all the details – but really it was the salvation of me in many ways... And now I have got so many friends and so many things to do I can't cope at times! (Member, Belfast)”

4.15 Affective words dominated all recorded conversations: *best, enjoy (able), family, friend (ly/ship), free (dom), good, great, help(ing), lovely, love, pleasure, refreshing, share, social (ising), understanding, welcome*, were each used more than four times in the 16 peer-to-peer conversations and scores of times in conversations unrecorded.

4.16 The dominant values of the BFC can be more richly captured in a selection of quotations from the peer-to-peer conversations held between November 2014 and April 2015. Each of these suggests a lived value of inclusivity dominating interactions, structures and activities:

(a) Security

“I felt so welcome and everyone was like 'how are you?' and really interested in me so the next time I came in people just remembered my name just like that without the name tag. It makes you feel special, like kind of part of it. And even though some people don't come here regularly they're still welcomed and treated as a regular. (Anja, Austria)”

“...it was the warmth and the welcome and the love that we got here was amazingthey are so loving and caring they are willing to listen to what you are going through. (Everson, Zimbabwe)”

“If I needed help, this is the place I'd go. (Encarta, Spain)”

(b) Respect

“...there's no hidden agenda, neutral ground, removed from the clinical idea of helping people, it's not a service, not a committee. (Jenny, Belfast)”

“...helps people to help themselves... [there is] no hidden agenda, no status, just hospitality and care. (Suleiman, Somalia)”

“... [in BFC] you can tuck your problems away. We have so many problems when indoors but when you come here you meet so many people from different cultures, different languages, you meet different people... I kind of liked it from that day up to today. (Beauty, Zimbabwe)”

(c) Equality

“...it's the environment, the mixture of people, the organism that makes the people love each other... It's like a family environment. It's family life. Everyone new here just go and talk, don't be shy. That's it like you're home talking to your sisters or brothers, your cousins, you can't be shy. Here it is the same. You don't have to be shy, just go and talk. (Mohammad, Kuwait)”

“You do feel like it's really friendly, no one judges, no one... there's no judging there's no sort of... you can just be yourself...(Pablo, NI)”

“...a warm space and an open space where each and every person is welcome I feel is help in and of itself. I feel that that can be liberating. (Pádraic, Belfast)”

4.2 How is the BFC organised?

4.21 The organisation of the BFC is deceptively simple. A steering committee of members from many countries and representatives of local voluntary and governmental groups advises on the running of the club. The coordinator is in regular touch with various members of the steering group between official meetings over specific issues arising from individual members. The steering group advises on the operation of the club, its practicalities and its future direction, as well as sourcing opportunities. The club membership itself gradually took on most of these responsibilities but the coordinator works continually behind the scenes to address problems, enquiries, planning activities and fund-raising. The coordinator is also supported by established club members themselves, always conscious of the declared values of the BFC: respect, solidarity and equality. Its aims for a community offering an inclusive experience of welcome, friendship and support are exemplified in many of the statements above. The words of stakeholders and steering group members give a flavour of the principles that guide the organisation:

**“ Nobody’s going to ask what religion I am. ”
(Maeve, Belfast)**

“ ...relax, learn about others...different nationalities, countries, communities, religions...they don’t push things, just let it happen. (Ronald, Zimbabwe) ”

“ People seem to think the Friendship Club is just for foreigners but it’s not. It’s for people who need friends. (Frank, Belfast) ”

“ ...I kind of needed to get some friends and wanted to start a life in Belfast. I think that might be the main reason that made me come back and also the friendly faces and the conversation you have and also you don’t have to reveal yourself – this is you – and you don’t have to reveal your background to be part of Friendship Club. You just have a conversation and keep going. (Gee, Sri Lanka) ”

“ In Friendship Club we talk to strangers – whoever has a name sticker on.... there are constant faces. Usually there are about 10 people that you see all the time and then everybody else is new. It’s like ‘Oh what’s your name? What’s your name?’ But you don’t have to remember the names because everybody has stickers. (Lorenzo, Italy) ”

4.22 The organisation of a BFC evening is straightforward. Everyone is given a name badge from 7pm onwards. They sit down and chat with whoever is around. The expectation is of friendly behaviour and established members make sure that this happens:

“ ...you’re really just going to a room and talking to people. But when you go there you can just have a chat and it’s a good place to relax and sort of chill. (Pablo, NI) ”

“ ...my first experience was that I just sat there in one corner and was speaking to one table with literally four people for the whole two hours and I didn’t really feel it was great or anything but for some reason, some kind of a pull, I came again. (Gee, Sri Lanka) ”

4.23 Conversations often move towards the specific challenges individual BFC members face. While there is no formal support function planned into the club’s activities, emerging friendships quickly and naturally exchange informal support and information. Though organisation is non-obtrusive, important information is quickly shared, as Lorenzo says:

“ It works because people can come here and get information, get company and meet new people. Somebody can tell a story – they are not lost. Because people usually who come here are new people who have arrived in Belfast – so they meet people who are already here and who give them direction, explain a bit about the town and life here and what to do and what not to do. (Lorenzo, Italy) ”

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4.24 One club member offered a particularly detailed summary of the BFC organisation, capturing its simplicity and the strong impact of the freedom it offers:

“...it’s central, it’s a free space where people are not obliged to buy anything. OK, yes, we’re in a café and a café operates to sell products and so on but there is no obligation for people to buy. If you go to a place where you must buy something maybe people feel uncomfortable, they maybe don’t have that particular income to be able to do that. It’s central, as I’ve said before, it’s warm, it’s friendly, you can be yourself here; it’s a nucleus that draws people in to explore what’s going on in and around the area. You like going out to pubs and clubs? You will meet a crowd of people here who do that. If you are interested in meeting people from different language and cultural backgrounds, you’ll meet people here. Belfast Friendship Club is what its members make it to be, and being organic I think is probably a big step towards making it very successful. There’s no agenda, there’s no ‘this is what we must do’, there’s no ‘we must do X, Y and Z in order to make this group go’; I think they just let go and just let it be and let it take its own shape and it fills its shape very well. (Pádraic, Belfast)”

4.25 Mixing a wide variety of languages and cultures is central to the philosophy and practice of BFC. This has organisational implications. Interaction cannot be required by the club but appears to occur easily. There is clearly a need for friendship but the question is what makes that interaction happen? The warm **welcome** is a major factor. This is remarked upon often and in almost every interview and conversation:

“It is something that the members have adapted and welcomed, that ethos and it’s the members that make it work now as well [as Stephanie]. It’s more than one person – that welcome is still there when Steph’s on holiday or away or whatever and the members are doing the welcoming. There are members who will go round and shake hands with every single person in that room... (Maeve, Belfast)”

“Everyone says they want to be friends and they mean it, people keep in touch even when they leave, everyone’s nice to me. (Vicky, Latvia)”

4.26 The **reliability** of the club being open every Thursday throughout the year also appears as an important organisational feature in many conversations, for example:

“...it’s the constant that it’s here all the time. Every Thursday you come and the door is open and it’s always here... You can rely on it. True. If they start to move it or they cancel some nights then you don’t have interest any more. Yes, that’s true. If you know that something is there all the time then you go. (Lorenzo, Italy)”

“Belfast Friendship Club is every week – it’s like ‘Thursday, where are we going? 7- 9. Friendship Club!’ (Mohammad, Kuwait)”

WELCOMING

4.27 The emphasis on **equality** is demonstrated in the evidence of subtle but definite support for those with no money. Vouchers for teas and coffees, the chance to join free film nights, courses or entertainments are a common feature. Many respondents specifically mentioned the free art, cooking or language lessons, others highlighted the Megaswaps. Arnau explains:

...everyone was taking things for pleasure...it's good because you put some things that you don't want and then you get something back. Everybody gets something in exchange and if you don't get anything, just being there with the people is the best thing that you can do. (Arnau, Catalonia)

4.28 The weekly notices at 9pm clearly generate **collaborations** through the rest of the week. A very wide range of activities are announced. Interviews and conversations revealed the following examples: cinema club, video diaries, holidays, charity collections, flash mobs, voluntary work in the café, voluntary work in the activity centre, English development, restoration work, football club, women's football, marathon, cooking, Spanish lessons, Arabic lessons, dancing, cabaret, Zumba, Salsa, dancing, drawing groups, weekend holidays, singing, guitar, Polish songs, parties, visit to a debt health centre, running, walking, cycling, painting, face painting, Global Kitchen, Gay Pride march, Palestine campaign, 'Small Worlds' programme, Action Cancer support and city centre events. Such activities provide purposeful occupation in the rest of the week for many club members:

I've tried two [painting workshops]. They were awesome. I'm doing the next thing. Yes! Next one is the face painting. (Vicky, Latvia)

...you are able to find out about different volunteering programmes. As an asylum seeker...I wasn't allowed to work so it's the way I was occupying myself... and going places from my room so it does affect the whole week. In one way I was waiting for the Thursday to come, and then every Thursday I was there meeting friends, and we go out sometimes and we catch up with each other. (Gee, Sri Lanka)

The first [volunteer] place I did was at a refugee shelter I think which was painting and that was probably where I met some of the friends from the club. (Pablo, NI)

I'm a volunteer here to clean the Friendship Club. (Mohammad, Kuwait)

Each week there are lots of activities going like walking or cycling in the mountains. People really like to come here and enjoy speaking... especially for people who don't speak English, they come here to practise more English, learn new things. (Mohammad, Kuwait)

What is unusual about the BFC approach?

4.31 There are thousands of clubs in every city. What arises from the data as unusual about the BFC is its simple focus on the three aspects of well-being: personal, group and community. Again, quotations from active members provide evidence of the inclusive community BFC seeks to develop:

(a) Personal well-being

4.32 Every member is named and welcomed. Every person appears cared for as an individual, many responses testify to this judgment. Those that look unhappy or uncomfortable are quickly and sensitively noticed and spoken to, usually by a steering group member, but increasingly by ordinary members:

“ Everyone’s keeping an eye on it [the feelings of others]if you see anyone feeling uncomfortable you’ll go over and interject, get them to sit down, just become part of the conversation...you don’t want to see anybody uncomfortable. (Maeve, Belfast) ”

“ All of my best friends I met in Belfast I met through Friendship Club... I just feel like it’s my family because I didn’t know anybody here. (Everson, Zimbabwe) ”

“ I can just go and relax somewhere and I can sort of blow off steam. And it’s a nice sort of... quite a relaxed... it provides – it’s like a safe place that you can go to relax and chat and enjoy yourself a bit. (Pablo, NI) ”

“ Yeah, I feel at home. ”
(Denise, Portugal)

“ BFC absolutely changed my life 100%. I’m not feeling alone any more. I’m away from my family and my friends so if you going to be homesick here, you know you have friends. You have people to talk to, to go out ... (Mohammad, Kuwait) ”

“ Basically, I met new people that normally I wouldn’t and I’ve got a chance to broaden my friendship group a bit more. The volunteer work has been quite good as well because I usually don’t go out much because I don’t feel comfortable... the volunteer work helps because you sort of just go and work with people you get on with and have a chat. It’s pretty good. (Pablo, NI) ”

(b) Group well-being

4.33 The happiness and security of the ever-changing group that makes up the BFC is clearly an aim. An unrelenting and explicit focus on collective well-being or building a cohesive, caring group makes this club unusual. This continuous and collective focus is evident throughout the data collected:

“ ...you always meet someone whom you talk to, like weekly we exchange phone numbers, emails, Facebook, friendship and whenever we meet in town maybe even go out for coffee or tea. You know, when you meet people... you’re not just going to say hi, they’ll say you really need a very big hug, a tight one. (Beauty, Zimbabwe) ”

“ I know I’m going to make new friends so that makes people happy. ”
(Mohammad, Kuwait)

“ Small Worlds... it gets to show other people what our worlds are like, what our cultures are like – just to open up their minds, you know what I mean. ”
(Everson, Zimbabwe)



(c) Community well-being

4.34 Community well-being is an aim of both government and curriculum in NI. Social and personal well-being in a community involves breaking down old and new barriers of suspicion. Establishing and maintaining positive dialogue between formally divided groups is therefore of particular concern to Belfastians. Community well-being also rests on feelings of security, calm, and the confidence to befriend those who in the past would have remained strangers.

“ When I grew up the only time I would have seen a black guy, a coloured man, would have been a doctor who was here training and that was it. You never ever saw a black guy. All these people were unheard of. (Frank, Belfast) ”

“ So before I never met any Zimbabwean, I never met any Irish people or English people or Scottish, Americans.... so it's kind of myth busting to have a way of meeting and finding the different cultures and also it's not just about nationality it's also about different backgrounds and different professionals and you are able to find that they are human beings as you are. (Gee, Sri Lanka) ”

“ BFC makes me really happy and excited because I know there will be new people there so because once you've got lots of friends you're not feeling alone. You're not apart from the city. Every time that I go out walking I know this guy, I know this girl. Last week I was walking to the McCusker's bar and a guy came up to me and said 'hello, you're from Friendship Club' and I said 'yeah I know you'. (Mohammad, Kuwait) ”

“ I got involved with the effort to save Gee at the time he was threatened with deportation. And when you hear all the people's stories, and the horrors they have suffered, it makes me humble. Although I came through 'The Troubles', 'The Troubles' were nothing compared with what's going on in some of the places these people come from. (Frank, Belfast) ”

“ ...there was one guy – I'm not so sure of his name – he was involved in this racism thing in Belfast and he got so much support from the club and I was really shocked that people could come together in such a way. (Beauty, Zimbabwe) ”

“ I found out that there were people here a lot worse off than me! I got involved in every damn thing going more or less that's been done here... I discovered dance. I discovered the nightmare of the Congo. (Frank, Belfast) ”

What is the impact of the club on the community?

4.41 Belfast has not typically been a place where locals were sympathetically aware of issues such as 'the nightmare of the Congo' or the needs of those suffering racist incidents. Such stories suggest that the BFC and other groups that encourage meetings between people from different backgrounds make an impact on the community. These impacts, though subtle, can significantly and positively impact on the narratives regarding migrants in any community:

“ ...it's [the BFC] fabulous. It's just really diverse. Lots of different nationalities... it is a platform for myth-busting. (Gee, Sri Lanka) ”



4.42 Evidence of the personal influence of meetings across diverse backgrounds is implicit in the quotations already singled out above, but longer case studies may demonstrate more widespread and measurable community impacts:

■ Silas' story: an example of integration into the community

4.43 Silas is a young Zimbabwean seeking asylum. He came to the BFC two years ago and they introduced him as a volunteer to the Belfast Activity Centre (BAC). The BAC is an outdoor experiential learning centre offering many adventurous supervised activities to schools, clubs and individuals. It has a special focus on helping disadvantaged young people find their potential. Silas has been volunteering at the BAC for almost two years while he waits for the results of his asylum claim. He volunteers on various tasks, cleaning, building, repairing and doing other odd jobs. The BAC say his commitment every Thursday has been tireless and very efficient. Silas says: 'The BAC taught me about repairing and maintaining mountain bikes up to level 3, so that now I can teach others.' Since his bike maintenance training he has been able to train to be a mountain bike instructor, which he does on a volunteer basis.

4.44 Silas volunteers on another day with 'Alternatives', a charity that works with young people considered 'at risk' in Belfast. Through being introduced to The Prince's Trust by the BAC, Silas has now joined a training programme to qualify him as an outdoor adventure activity instructor. 'In two months I will get a certificate, and I have got many new friends,' he says. Silas reflects: 'Before I came to the Belfast Friendship Club, I found life very challenging; I had a many racist attacks, four times. Now I feel safe, I feel Belfast is a safe place to be, it's changed my life to have hope. I tell people in the [asylum seekers'] hostel to come to the BFC, it really brings people together, it helped me a lot to gain experience in this country.' If Silas is awarded refugee status this would enable him to be employed by the BAC or other similar organisations in the future.

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■ **Norma's story: an example of community support and integration**

4.45 Norma also comes from Zimbabwe, she is also claiming asylum and unable to work. She volunteers at the Common Grounds Café (the Thursday evening home of the BFC) during the week. According to the café manager, Daniel: 'Norma has quickly become a valuable asset in terms of her reliability and willingness to train. Her work in the café brings her into constant contact with the public.' Members of the BFC have provided a lifeline to Norma. When her son was ill in South Africa, club members paid for his medical treatment. When the evaluator visited the club on November 13, Norma had brought a cake to thank members who had shown such solidarity with her. Since then members of the club have supported Norma's son to apply for higher education. She has trained as a chef with the BFC's *Global Kitchen* initiative.

■ **Antonio's story: an example of group integration**

4.46 Antonio has been coming to the BFC for three years. Picking up from where his friend, Diego, had begun, Antonio took on the co-ordination of Spanish lessons last year. The Spanish class meets in Belfast city centre every Monday: 'You are invited, everyone is invited!' Antonio's announcements in the BFC on Thursday evenings have become a highlight for members since they take on something of a pantomime 'call and response' nature with the audience. The Spanish club is a very successful, free activity for members of the club and beyond.

■ **Degash and his catering company: personal integration into the community**

4.47 Degash was a member of the BFC in 2014 when it held one of its *Global Kitchen* events where foods from all over the world were brought along by club members and sampled by members and other guests. *Global Kitchen*, another free course, is linked to a food technology training course and administered through the BFC. Gobi, another member of the BFC, spoke warmly of his experience:

“ **We did the Level 1 training, cakes, pasta, pizza, soup, a food and hygiene course, 15 of us, all races, all different cultures, we were able to sell the food. If I finish the course I can get work placement to any restaurant.** ”

4.48 Inspired by the success of the course and his enjoyment of it Degash completed all levels of the training. He went on to work with a friend. A recent contract was to supply food to a group of mediators leading a training course on Wednesdays. In feedback the food was recommended as a highlight of the course.

■ **Suleiman's story**

4.49 Suleiman calls himself 'a social entrepreneur' and is a Somali refugee working as a translator, settled in NI and regularly attending the BFC. He decided to start his own drop-in centre for the 700 or so residents of NI from the Horn of Africa. Last year his centre had 1,317 visits – 'one person came 19 times for 10 different issues' – but the centre does not only serve Somalis or Ethiopians:

“ **...the focus is on the Horn of Africa, but it's not exclusive...I'm helping others so I can go to Syria or refugee camps and help people in other parts of the world...** ”

Suleiman now sends members of his centre to the BFC for friendship, support and integration.



Are the claimed successes justified?

4.51 Apart from the steering group, more than 12 members have sustained their membership of the BFC for more than five years. For them the club continues to provide the same benefits for which they joined. One man from Hungary came to greet the evaluator during a Thursday observation and when asked why he came to the club he simply replied 'loneliness' and smiled gently. He had been coming most Thursday evenings since his job brought him to Belfast a year before.

4.52 The BFC, unsurprisingly, claims to promote friendships. Specifically it aims at being a safe, shared, cultural, diverse and social place where 'strong positive relationships' are made. Its claims of success are based on the belief that these conditions apply for the vast majority of its members.

4.53 Members' claims related to the friendliness of the club were gathered from the transcripts of the conversations and research notes but also in observations of body language and tone of voice during evaluation interactions. When Beauty said 'you will find different people there who can help you on each problem whereby at the end of the day you have a solution', she said it with 'smiles, bright eyes, open body language' (research notes, April 22, 2015). Liz's eyes also 'sparkled' and she 'smiled broadly' as she spoke of the friendship she had received and observed at the club.

4.54 One indicator of a strong positive relationship may be its flexibility and non-dependence on constant physical presence. The informal and loose structure of the BFC means that some members come and stay for one or two evenings and then may not re-appear for many months. Such people were mentioned by name or named themselves in five of the member-to-member conversations.

4.55 The degree of success in meeting its aims might also be measured in the numbers of members who, unbidden, testify to its positive impacts. Numbers of references to club aims during conversations are indicated in the table below:

Table 1: Communication of BFC aims to its members

CLUB AIM	NO. OF REFS FROM 16 CONVERSATIONS
Friendship / a friendly place	39
Safety (secure / comfortable place)	21
Shared space (giving / swapping)	10
Cultural / art / involvement	12
Diversity / countries / languages	30
Social / meeting / community / group space / advice	30
Equal space (fair / impartial)	7
A place for good / positive relationships	16
'Like a family'	15

SUCCESS FRIENDLINESS

4.6 What difficulties and threats does it face?

4.61 Few offered opinions on what could or should change about the BFC. Member-to-member conversations and semi-structured interviews consistently offered opportunities to give advice on the development of the club. Responses were typical:

“ I don't see anything to change. It's really, really good. People really love it so I can't see anything to change. (Mohammad, Kuwait) ”

“ Why would you want to change something that works so well? ”
(Vicky, Latvia)

4.62 Some however did seek a strengthening of emphasis in a particular direction:

“ ...the thing that would make it better would be ...more influence from the local people ... there are lots of different cultures, religions and even sexual orientation and stuff and so it is diverse but I would still want to see it more integrated in the local community and Northern Irish people would get to know more about us because I don't feel integrated into Northern Irish society. This [BFC] is where I feel comfortable but I agree it would be nice if when I told Northern Irish people about Belfast Friendship Club that they knew what I was talking about. (Gee, Sri Lanka) ”

“ New people think[ing] this [Common Grounds Café] is a coffee shop. Nobody thinks this is a Friendship Club ...so if friends or anyone new arrive it's so very difficult to find as no 'Friendship Club' name – International Friendship Club, something like that. If a sign that would be good – everyone would know very well. (Gobi, Sri Lanka) ”

4.63 Attempts have been made to replicate the BFC. These have met with different degrees of success in relation to ethos, numbers, repeat visits and diversity. The East Belfast group has been particularly successful with Polish newcomers, mostly economic migrants in professional or white-collar employment. South Belfast is without doubt the most cosmopolitan area of Belfast and NI; therefore replications elsewhere are never likely to be as diverse in their membership. As far as could be ascertained, none of the other clubs (mentioned in section 1.3) held meetings every week of the year. Most had to close in school holidays or public holidays. The lack of consistency in opening, especially for those from abroad or without families, may have confused or disappointed some members. In interviews it was suggested that some clubs might have found it difficult to resist a charitable approach, potentially embarrassing some members. Others commented that other clubs seemed to have a faith basis which might cause some to feel a sense of exclusion or that there may be an unspoken agenda. None of the points above suggest that replicating the BFC would be difficult however.

What features of the club can be replicated?

4.71 Many feel that the replication of the BFC elsewhere in the UK would be 'a good thing' and 29 out of a total of 39 respondents said this directly. Two interviewees suggested the idea of a Friendship Club could be replicated in schools. The simplicity of the rules and the clarity of its purpose means that theoretically the BFC should be replicable anywhere. Its character, based upon ideas of respect, solidarity and equality seems to be understood by all members. Throughout the UK these could be argued to be well-understood values. The few rules were reiterated or demonstrated by many members. It was clear from conversations, direct or recorded, that everything announced at the club was free. It was also clear on the visits made by the evaluator and other members of Migrant Help UK that there was no alcohol and that possible proselytisation was prevented before it started by the leaders' and steering committee's vigilant involvement in conversations around the room.



4.72 The free use of City Church property is an important part of their service to the community but few realise Common Grounds Café belongs to a church.

“ A lot of people don’t realise [that Common Grounds Café is owned by a church]. If people realised that it was and they started doing the Bible-thumping in the café, they would clear the place on a normal day, never mind on a Thursday evening. (Maeve, Belfast) ”

4.73 We saw no examples of unwanted attention or overt pick-ups in our observations at club meetings and several members stated that they felt safe from such pestering.

4.74 The location of a friendship club is important. Fifteen people interviewed specifically mentioned the safety and security of the venue and the area around it was mentioned 21 times in the peer-to-peer conversations. South Belfast is a cosmopolitan area of the city and there are many bars and cafés. Close to the universities and hospitals, this area of Belfast has, over many decades, become home to a range of minority ethnic identities, in particular the Chinese community. Many young people from the university are on the streets and the area was generally seen as safe. Asylum seekers have to register at an office nearby and so are familiar with South Belfast. Most BFC members are able to walk to the club.

4.75 Some respondents felt that the BFC would not work in all of the cafés in the area however. Several highlighted the special atmosphere of security in the Common Grounds Café:

“ You don’t feel so alone there, you can trust people. (Arnau, Catalonia) ”

“ ...some parts are dangerous, but the BFC offers security. (Beata, Lithuania) ”

4.76 Some other parts of Belfast do not feel safe for visitors from overseas:

“ I’ve had threats, some friends’ windscreens were broken, a coat was stolen, it can be a little bit scary in Belfast, you know. (Beata, Lithuania) ”

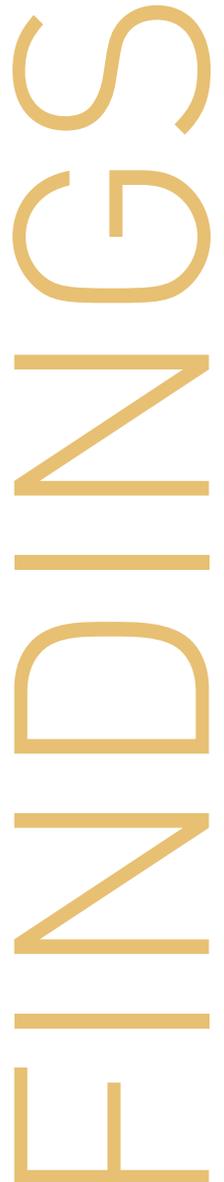
4.77 For many Muslim women it is unacceptable to come out in the evening, especially alone. This means that Muslim women generally do not engage with the BFC. There are other barriers to engagement too, in Stephanie’s words:

“ ...to integrate socially when you don’t have equal access to health, housing, education, employment or welfare can be almost impossible...Other barriers include work patterns, language and, for some asylum seekers, experience of trauma and associated mental health issues, such as depression / anxiety... (Stephanie, email, March 23rd, 2015). ”

4.78 Barriers such as those summarised above mean that the welcoming, reassuring and non-judgmental atmosphere described in 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 above are essential features of a successful friendship club.

4.79 Vicky from Latvia puts the replicable essence of the club very clearly:

“ It’s not closed off, so if somebody has friends visiting, or family visiting or they have met new friends who have just arrived in the country, they can bring them here and everybody is welcome. Nobody is ever turned down. Nobody is ever made to feel – there are so any different cultures here – that nobody is ever made to feel like an outsider... ”



Planning the next BFC event.
By Norma Beggs
(artistnorma_beggs@gmail.com)



What kind of leader makes friendship club successful?

4.81 Denise and Stephanie, founders of the BFC, have complementary and very different skills. Both are strong leaders but turn regularly to the members of the steering group for feedback and guidance. Throughout the week, steering group members are asked to offer advice and support on a wide range of matters. In the minds and words of many of its members, however, the BFC is successful because of the combination of Stephanie’s and Denise’s skills. One interviewee said explicitly that Denise has a ‘very clear idea of what she wants for the club’. Another mentioned ‘an unerring ability to convey welcome’ as one of the key skills both founders display generously. Specific leadership qualities mentioned in interviews and conversations are listed below in the words of members:

Table 2: Qualities of Friendship Quotations on Club Leadership

WELCOMING	INCLUSIVE	CONFIDENT & WELL-LIKED	DETERMINED	CULTURALLY SENSITIVE	VALUES-LED	CARING
‘...just welcomes everyone and makes everyone feel special and being a part of it’	‘Collaborative Open....ideas get shared around ...Good memory’	‘...can draw crowds of people ‘	‘Passionate and long term’	‘Letting people be themselves you know’	‘...gives direction’	‘I wasn’t in the system was chucked out of the house, my support was cut, but she helped’
‘.....always asks how you are doing and stuff. ...delighted to see you’	‘...she knows everybody by name and is actually interested in them and caring about them’	‘Contacts are important’	‘Always gets volunteers’	‘Part of the community’	‘Sets the stage ‘	‘Actually interested in us Very caring’
‘Greetes everybody when they walk in... ...warm, ...bubbly, ...friendly’	‘Treats all the same.... We’re always asked to give comments’	‘A key member of the club’	‘A strong driving force’	‘Socially competent’	‘...clear idea of what they want for people new to Belfast’	‘...a real love for us’
‘The biggest smile possible’	‘Asks for people’s own ideas’	‘Good contacts everywhere’	‘Doesn’t take no for an answer’	‘Culturally aware’	‘...has many ideas’	‘Knows everyone by name ...that comes from being interested and caring about them’
‘Everyone follows her model of welcome.... ...she’s natural’	‘Gets everyone to talk and break their inhibitions’	‘A big character’	‘I need to learn a bit of her steel’		‘Honest’	‘She kind of knows who would fit together and might have some topics they can talk about’



5.0 Discussion: establishing an ethos of friendship

5.01 In the following discussion major themes arising from the evidence will be examined. Eight themes, each divided into categories (shown in brackets) and each with distinctive properties, shown in italics in square brackets, emerged from the data as it was gathered and analysed:

- The Welcome (Stephanie, name badges, friendly); [*warm, importance of memory, consistent*];
- Values (equality, solidarity, respect, inclusion); [*lived, consistent, demonstrated*];
- Friendship (supportive, non-judgmental, low hierarchies); [*flexibility, sharing, accepting*];
- Communication (the arts, languages, chats); [*social, myth-busting, other points of view, relaxed*];
- Simplicity (few rules, no agenda, no formality); [*free, easy, has to be experienced*];
- Well-being (love, safety, facing problems, enjoyment, involvement); [*caring, sensitive, responsive*];
- Integration (English, other languages, volunteering, activities, community interface); [*constant, varied, all over Belfast*];
- Information (activities, visits, qualifications / education, arts); [*every Thursday, from members*].

5.1 The Welcome (Stephanie, names, conversation, memory)

5.11 The word 'welcome' or 'welcoming' is contained in almost every interviewee's assessment of the BFC. The second most used word is 'Stephanie'. While Paul, Liz, Denise, Robin and Gee (members of the Steering Group) are mentioned by name six or seven times, Stephanie is named on 37 occasions in the conversations and interviews. The mentions of specific names, by no means always of steering group members, is usually in the context of the welcome people have experienced. If one person's name dominates the evidence perhaps this may be seen as a disadvantage to replication of the BFC elsewhere. Certainly Stephanie's attributes seem crucial to the club but every community probably has someone who combines a strong social conscience, inclusive values, an outgoing personality and a genuine care for other people. In conversation, about 20% of people dwelled on the observation that the club has taken on its own sustaining ethos and this ethos continues with or without her. Significantly, 12 of the interviewees did not mention Stephanie at all. Two confidently replied that they felt they could run a friendship club in their town, having experienced how one can work.

5.12 The welcome is very definitely a key feature of the club. Vicky from Latvia shows how the welcome for her was not dependent on one or two people:

“ I felt very welcome, like everybody knew me and everybody wanted to be my friend and everybody was so nice to me, and I was just shocked because when I was in NI prior to that for five or six years already and I haven't made many friends because people are quite closed off... everybody was telling me they wanted to be my friends and not just saying it but actually meaning it. ”

5.13 The welcome is also well managed. The name badges are an important part of structuring this welcome. Gee puts it this way:

“ I was labeled with my own name...if you have your own name label with you, you can go and speak to anybody in the room at any table and you don't have to be excluded or anything. ”

DISCUSSION



5.14 No one passes the entrance desk without getting their name written down and placed on their lapel. Many respondents mentioned the importance of this badge which, for some, simply provided the perfect first line of conversation.

5.15 Section 4.7 lists aspects of the welcome that are in some ways independent of the club leader for the evening. The named aspects of the BFC welcome – its inclusivity, its natural feel, its genuineness and accompanying smile – are probably aspects of welcome anywhere in the world.

5.16 Being quickly part of a conversation is crucial to sustaining the sense of welcome. A simple question at the door, 'Where have you come from?' allows a newcomer to define what is known about them and not have to make the first move. They may give a street, an area of Belfast, a town, a country or an institution, but the answer gives the leader a cue to tie the visitor to a conversation with someone else at the club who has given a related answer. A good memory is obviously part of the welcome extended to all, including those who have been only once or twice and returned after a period of years. One respondent put Stephanie's phenomenal memory down to 'actually being interested and caring about them'.

5.2 The Values (equality, solidarity, respect, inclusion)

5.21 The values of the BFC are lived. They can be seen being enacted in every aspect of the club's activities. Of course, there are times when values are not fully expressed; people feeling depressed or anxious may find it very hard to show compassion or trust, but many testified to the living values of the club. Indeed, some who admitted feeling low or uneasy said that two hours at the BFC with its consistently demonstrated values made them feel 'able to carry on'.

5.22 From the very beginning, Denise and Stephanie wanted equality and respect to lead the actions and activities of the club although the importance of solidarity became apparent later in the development of the club. The evidence brought together in section 4.1 (and extended in sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.7) suggests that those values are understood, shared and supported by the majority of members.

5.23 Equality is planned for in the rules of the club. No religion or lack of religion is dominant, no one suggested that their traditions or beliefs had been compromised or misunderstood; no one spoke of harassment or unwanted attention within the club, though several mentioned it in other contexts. Equality shows in the actions of members and in the range of invitations, often arising from within the membership itself to attend a range of marches and rallies, including gay pride and anti-racism. It also shows in the mixed marathons, the women's football team, the free activities, the coffee vouchers, the wide spread of languages, cultures, ages and employment statuses, and in the consistency of the offers of friendship testified to by almost every interviewee.

5.24 Solidarity was evident in five peer-to-peer conversations that sympathetically spoke of one member's experience of a racist attack. It was magnificently in evidence in the 1,000 signatures pleading for Gee's release from detention and in the members' support of Norma, through her son's shooting to his eventual success in gaining a place at university. It was observed in Norma's culinary response and her many parties to which all BFC members were invited. Solidarity shows in the way that members speak of being helped by other members when in trouble or difficulty. Pablo remarks positively on the lifts he is given, 'though I wouldn't come to the club just for the lifts,' he says.

5.25 Respect was also planned for. The decision not to refer to the church ownership of the venue and not to proselytise, to ban alcohol and to actively discourage using the club as a dating agency were born out of a desire to show and promote respect across cultures and traditions. However, 'rules' have evolved through consultation and response throughout the life of the club. Observations noted countless examples of what were interpreted as respectful attitudes shown by the steering group and regular members towards newcomers.

5.26 Respect is not the same as equality – one respects a person for who they are, what beliefs, gifts and contributions they have. Choosing respect as an overarching value of the BFC was to act on the belief that there are admirable skills, talents, characteristics and behaviours in everyone and that all beliefs are worthy of consideration. One Belfastian from the city's Youth Services Department who occasionally attends the BFC gave an example:

“ When we started working with Muslim people, we took young people on a residential, and it wasn't until the day before that we actually realised that we were making food for young people and hadn't thought of Halal food, hadn't thought about prayer mats, and this has now trickled into our youth services...without the Friendship Club that wouldn't have happened...after talking to people from another country, you just go, I hadn't thought of that, you get one of them Homer Simpson moments, like DOH! Of course it's different.
(Stuart, Belfast Education and Library Board)

“ As a female you don't have to feel intimidated because you come here and you don't know anybody and nobody's chatting you up or asking you out. People are just here to make friends...it's not a dating place...because sometimes especially if you're young and on your own in a new country – you would feel uncomfortable.
(Vicky, club member)

5.27 Stuart now uses the BFC's Small Worlds workshops for community relations, equality and diversity training for all his staff 'right through from cleaners to youth workers...so when they are dealing with young people, they wouldn't say anything offensive'. In modern Belfast this kind of sensitivity is essential to repairing the fractured results of 'The Troubles'.

Participants in a Small Worlds workshop



5.28 'Small Worlds' is an extension of the BFC provided for employees, community and faith-based groups, primary and post-primary schools, NGOs and businesses. This café-style event is provided for organisations wishing to understand more about migrants' other community issues. Five or six participants sit at a table with one member of the BFC, usually an asylum seeker, refugee or economic migrant. They bring with them photos and artefacts from their home background and their story. After a very short time, 'table hosts' are questioning the representative, why they left their country, what dangers they survived, what benefits they receive and what their new life is like. Stuart observes:

...when people read papers like the Daily Mail and so on and they read all the stuff that migrants supposedly get – where actually face-to-face with someone here and hearing their story ... some staff come with very strong attitudes about immigrants and asylum seekers and then when they're faced with a very human story...some people get very upset when they leave...it completely counteracts everything they've seen in the media – it's very powerful...

5.29 Inclusive values are concerned with wide-ranging, life-directing concepts: equality, human rights, participation, community, respect for diversity, trust, sustainability, compassion, honesty, courage, hope and joy (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). Any organisation seeking to establish an inclusive culture must constantly judge their actions against shared understandings of this demanding framework of values. The evidence suggests that the BFC displays these values, and continually tends them, grows them and builds them.

5.3 The Friendship (sharing, support, flexibility, acceptance, low hierarchies)

5.31 Friendship was discussed in section 3.1 and exemplified in much of the evidence in section 4 above. The word was continually used in conversations and interviews and is well evidenced in the quotations from above. Some distinctive patterns arose in the data relating to friendship, however. For BFC members, friendship involved sharing and supporting perhaps obviously, but less predictably comments about the flexibility of the club and its flattened hierarchies mattered to members.

5.32 When one member expressed an interest in an arts project, but couldn't go, the next workshop was arranged to accommodate the missing member. When someone is away for one or two years, they are welcomed back as a member without formality. If a particular person needs legal, language, financial, or accommodation advice they are offered signposting and, if possible, a sympathetic ear is discreetly found from among the membership. These examples were all observed in the three observation days, but members told of far more.

5.33 The flat hierarchy of club membership is seen as a vital characteristic. Though there is a steering group, they are all regular members of the club and their main activities revolve around being simple members and not providing an 'advice service'. Liz comments:

We recognise the hierarchies in advice-giving etc. We also recognise that people need a 'break' from their usual routine of (being forced into) being the recipient of advice and services.

In the context of the East Belfast Global café, Jenny remarked on the equal relationships in her club:

It's like going down the pub in the old days when you'd go and you'd know there were friends there and you'd have a good crack – that's what it is. It's that almost removed, clinical idea of 'helping people' that I have grown to see as a big problem.
(Jenny, NI)

There are leaders, but many others from outside the steering group are willing and able to take on leadership roles. When leaders offer a club trip, holiday or arts activity, organisation is quickly passed on to members. Most of the activities announced on a Thursday evening do not come from the steering group but arise from the membership. Regular clubs on other days of the week, such as Spanish, Arabic, Salsa, and Zumba, are organised and attended by BFC members themselves. Similarly voluntary work, as asylum seekers are not allowed to take paid jobs, is negotiated with outside agencies and provides club members with opportunities to integrate with communities well beyond the influence of the BFC.

5.4 The Communication (the arts, languages, chats); [social, myth-busting, other points of view, relaxed]

5.41 Language can be a barrier to communication. Twenty to 30 languages are represented on an average BFC evening and visitors may feel embarrassed at their lack of English or inability to speak the language of another. Some definitely come to improve their English, certainly the lingua franca of the club – a common language for all members.

“ As a man coming from Africa I didn’t know much about Spanish, French, Polish you know, most of the time for me it was English...it was great meeting people from different walks of life and understanding differences...how they perceive this whole world in general...this has helped me and now I can be able to relate.
(Nkosi, Zimbabwe)

5.42 Some said that initially they came to BFC to improve their English in a safe place. Others like Pádraic and Arnau have started their own informal language classes that attract up to 40 members each week. The majority, however, come to the club just to chat with friends, knowing that activities they might be interested in may be announced and that if they have any problems there is usually someone there they can talk to.

5.43 The diverse nature of club membership means that conversations often cross cultural boundaries. Gee called the BFC conversations ‘myth busting’ because they so often change people’s assumptions, as was evident for example in Frank’s testimony (4.3c).

5.44 Arts are a universal means of communication and at events are an important feature of BFC activities. In the first quarter of 2015, BFC members could join:

- ‘Putting ourselves in the Picture’ – six months of art workshops using ultra violet paint and materials and working towards an exhibition with 24 members in attendance;
- ‘Around the Campfire’ – storytelling and music-making on the theme of arriving in NI with 19 in attendance;
- ‘Talent Tribe’ – creative industry training offering workshops and volunteering for those interested in film-making, acting and arts entertainment;
- ‘Community singing’ – a club member turned up with his guitar and led the club in singing well-known popular music and added in some of his own from Poland;
- Face painting.

5.45 Photography, painting, model-making, a Samba band, singing, visiting art galleries and musicians, a Chinese New Year presentation, puppet-making and dance have all featured in the year’s club activities. Arts classes and courses are, according to Stephanie, ‘always well-attended’.

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5.5 The Simplicity (few rules, no agenda, no formality); [free, easy, has to be experienced]

5.51 The rules and organisation of the BFC are very simple. Although the concept is straightforward it must be stressed that the smooth running of the club is established and maintained by continual work behind the scenes and throughout the week by the co-ordinators and steering group members. Stephanie, for example, received and responded to 78 email requests from non-club members seeking information or research opportunities during a single month in 2015. In that month there were 15 requests to pass on information to BFC club members, 10 researchers wanting to observe and interview at the club, 11 invitations to speak at other gatherings, five requests from journalists or film makers to film at the club and a wide range of letters asking for practical help. These emails were separate from those filed as club members' personal communications. The impression given to members however is of simplicity itself, as Pádraic says:

“ It’s a free space where people are not obliged to buy anything... it’s warm, it’s friendly, you can be yourself here...BFC is what its members make it to be, and being organic is a big step towards making it successful. There’s no agenda...”

5.52 Several steering group members remarked that one can only understand the effectiveness of the effortless and uncomplicated nature of the club if you actually come and participate. It is hard to describe except through the words of members:

“ I came to BFC about a year ago and it was really special to me because I don’t know anybody here and I don’t have family or friends....it’s just been my family in Belfast. (Beauty, Zimbabwe)

“When I came here [BFC] it was the warmth and the welcome, and the love that we got here was amazing – from Steph, Liz, Maeve, Paul...all of them, it was amazing and it became my family too and it was great meeting people from different kinds of places...it was amazing and the situation I was in...it made me calm down because I had people to talk to...it’s difficult if you’re new in a place and you don’t know anyone...you get advice from other people who have been in the same situation you’ve been in. (Everson, Zimbabwe)

“ When you describe it to someone it doesn’t make sense because you’re really just going into a room and talking to people. But when you go there you do feel it’s really friendly, no one judges, no one...you can just be yourself, you can have a chat and it’s a good place to relax and sort of chill. (Pablo, NI)

“ My first experience was that I just sat there in one corner and was speaking to one table with literally four people for the whole two hours...I didn’t feel it was great or anything but for some reason, some kind of a pull, I came again...I kept coming and coming and I’ve been since 2012...it’s just a really vibrant environment. (Gee, Sri Lanka)

5.6 The sense of Well-being (love, facing problems, enjoyment, involvement); [caring, sensitive, responsive]

5.61 Like Everson above, many people used the word 'love' to describe the atmosphere at BFC when socialising with fellow members. The atmosphere of care for all members' social and psychological well-being was an express intention of the club as it envisaged. Many who come have suffered trauma or are passing through crises related to asylum claims or their rejection. Some stories have been captured here, some were shared with the evaluator but are too sensitive to be placed in the public domain, and others are well represented in Wilson's evaluation (2012) and the BBC item on asylum seekers in NI. Literally all those who communicated their traumas, problems, disappointments or fears spoke of the caring attitude and action of club members. Gee's, Norma's, and Silas' stories are unique but the support they say they received was widespread throughout the club membership.

5.62 At a less extreme level even those with no presenting problems themselves remarked upon the care members of the club show:

“ You usually find out if something has happened and people are so supportive if something happens to somebody. Everybody else would chip in and help if they need a place to stay, if it's not safe at home or something else. (Beata, Lithuania) ”

5.63 The atmosphere of enjoyment is evident in the body language and smiles, loud and excitable conversation. Suleiman found the noise of excited chatter difficult at first:

“ For the first couple of weeks I couldn't cope with it and finally it became like music, like normal for me. I don't hear voices now...there are so many people ...sometimes people are standing, they're not even sitting...but I don't hear the noise anymore because I have adapted. ”

5.64 An evaluation should avoid naivety. Those with a bad story to tell are less likely to come to an evaluator to speak about it. Those with negative experience of the club are unlikely to return or volunteer for member to member conversations. Some said their first few attendances were a bit quiet, or they 'felt a bit weird', but that everyone else seemed to be having such a good time that they kept coming and after two or three weeks they felt part of the enjoyment. Two respondents said that they 'made time for the club' even if they were feeling tired or miserable because they knew it would cheer them up and make them feel better.

5.65 There are some first time members who do not come back. When asked, none of the interviewees or conversations mentioned anyone but it would be interesting to find out why they did not return to the club. This is perhaps a matter for the next evaluation.

5.66 Sensitive issues often arise in club conversations. Suleiman comments:

“ BFC, yes it has privacy, not preaching the privacy, but there are people who are very well connected in terms of understanding personal issues and do not expose and [are] not risky to anyone. ”

5.67 Feeling part of a community results from involvement at many levels. The weekly announcement of activities by members of the club, the special subject 'working groups' the Roundtable contacts with various volunteer agencies and local associations, BFC-organised outings, parties, courses or community relations inputs, all provide opportunities for engagement with others beyond the club.





5.7 Integration into Belfast / NI life (English, other languages, volunteering, activities, community interface); [like a family, constant, varied, all over Belfast]

5.71 Improved English is vital to successful integration into Belfast and NI life. The high level of communication in English by migrants representing 20 or 30 other languages has already been discussed (section 5.6), but integration through the BFC occurs at many other levels. Section 4 of this report highlights volunteering, weekly activities, planned events, community integration projects, courses and what might be called 'splinter' interest groups such as the Spanish and Arabic language meetings. Each activity brings club members into contact with people from outside. While it is not possible to collect figures for the breadth and depth of these integration initiatives, their continuation, expansion, and the numbers taking advantage of them is suggestive of significant success in integration.

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“ I’m an active person and I’m an impact to the community because we’ve done a lot of things in the community.... we did a song, the mayor was there and we did a presentation and in the church we did something called Small Worlds, it gets to show other people what our worlds are like, what our cultures are like – just to open up their minds. (Everson, Zimbabwe) ”

“ I found it a very unique and very interesting concept of giving people the opportunity to meet ... especially people who might be isolated a way of making friends, of connecting with others...who might be in the same situation as them. (Ronald, Zimbabwe) ”

5.8 Information received (activities, visits, qualifications, education, arts); [every Thursday, from members]

5.81 The club was not set up as an information centre, but this function has evolved. The membership contribute to the announcements at the end of a Thursday evening and so long as general activities are free there are few restrictions. Details of many organised activities have been given in sections 1.4, 4.2 and 4.4, but some announced events are impromptu:

“ The guys play football in the park on a Sunday... the girls might organise a match on a Saturday...the interest, the ideas come from the people themselves. It’s like, ‘I’m doing this. Do you want to come and join me?’ Or, ‘We’re going to the cinema tonight, who wants to come and see this film?’ ...and they have a Facebook page and they share information there too. (Jo, Belfast) ”

5.82 When information on a course, qualification or special BFC event is approaching, an organising and overseeing working group may be set up from volunteers within the membership:

“ ...we’ve just formed a committee of six folks, but in terms of the whole group who come it’s not very evident who they are, it’s not really a committee. (Jenny, East Belfast) ”

5.83 Social media play a big part in information sharing. Jenny uses an app called ‘Meet Up’ to advertise her version of the BFC in East Belfast. On the ‘Meet Up’ app:

“ They put down everything they love, like Chihuahuas and horses or whatever, and they’re matched up with an organisation... So we put down things like practising English, meeting for coffee, chats, international...and quite a few people come through that. ”

BFC’s Facebook page has 1,350 members and is used regularly to pass on information and to organise events among members and friends. Its Twitter account has 303 followers and has made 88 tweets since 2013.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

6.01 The 39 detailed sources of evidence collected in this evaluation strongly suggest that the BFC is replicable elsewhere in the UK, perhaps even in school contexts. Replication will not be easy, however. The BFC, while simplicity itself, is the product of careful thought, attentive nurturing and constant vigilance. The respondents provided clear guidance on the values, venues, direction, organisation and leadership of any copies of the South Belfast club. The privilege of meeting 39 members of such a special club and the quality of their responses led the evaluator to make 13 recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.02 That Migrant Help UK seeks to replicate the Belfast Friendship Club in each of the major asylum seeker / refugee dispersal areas of the UK and its schools, conscious of the broader remit to build more inclusive communities;

6.03 That Migrant Help UK identifies local partnerships / networks and schools willing to adopt the vision and invest in the development of Friendship Clubs in their area;

6.04 That Migrant Help UK employs a leader from the Belfast Friendship Club to identify and train locally-based Friendship Club leaders in each of the dispersal areas;

6.05 That the booklet *Be the Change* by Stephanie Mitchell and published by the Belfast Roundtable, is used as a guide to training and development of the proposed clubs;

6.06 That as part of their training and development, prospective leaders of future Friendship Clubs visit the BFC in order to see a successful club functioning;

6.07 That Friendship Club leaders in each area research and identify suitable, safe, accessible and neutral premises in which to hold their clubs;

6.08 That identified leaders, in consultation with the trainer, begin by establishing the values that lead the club and that these values are constantly and consistently monitored and upheld;

6.09 That supporting committees, who meet four times a year, are formed of representatives from community integration, care, housing, education, health, support and advice who share the 'Friendship Club' vision;

6.10 That a smaller steering committee, who meet once a month and consist of members who share Friendship Club aims and values, is formed for each club;

6.11 That a 'helpline' that shares the values and aims of the Friendship Club is established to support club co-ordinators and steering group members to respond to problems, dilemmas and legally sensitive situations;

6.12 That more research is done into those that do not continue membership of the BFC;

6.13 That Migrant Help UK provides funds for training, printing of *Be the Change* initial setup costs, staffing, and resources to support destitute club members participate in club activities and other costs involved in the first year of nine Friendship Clubs;

6.14 That after the first year, Migrant Help UK supports each new Friendship Club to identify and secure local, national and international funding to ensure the sustainability of the clubs.

Club members involved in member to member conversations and informal interviews:

Gee, Vicky, Becky, Frank, Anja, Everson, Jenny, Beauty, Mohammad, Pablo, Pádraic, Lorenzo, Antonio, Khumbo, Sarah, Gobi, Liz, Linda, Beata, Jo, Encarna, Silas, Norma, Loyd, Vicky, Ai Hein, Nkosi, Silas, Arnau.

Interviewed Stakeholders

Neil, Stephanie, Denise, Suleiman, Ronald, Paul, Vicky, Robin, Maeve, Stuart.

Visitors from Migrant Help UK

Cherry, Robert, Susan, Phil, Alex.



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