

Cultivating Radical Kindness

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Introduction

In August 2020, **Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network** was awarded funding from **Spirit of 2012** to capture examples of “radical kindness” – activities and programmes that bridge differences between groups and forge stronger, more compassionate, social connections.

Belong’s **Radical Kindness** project draws on findings from ‘**Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in the Context of Covid-19**’, a major research project funded by the **Nuffield Foundation** and conducted by Belong and the University of Kent. This project examines the impact of Covid-19 on social cohesion through survey data collection, focus groups and one-to-ones with participants from all across the UK.

Over the past nine months, Belong has collected countless examples of radical kindness from our conversations with people from across the country. Some of these examples have been shared via a series of ‘elevenses’ webinars with people from different areas and different organisations. These include our research partners in Bradford, Walsall, Blackburn with Darwen, Waltham Forest and Calderdale, and organisations from voluntary, arts, culture, education and business sectors, such as NCS Trust, The Linking Network, Calder Community Cares, Odd Arts and others.

This paper presents what we have learnt. It illustrates the power of radical kindness for reshaping community relations and challenging narratives of fear and division, especially in times of crisis. Images have been provided by Spirit of 2012, Hop on Yorkshire, Odds Arts and Calder Community Cares.

The Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen many examples of civic support and mutual aid, with communities organising to support those who are perceived as vulnerable and isolated. At the same time, there have been stark differences in the impact of the virus on different groups and communities, and on different regions of the UK. In particular people experiencing multiple and higher levels of deprivation have been disproportionately affected.

Social mixing is one of the most powerful ways of reducing prejudice and promoting empathy across different groups of people. However, it has become severely limited because of the pandemic.

Despite the successful rollout of the vaccine programme in the UK, new variants of the virus and slower vaccine roll out globally means it is likely that some restrictions on social interaction will remain in place for some months – maybe even years – ahead.

The UK is at a crossroads as we emerge from the pandemic. British society is still vulnerable to the divisions and polarisation that were present in the years preceding the COVID-19 crisis. We need to strengthen the ties that bind us and in particular those ties that bridge between different groups, communities, and regions.

Now, more than ever, it is crucial to promote radical kindness and encourage behaviours that foster bridging across difference. In this paper, we discuss the concept of radical kindness and ask: what are the conditions that need to be in place for radical kindness to thrive in our lives, workplaces and communities?

What is radical kindness?

The word kindness originates from the Old English noun *cynd* (nature, family, lineage, kin) and the word radical originates from the Old English word *radicalis* (forming the root, inherent). Together, these words indicate the human desire for deep-rooted connections to and with others that can transcend our usual group identities.

At *Belong*, we believe that radical kindness moves beyond situational, random or relational acts of kindness and addresses our need to connect with and care for others. We define radical kindness as a type of kindness that reaches out across differences and becomes transformative, though it may involve some form of disruption or discomfort along the way, especially when it challenges institutional and structural barriers. In this sense, radical kindness is about addressing the root causes of separation and segregation and bringing people together from different backgrounds (across, for example, ethnic, class and faith boundaries).

It is distinct from random and relational acts of kindness, which tend to be carried out towards those who people perceive as belonging to the same group as themselves. In contrast, radical kindness refers to those acts and activities that intentionally seek to build bridges across differences, develop solidarity and shared ground, and promote social connection between different groups and communities.

We believe that radical kindness offers a powerful means of promoting cohesion and addressing underlying prejudice as it actively encourages positive and prosocial behaviours and attitudes towards those who people perceive as being different from themselves.

What are the conditions that need to be in place for radical kindness to thrive?

Over the course of the Radical Kindness project, we have sought to understand the conditions that need to be in place for radical kindness to thrive in different environments and sectors. Drawing on the learnings from our Beyond Us and Them research, we have drawn together a set of ten conditions for embedding radical kindness in our lives, workplaces and communities.

The conditions, which are set out below, are structured around three key pillars of *people, place, knowledge*. We believe that *place* matters and strategies to address social cohesion and embed kindness will need to be interpreted differently in different places. Local *people* are key to responding to local challenges as they possess the crucial specialist *knowledge* that helps create the conditions for kindness to take place.

In order for radical kindness to thrive we need to address structural inequalities and discrimination. Without this, the concept of radical kindness risks losing its ability to transform relations between people and tackle injustices in society. The conditions below are shot through with an acute awareness of how structural inequalities and discrimination can prevent people from accessing resources or experiencing the same level of rights. Radical kindness needs to exist in a context where structural inequalities are addressed so that people from different backgrounds can live equal lives and are treated with equal status.

The conditions work best when they are implemented together. Each supports the others. They are designed to be applicable across different sectors (i.e. business, third sector, education, civil society, local government, health) and were developed from wider research, as well as from conversations with individuals doing formal and informal voluntary work in hyperlocal places, or working for local authorities, voluntary, community, faith, education and business sectors.

From simple gestures, such as organising a socially distanced coffee morning for neighbours, to embedding radical kindness in grassroots and arts initiatives, to linking programmes in schools, to businesses that facilitate listening circles to encourage understanding between colleagues from different backgrounds, we think that everyone can and should play a part in encouraging radical kindness.

In order to build kinder, more cohesive places, we believe that we need to:

1. Cultivate and be part of a kind and connected local infrastructure that offers opportunities for cross-sector collaboration

Good relationships and cross-sectoral partnerships between government, business and the voluntary sector can help support people and reach and engage underrepresented individuals and communities. Our research has shown that, during the coronavirus pandemic, those local authorities that worked collaboratively across sectors found it easier to mobilise and support the needs of their local residents (Abrams et al. 2021).

In Calderdale, the local council worked closely with a number of different sectors and organisations to manage the Covid-19 pandemic in the local area. They acted as a facilitator, convenor and co-producer, and actively supported small grassroots initiatives in the local community. We spoke to Jan who had set up Calder Community Cares, a small charity helping those in need in Calderdale during the early days of the pandemic. Jan was hugely grateful to the council and to other organisations in her area for being so supportive of the initiative and for working as a collective.

“For us, it was a kindness in that wherever we turned, it was a yes. Wherever we asked for help, it was a yes. Whenever we needed something, it was a yes. So yes, we set up and the community came forward to support this. But [...] we wouldn’t have been able to achieve as much as we have done without people opening doors for us, helping us with our learning curve, providing us with training and DBS support and advice. So I feel that you know, that’s kindness. [...] [T]he whole network within our area of voluntary organisations, charities, the local authority, council officers all working together, I think, is also an act of kindness.”

Blackburn with Darwen’s Local Integration Partnership includes a wide range of stakeholders from across different sectors, including health, education, housing, business, and VCFS. This ensures that any plans and projects are co-produced and have the community in mind from the beginning so that local needs are catered for and that often limited resources can reach the right areas and deliver the most value.

2. Support social mixing in order to develop positive attitudes about others and tackle prejudice

The evidence consistently shows that social mixing is one of the most effective ways of tackling prejudice and distrust between groups. In areas where residents may lack confidence to reach out across difference and do bridging work, it is vital that programmes / structures are in place to support mixing. When social mixing is overseen by a trusted, legitimate body (such as a charity or faith organisation), it is proven to put participants at ease and improve the effectiveness of relationship building (Scott et al. 2020: 29). It is important that those involved in designing and delivering social mixing programmes represent a diverse cross-section of a local area to ensure that a plurality of groups and identities feel welcomed.

The Linking Network is a national charity that brings together school children from different areas and different demographics who may not normally mix. This initiative builds relationships and bonds not just between the children, but also between teachers and parents. It teaches children valuable bridging skills and helps them to understand and overcome prejudices by building meaningful connections with other children who are different to them. During the pandemic, The Linking Network continued to work remotely to link school children.

“I think making connections with different people from different walks of life is an essential, vital skill that’s absolutely necessary in order for each individual to be able to thrive in this current society and the communities that we live in. And I think that one of the things that we really feel strongly about as an organisation is being able to give our young people, our children, skills that will [...] give them the ability to be able to make those connections with one another and be able to see beyond the differences and realise that actually they can connect with one another, and not make the snap judgments that sometimes we can all be guilty of making.”

The Walsall Community Dialogue Project was set up in 2019 by The Faith and Belief Forum, funded by Walsall for All and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was paused in March 2020. It was then re-designed to be a COVID-safe project later in the year.

The project brought people together from different parts of Walsall to engage in conversations about identity, diversity, belonging and living together. Highlights from the project have included seeing friendships develop between groups from backgrounds that had never met before, connections that will continue well beyond the end of the project. Similarly, Community Connectors (who were trained to help deliver the project) developed their confidence in delivering online dialogue and, inspired by the project, participants have gone on to set up their own initiatives such as online groups and podcasts. Throughout the different phases of the project, 23 groups participated covering various faith, cultural and social interests across Walsall, with over 50 dialogue sessions delivered. There were also opportunities to participate in digital art workshops and open dialogue sessions. In addition, The Faith and Belief Forum ran dialogue sessions as part of their Walsall Community Recognition Awards, where 125 groups and individuals were recognised and celebrated for their contribution made to Walsall's communities.

The Community Makes Us project responded to the emerging and ongoing needs brought about by Covid-19 for people living in Batley and Spennings. These included both reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, which we know have been exacerbated by multiple lockdowns, and counteracting division and divisiveness, a defining feature of the Yorkshire focused work of The Jo Cox Foundation. From November 2020 to March 2021, 7 groups of almost fifty individuals took part in weekly online 'community conversations,' led by experienced facilitators. 86% of participants said that the sessions were useful, and 96% wanted to continue the conversations, which have also led to plans for a post-pandemic community memorial event, as well as many participants becoming volunteers with More in Common Batley and Spennings.



3. Engage with underrepresented and minority groups and communities in a participatory, non-hierarchical way

Working collaboratively with underrepresented and minority groups and communities using participatory approaches is key for creating non-hierarchical relationships that allow space for more egalitarianism to emerge. Research on intergroup relations shows ‘that great progress is made when participants hold each other in mutual respect and interact with equal status’ (Scott et al. 2020: 28). One way of achieving this (and of moving away from models of kindness that can appear patronising and condescending) is ensuring that there are structures and programmes in place that empower underrepresented groups and communities to partake in decision-making processes.

People United is an arts charity based in Canterbury. They work with communities to co-create art that explores radical kindness as both a value and an action. A couple of years ago People United, in partnership with Ashford Borough Council and the Diocese of Canterbury, commissioned artist Anna Ray to work with a group of mothers in Ashford – one of the first towns to respond to the government’s call to welcome refugees from the war in Syria. Half of the women in the group had lived in Ashford all or most of their lives, and half were recent refugees from Syria. Even though their young children attended the same school and were collected each day at the same school gate, the mothers had never communicated with each other before joining the project. Together, they decided to focus on their home as a theme and, through talking about the commonalities of caring, shopping, cooking, and being at the centre of their family life, they discovered their similarities and shared experiences were far greater than their differences. By the end of the nine-month project the women had shared stories, swapped recipes and started a lively WhatsApp group. Together, they’d created beautiful textile-based art that represented their individual journeys, their sorrow, their happiness, their homes and – for the Syrian women – the homes they carried inside them. Some of them developed fast bonds of friendship and some went on to set up thriving creative businesses together using the skills they’d learned. In December Ashford Council won the Diversity and Inclusion category at the Local Government Chronicle Awards. Though this project was only a small part of their programme, it was an early element of their approach which the judges said had “transformed lives, demonstrating what can be achieved when innovative approaches are championed at all levels – from community to political.”

“Home shows us how art and creative activities can be powerful agents for radical kindness and positive social change. By facilitating dialogue, encouraging the exploration of ideas and making space for complexity and discomfort they encourage empathy and build kindness across difference.”

4. Tackle misinformation to support more trusting relations between individuals, communities and the state

It is crucial to tackle conspiracy theories and misinformation about certain groups and communities spreading in person or via social media channels. This can be done by disseminating accurate information and positive counter stories via trusted community and faith leaders, local media outlets, or social media platforms with an extensive reach. It is important that government organisations work collaboratively with statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as with community leaders and residents, to ensure that accurate information reaches people on the ground and misinformation does not spread. These types of approaches are also key for aiding community members to have the skills and resilience to resist and combat misinformation in the longer-term.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Calderdale Council tackled misinformation that was circulating locally by targeting social media and viral messaging. The communications team worked collaboratively with local organisations, including the voluntary and faith sectors, to send messages to local people, but also to target misinformation so that local people have accurate information.

During the first lockdown in March 2020, the Walsall for All team approached faith and community leaders across the borough to video record the 'Stay at Home' message in their native language, which were all compiled into a 2 minute video. Around 17 languages were represented in the video. This provided an opportunity for residents to hear from local people and understand the importance of staying at home in order to protect the NHS and save lives. The video was seen almost 6,000 times on Facebook and was shared by various statutory services, NHS trusts, community groups and even residents themselves, helping to amplify the key message as far as possible to ensure wide reach and engagement. The video was re-published in January 2021 when the third lockdown took place.



5. Encourage active social engagement and support the agency and empowerment of citizens

Our Beyond Us and Them research shows that active social engagement not only promotes better well-being, but also strengthens social cohesion in local areas (Abrams et al. 2021). Volunteering and engaging in social actions such as donating to a cause or signing a petition are examples of radical kindness as they involve reaching out across difference to support and show solidarity to others. In our recent policy paper, 'Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas', we set out a number of approaches for encouraging higher levels of volunteering, including encouraging peer-to-peer connections, creating a shared volunteering database, coordinating with national programmes and events, and rewarding and celebrating volunteers through different initiatives (Belong 2021).

It is important to provide opportunities for people (and particularly young people and groups that do not typically engage) to feel empowered as citizens and able to participate in democratic and civic processes within their neighbourhoods, localities and environments. As young people are often more open to mixing socially with others than adults, it is vital to provide spaces for them to develop leadership skills in partnership with others. Barriers to volunteering for people from different backgrounds (for instance, disabled people) need to be addressed and opportunities need to be created to ensure that everyone can participate should they wish to do so.



NCS is a government-run scheme that brings young people (aged 15-17) together for a period of three-four weeks to engage in a series of social and civic activities. The scheme has been proven to have a positive effect on young people who may not have had much opportunity to mix before and has helped to strengthen bonds between people from different backgrounds. Additionally, it acts as a civic participation engagement activity that teaches young people how to work collaboratively and in a cooperative way to tackle an issue they care about in their community. One young person who took part in the scheme said it had helped him to overcome his concerns and anxieties and connect with people he would not have otherwise connected with:

“And before [...] there was a lot of people I felt like I couldn’t be friends with. You know, just because we were different. And I was so different with my anxiety and everything. And there were certain people I was afraid to speak to. And then, [...] then suddenly you go plan a project together, you realise that you can get along with everyone, if you just, you know, push forward a little bit and get over whatever you might think of someone, you know, in the first glance, and, and that’s really stuck with me throughout my whole time doing NCS. [...] I think it showed me, you know, how much I love people, how much I love helping people and being around them. And it was something that was scary for me before. And now I can’t be without people, that’s the biggest factor.”

In Bradford, the council introduced the Citizen Coin scheme, which offers residents the opportunity to exchange their time and skills doing social good for coins that can be spent at local Bradford district retailers. The app has given local people a sense of pride and has increased volunteering and participation in communities where it has traditionally been low.



6. Promote arts, culture and sports programmes that encourage social mixing and break down barriers between groups

People United have long argued that the arts are a superconductor for kindness (Jo Broadwood, 2012; *Taking Care: The Art of Kindness*). Their research, together with that of others, shows that the arts and culture can increase empathy and compassion, and develop meaningful connections between people from different backgrounds. Our own research has shown that participation in sport and physical activity programmes can lead to greater cohesion and integration in local areas, and can help to tackle prejudices (Scott et al. 2020: 25). Arts, culture and sports programmes can increase interactions between groups who may not otherwise mix, and can act as a springboard for generating increased trust and connection. They can also help people feel more engaged with a local place and like they have greater agency and ownership over their community.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, Odd Arts recognised the importance of the arts for supporting people in times of crisis. They sent out creative packs for people to do at home during lockdown, arranged creative 'door knock' sessions where some of their team would deliver a drama workshop on people's doorsteps to inspire happiness, joy and connection, and ran creative workshops with prisoners who had been locked up for 23 hours a day because of the crisis. Odd Arts also established collaborations with City of Sanctuary, who work with refugees and asylum seekers, and Back on Track, who work with people with experience of the criminal justice system or homelessness, and ran drama workshops exploring the theme of belonging. These workshops brought together two groups that may never ordinarily have mixed and helped them build bridges by identifying shared experiences of non-belonging.



Steampunk Bob's *Videogram Express* was a collaborative intergenerational project run by People United with St Stephen's Primary School in Canterbury, Kent and the Cares Family, a national charity who support and connect older people who are experiencing isolation. The project was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular to the impact of social distancing and shielding on primary age children and older adults. *Videogram Express* was led by artist, Bob Karper, who curated a friendly and open Zoom exchange of questions, answers and advice-sharing between children of key workers and older people living alone in London and Liverpool. Its intention was to generate feelings of warmth and connectedness between the generations at a time when human contact was restricted. The two groups offered each other an insight into, and understanding of, how they were experiencing lockdown. The resulting short film showed the connection made between the children and older adults was open and touching. The Cares Family use the project to promote their work and the value of intergenerational connection.

"Creating opportunities for children to meet and exchange stories with people who appear to be different to them encourages them to develop empathy, to understand and learn from their differences, and to recognise and embrace their commonalities."



7. Support and develop the lived and specialist knowledge of local people and local organisations

Radical kindness is about forming and developing relationships across difference that prioritise and value the knowledge of the receiver as much as the giver. It therefore follows that radical kindness will thrive in situations and environments where the specialist knowledge of local people and communities is privileged and brought together with sector-specific expertise. In our focus group sessions, many participants spoke about the importance of using trusted local interlocutors to facilitate bridging activities and set up opportunities for meaningful interaction. This approach is particularly important for supporting community-led responses in times of crisis, rather than imposing top-down models of kindness that do not draw on local knowledge.

In Waltham Forest, the Connecting Communities programme brought together different faith communities (Jewish, Muslim, Christian) to share learnings and best practice around the Covid-19 pandemic. This created bridges and saw individuals coming together to share knowledge and help other individuals and communities.



8. Promote diverse leadership

Leadership and senior management teams should be diverse and inclusive and reflect the demographics of their workforces or communities. Diverse leadership is crucial for ensuring that different voices and perspectives are valued and listened to, and that individuals and communities feel represented at senior levels. Research shows that, from a business perspective, a diverse leadership team is an advantage and can create a stronger connection with a customer base (Insights n.d). Leaders need to be able to express empathy and compassion and be able to listen actively to the people they represent. Strategies such as reverse mentoring, where the mentoring relationship becomes about bidirectional learning, can help to achieve kinder, more inclusive cultures.

Beaverbrooks is a family-owned jewellers based in the UK. The managing director, Anna Blackburn, is one of a handful of female leaders in UK retail. Beaverbrooks has a predominantly female workforce and has long championed an approach to flexible working that focuses on individual's circumstances rather than policies. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, employees had the option to work from home and flexible working patterns have regularly been put in place for people returning from maternity/paternity leave. In response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Beaverbrooks set up a committee with responsibility for developing a diversity and inclusivity strategy. The organisation believes that a collaborative and inclusive culture is key to business success. Mark Adlestone, Chair of Beaverbrooks, says:

“Our MD has been with us since 1998 when she came up through our management development programme, and we’re all the stronger for it. Our workforce is predominantly female, so Anna understands what it’s like on the shop floor because she’s been there herself. She took on the role when she had two children under five, so figuring out work life balance was top of the priority list and this is something Anna actively promotes today.”

9. Create kind, inclusive cultures that make everyone feel valued and welcomed

Tackling exclusion and creating kinder, more inclusive organisational cultures can help people to feel valued and important. Different groups and communities face different barriers to inclusion and therefore different forms of action need to be taken. Sometimes, organisations and institutions need to develop strategies that actively aim at challenging and ameliorating existing inequalities in society. Rather than a tick-box approach to inclusion and diversity training, it's important to create safe spaces for people to articulate their needs and feel that these needs are listened to and acted upon. It's also important for any form of discrimination to be challenged and for people to feel they will be supported if they speak out against injustices.

At Savannah Wisdom, safe spaces are created where employees can speak openly about any issues that may have arisen. This helps them to feel empowered, allows them to articulate their needs, and encourages others to listen. It also avoids a negative culture of blame and shame in favour of an open one that supports and encourages dialogue and attentive listening.

“By creating those safe places in a workplace environment, some of which are formal listening events, or some of which are informal, such as a canteen area where everybody can mix and speak freely, you allow that dialogue to happen. And quite often you'll find if somebody at a listening event talks about an issue where they felt that someone had treated them unfairly, or made a comment about their hair or the kind of food they eat, hearing it from that person formerly at a listening event then opens up a conversation in a safe space in an informal capacity. And that then builds the team, because people are then able to feel more comfortable approaching those issues.”

Algebra is a financial tech institution that has been created to address issues of financial exclusion, particularly amongst minority communities in the UK and abroad. Core to its business model is the engagement of communities that are diverse and are not typically well serviced with financial services. Algebra works hard to understand the communities it works with by placing their voices at the heart of the work that they do and by finding structural ways to create safe spaces to listen to people's views.

In Walsall, the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools programme enables local schools to employ rights-based approaches with young people. This has a demonstrable impact on integration in some schools as young people are included and feel respected. This work has complimented other local projects, including School Linking and an arts programme entitled 'Walsall Arts for All'. Five secondary schools were supported by Walsall for All to join the programme and achieve their Bronze accreditation. Schools are given a pathway to teach human rights to young people and promote greater inclusivity within the classroom environment.



10. Develop local and national policy with radical kindness at its core

Radical kindness could shape local and national policy in ways that temper the rational focus on data and impact with a relational focus on compassion, interpersonal relationships and the emotions (Unwin 2018: 9). Organisations like The Carnegie Trust UK have campaigned for public and social policy with kindness at its core (Unwin 2018). Policy on social cohesion needs to be underpinned by a focus on tackling structural inequalities and deep-rooted discrimination, encouraging kindness that bridges differences, and actively strengthening positive prosocial behaviours. This might change the way we structure our communities, ultimately creating a kinder, more compassionate society where inequalities are addressed, difference is cherished and cohesion flourishes. In ‘Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas’, we set out a series of recommendations for embedding social cohesion into relevant national policy agendas.

Belong’s recent policy paper calls on government to implement a longer-term strategic programme to create a solid foundation upon which communities can work together in a spirit of neighbourliness, compassion and unity to recover and rebuild from the pandemic. In particular, we believe that government needs to build on the Integrated Communities Strategy and embed principles of social cohesion into relevant national policy agendas working in partnership with local government to support a locally tailored approach.



Conclusion

How might British society be different if principles of radical kindness were embedded in our institutions, government, politics, business and social and civic lives? There might be more listening and a greater desire to understand others and their experiences rather than an impulse to dismiss or deny them. Perhaps we would carry on disagreeing but disagree more healthily? We might treat others with greater respect and dignity based on our shared humanity not their background or where they came from. There might be more of a sense that we are truly all in it together and that no one can advance and thrive unless we all do.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic and begin the process of healing and recovery, it will be more important than ever to harness the capacity for radical kindness that has flourished during the pandemic and ensure that it takes root in our workplaces, communities and society. Belong has been inspired by the many examples of radical kindness we have collected over the course of this project. Each of the individuals, organisations businesses and institutions that have shared their stories with us are in their own way influencing their street, community, workplace, and local area to foster deeper and more meaningful connections in pursuit of a kinder, fairer British society.

For examples of radical kindness around the country including stories, podcasts, and short audiograms please take a look at our [Radical Kindness page](#).