



CULTIVATING A CONNECTED COMMUNITY

How are we doing in Springfield, Beech Hill and Gidlow?



This little booklet is split into 4 parts.

1 - The Introduction

2 - Community survey results

3 - The Interviews and Stories - what local people had to say

4 - A little more about some of the people behind the scenes

PART ONE - THE INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Covid19 pandemic we have been working together to cultivate a connected community in Springfield, Beech Hill and Gidlow, which is also known as Wigan West. This was started by a group of women, building on the work of women before us, and has grown over time to include more people.

We believe that when communities are more connected they are healthier, safer and more powerful.

Between September and December 2022 we set out to find out how connected we might be feeling, so that we can celebrate all we've achieved together, at a party in May, and begin to think about what we might like to do next.

In years to come we can look back at this and it might help us to see how we have grown together.

To start learning about how we are doing, we:

- Created a community survey, with a prize draw of £50, won by Paul Daly, and 33 people took part in. We circulated the survey on the Facebook group that has 2600 members.
- Posted individual questions from the survey on the Facebook group so that more people could take part.
- Interviewed 10 people of different ages and different backgrounds.
- Held three story telling sessions at the Women and Young Girls FoodShare at Bookcycle, Wellgood Socials at the Wellfield and Tea and Biscuit at the Hen Hole. 16 people of different ages and backgrounds took part in.

Here's what we learned.

PART TWO - THE SURVEY

We asked a number of questions. Here's a summary of some of the questions and responses.

How Connected is the Community?

How Connected is Your Street?

What Matters to Us?

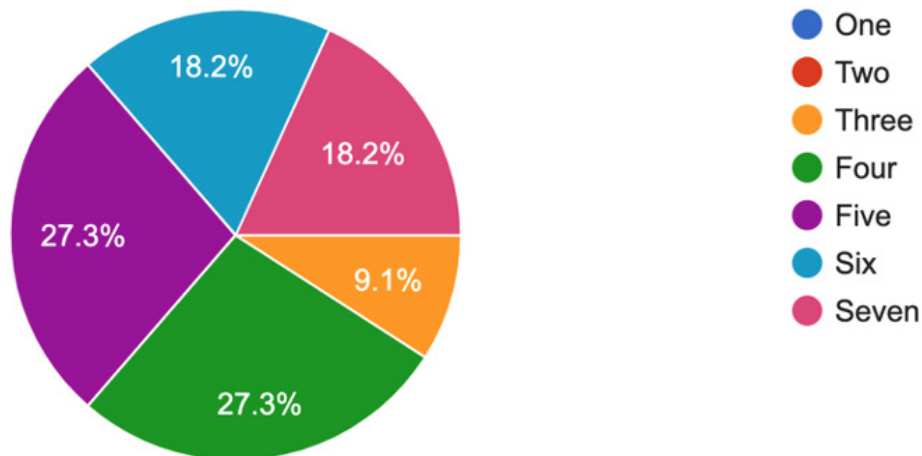
What Can we do Together to become More Connected?

1. HOW CONNECTED IS THE COMMUNITY?

We asked people to score how connected they think the community is now by scoring their answer between 1, meaning not connected at all, and, 7 meaning really connected.

Almost 55% of people gave a score of 4 and 5; and 36% scored 6 and 7.

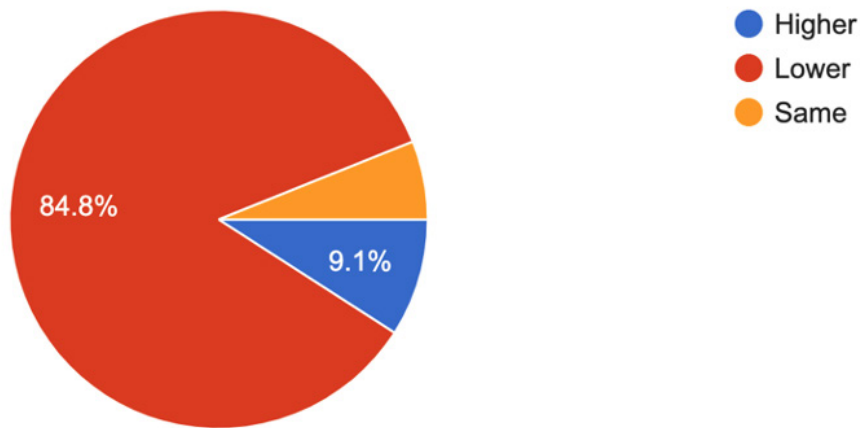
We know that people who completed the survey are more likely to be involved in community life. Still, this gives us a good starting point to measure the growth in



our connectedness, as more and more people get involved over years to come.

WHAT SCORE WOULD YOU GIVE IT?

We also asked people if the community feels more connected now than before the pandemic. 85% of people said they would give connection a higher score now than before the pandemic.



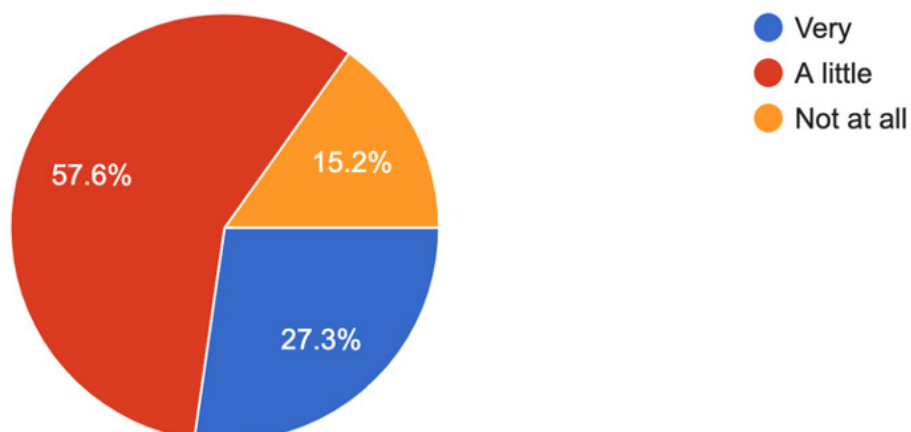
Here's a couple of comments from local people.

“People just got on with their life in their own family circles. The pandemic made us realise how unfortunate people are and how much people rely on others to help them each day. The pandemic has brought a lot of positives for the community and people are now a lot more connected.”

“I think there is a better community spirit now. There seems to be more community activities taking place and there is better communication. Also, there are people who are leading the way to make the community better.”

2. HOW CONNECTED IS YOUR STREET?

We asked people to say how connected they feel their street is. The majority of people said that their street was a little connected



And when we asked if this had changed either way since the pandemic, the majority of people, 49%, said it hadn't.

Here's what a couple of people had to say about their streets.

"I organised a street party for jubilee, most of our neighbours came, and we had a brilliant time. Because we had all been so isolated and disconnected during the pandemic, we all really put the effort in to make our street party amazing. We all talk to one another a lot more. We also have a WhatsApp group where we share any community ideas, or if we've noticed any problems in the community."

"People to me seem more selfish and wary."

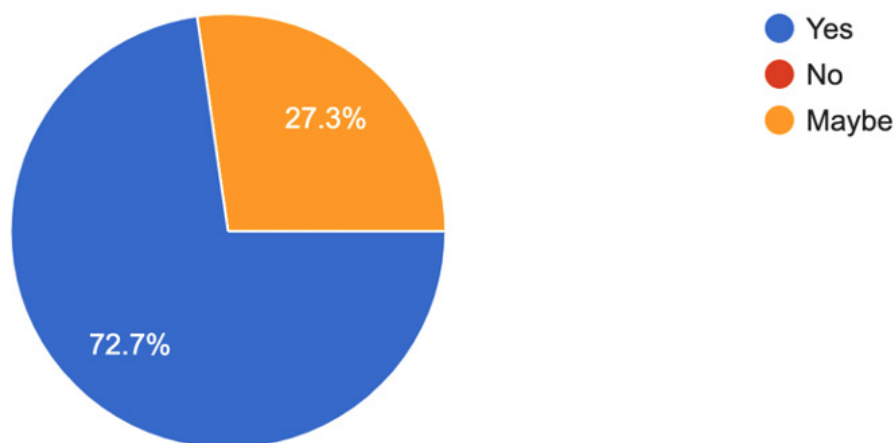
When we asked people what they might like to do to make their street and / or community more connected there was a real interest in:

more street parties;
creating community gardens in the 'backs';
more general get togethers;
clear ups and
community events.

So it seems like people would like to see their streets more connected.

3. WHAT MATTERS TO US?

Feeling a sense of belonging and welcome is so important in a connected community. The majority of people who took part in the survey feel like they belong and are welcomed in the community.



Here's what a couple of people had to say.

“Since I moved here I've been made to feel so welcome, everyone is really friendly and has that typical northern humour and grit. It took me a while to understand the accent but I'm a pro now!”

“I think there's still a lot of people who don't know the community group and activities exist. I'd like to see better involvement with different ethnic groups. More care of the neighbourhood, like less littering.”

Feeling safe was something that really mattered to nearly all the people who took part in the survey. It made us wonder what feeling safe means to people.

What does feeling safe mean to you?

4. WHAT CAN WE DO TOGETHER TO BECOME MORE CONNECTED?

The answer to this was loud and clear:

**More events,
more parties,
doing more things together.**

In the comments a good few people said that the events have enabled them to make more friends, or get to know more neighbours. A lot of people said that it can sometimes feel uncomfortable saying hello to people that you don't know and so the events create 'bumping spot' places where you can meet new people. This then makes it easier to say hello when you bump into them again around the community.

There was a theme too, that what we are doing is beginning to work, but we really are at the beginning of something and there's more to do.

“It's improving slowly with the help of social media and new initiatives encouraging the community to come together. It's becoming closer but there's still much to do.”

“It's grown, the community has grown since when we started. The puddle hasn't gone very far yet. And really there is no limit to where this puddle can go.”

Aside from events, parties and celebrations, we asked people who they thought were missing from community events.

People said they would like to see:

More for those who for many different reasons may be feeling lonely, socially or physically isolated or unwelcome.

“There are people who live among us who are still alone, we would want them to be part of our community to feel loved and appreciated”

More for men in the community

More in the evening and at weekends for those who work

More opportunities for families to get together

“Other towns have markings on the ground that represent 1 mile, it means that individuals or families can walk, run, skip and know they’re doing a full mile because it’s around in a circle shape, it means people can join and end at the same spot.”

A greater sense of caring for each other.

“It used to be like people took care of each others’ kids. The only people that I think I can do that with now is family. It would be nice to feel like that with community.”

“Supporting the elderly and reducing social isolation would be lovely. The pandemic really highlighted that some people have nobody to call on if needed, and that’s really sad.”

More for young people

“I’ve seen these young lads, the same young lads that I’m saying are trouble causers, going round doing peoples gardens and people were paying them to do their gardens. Because they were getting something back they did a brilliant job. My Dad paid them for doing it, a couple of quid each. And they did it, and they did a good job but they probably felt like they were getting something out of it. And because of that they spoke to you properly. It was like give and take. We used to go round as kids and wash cars and they’d chuck us a quid. We used to love it, and you don’t get that anymore.”

That's a taste of the survey results. There'll be opportunities for you to say what you think about this at the community party in May. If you're interested in reading more about what people said in the survey, you can find it on the website.

PART THREE - THE INTERVIEWS AND THE STORIES

We invited anyone who was a member of the Facebook group to get involved in the story sharing sessions and we invited people who had been involved either in setting the group up, attending some of the social spaces, or, making things happen in the local community to be interviewed. We gave everyone who took part a £15 voucher to thank them for their time and contribution to the community.

In the story sharing sessions and interviews we invited people to talk about what community means to them, their experience of living around here - before and since the pandemic, what keeps them here, what they care about, and, their hopes and dreams for the community.

There is more information about what people said during the interviews on the website, but here are 6 of the themes that we noticed. The things that we kept hearing. Each theme has quotes from people who took part in the interviews.

1. We are at the beginning of something. A sense of community and belonging is growing, and there's work to do.

“ I think it's surprised everyone about how involved people wanted to be. I think there's people in the community who want to do these things but don't know how to and so I think it's made a massive impact bringing those people together and giving them the courage I suppose to do it.”

“This community is getting there. It wasn't a community before Covid. We've got to know neighbours more. It's not a surprise to help people anymore. You see people who you've seen at a different community things and say hello. People feel less threatened and more of a bigger group when they see each other after a community event.”

“People are alone through no fault of their own. People might look at what we do here and think that’s a bit of a click, I won’t feel welcome in there or I’ll feel inferior. For me, community is just everyone in the area. It’s surprising when you walk around the area, the number of people that you do bump into who you don’t necessarily know. If you smile it makes a difference. And there’s a lot of different nationalities in the community. You notice that just taking my grandson to school. Just in the playground how many different languages are spoken.”

2. The importance of open, free and cross generational social spaces and events in the community where people can get together, share skills, get to know different people, support each other and have a good old natter.

“I love all the different people at the Wellfield Socials. Whole mix of people - young mums, older people and why we might not have had anything in common in the first place, we now have each other. Here, it’s more about life experience and we’re all offering each other support without actually realising that we are doing it.”

“These groups, it’s like getting people together. It’s like your opinions matter. And it’s like I never thought that anyone would ever want to listen to anything that I have to say. I didn’t think it mattered. It’s realising that people do want to listen to you.”

“You wouldn’t believe how effective all this is. It’s just brilliant. The stuff with kids. Like if my Granddaughter says Nan will you take me Ninja warrior, it’s £12. You can’t keep affording it.”

“It gives you a bit of worth, doesn’t it? You feel a bit better in yourself. Get stuck in and actually doing something. And having some ideas and maybe putting them into motion. Doing something rather than doing nothing. Cos you find yourself in a rut doing nothing and the more you don’t do anything the more you get stuck in that rut. Just getting up and going out and doing something with yourself, even if it’s just a cup of coffee and a chat.”

“Those food shares - it’s like watching a tiny plant because the tendrils are just spreading out and spreading out and you can feel that more people are just going to get connected. So it is about togetherness now. And, it feels a lot safer. They are hopeful.”

“Friendships or the beginning of friendships that just grow out of people coming together in the same space. You can’t make mates in a vacuum can you? You have to be together to do that. And that’s what people are doing, coming together

in the spaces that you are opening up.”

3. That most people feel nervous or anxious about trying something new. Being in social spaces, once you've taken the step, reduces anxiety and grows connection. Connection makes us all feel better.

“I also think you can be your own worst enemy sometimes. You can go to things and just think. I don't think they like me. I don't fit in. Where probably, you did, or it might just take a bit more of an effort. I think sometimes our own anxiety, our own paranoia, stops us from doing things.”

“I used to take anxiety tablets and I've not had to take them. You know and I just feel like I'm getting better and better. Small steps but it's building and from rock bottom, and I'm so much better now than I have been for a long time.”

“Since I've joined this group, it's just brilliant, it opens your eyes, you're meeting people, you're doing things and you know sometimes when you are just talking about things, it helps. I used to have panic attacks a lot, and I do suffer from anxiety, like a lot of people do, even coming out of the house. Like before I joined here, I really didn't have any friends. So since I've been coming to these community things it's just been fabulous. There is always someone to listen. I do think it's a good thing. Get Britain talking.”

“The school system isn't very good at the moment. I think there should be more groups on at lunchtime where people can go to to make friends. I'm struggling to make friends at the moment and I don't like getting involved and trying to say hi to people. Cos, a lot of my old friends left me. And, I felt like everyone would reject me. I think more people need a little bit of a push, so if people made more groups at lunchtime, loads of different lunchtime groups, and everyone has to go to one a week then we'd make more friends.”

“Without trying to work out why, I always feel better when I get back to my flat after I've been here. You feel better and you're not quite sure why you feel better. Whenever I've left here, no matter what the conversation has been I've always felt better when I've got back to my flat. That feeling always lasts. You're not quite as stressed.”

“For me, it's changed my outlook on life. There's more to life than bed and work. Go out and grow me as a person rather than hide behind my front door. You can just become a recluse if you let yourself be one.”

4. That we are beginning to do things for ourselves, peer support, sharing skills, gifting what we have too much of, and seeing ourselves as a community that could take more control

“The last two or three years there’s more of a community sense. People are seeing that the community is doing things for itself.”

“It comes from the bottom up now, us. We haven’t had good government for ages, the council are finding it difficult. We’ve got to get together from the bottom. We’ve got to make it what we want it to be. It’s not hard because we’ve got these places, haven’t we.”

“If a community is together, it’s a safer community, a cleaner community, a happier community. It’s got a heart and a soul that belongs to that place. And it’s a place where you’ve got each others’ back. There will be pockets of that, but I don’t think it exists on a bigger scale. It could though. Be a place where decisions are made locally. Stuff happened from within, outwards. It radiated out. It didn’t come in from outside.”

“I think private landlords are a horrible dream so if there was a way to be a landlord but actually care about the people who live there. Actually want to make it nice for the people who live there. I know house shares are popular but they are only popular because they are the cheapest option. No one would really pick that, where you only really get your own room. You don’t even have a living room, as that’s another bedroom, so all you get is a little bench in the kitchen where you can sit there, but it’s not that comfy and then you just go back to your room. And so you’re living with someone but it’s a lonely experience.”

5. Community hubs - people are longing to feel connected and were reminiscing about the things that once connected us, like social clubs and the church.

“The Church has been all about looking in for a long time, not really looking out to the wider community. Being involved with this has opened my eyes a bit more to look out. We (the Church) wasn’t doing it really. I’m trying to get more people from the Church involved in the background.”

“The Wellfield was the hub of the community and it’s not now. My parents used to go in there. There’d be a savings club and we’d go on trips to Southport. That’s not the same now. It’s not a community hub. It could be. It’s at the heart of this community.”

“I think this is why community isn’t what it used to be. Maybe a 100 years ago everybody went to church and so the church was the centre of community. They organised different things that everybody went to and everybody that went to that church knew each other so that was like the hub of the community. So now people don’t go to church anymore so where is the centre of community?”

“We need those spaces to come together and be together. We don’t have them with church like we did. There are so many spaces where people came together and they’ve just gone. So many people live their lives online these days and it’s almost like they have an avatar that is their public image and I think that that’s really not healthy. It’s almost like a disconnect from who you really are. Life isn’t perfect, life is tough and we need spaces for people to be honest about that. It’s really important that we are in rooms together.”

6. There are many people feeling isolated and don’t know how to get involved. Involvement should never be forced, some people like to be alone, but we can do more together to let people know what’s going on and invite them in.

“I’m an example of moving into community because I moved in two years ago. The only reason I’m sat here today is because I got a piece of paper through the letterbox telling me that the scout hut was going to become a place for people to buy cheap food. So when a person moves into a community they might lack social skills or they might not have neighbours that they want to speak to, how do you find out about the community? You might bump into someone who might tell you. And some people who might lack social skills, don’t like asking and become more isolated just by the way they are. It’s not their fault. If I was going out now and wanted to join another group where would I go to find out?”

“Older people don’t use facebook though, you need to get the word out more. We throw leaflets in the bin too. We use land lines more than mobiles. And the signs need to be really big for us to see in the notice boards too. Although we’ve no reason to go out and past the noticeboard. At one time we would have gone for

our pensions. Now there's no need to do that. And there's no benches. Nowhere to sit and have a rest. We need something. Older people like me. I get out of breath.

If I walk to the shop for a tv times I can get to the Tesco, but I can't get back. It's easier for me to walk across the road slowly, get a bus into Wigan, buy it there and sometimes I get the same bus home."

This is just a sample of the experience of members of the community. Does their experience fit with your experience of community? What struck you about what you've read?

PART FOUR - MORE ABOUT THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES

At the beginning of the pandemic 5 women came together to organise a community led response in the local area. That included bringing people together online and bringing people together onland to create the pandemic food pantry and gardening together. We set up an association and applied for some small pots of money to help us do community stuff. We encouraged the community to share goods, buy each others' services, support each others' businesses and recycle unwanted items locally. You can read more about the story on the community website.

In October 2021 we held our first annual general meeting and more people joined the committee group. Around the same time two of the committee members - Gill Wright and Angela Fell created a community interest company called Northern Heart and Soul CiC and were successful in securing some investment from Lankelly Chase. Northern Heart and Soul have a dream of this community becoming a self organised and self renovating neighbourhood and are interested in bringing land and property into community ownership and creating community businesses and jobs. This is their job, and they are paid as freelancers, with the money that they get from Lankelly Chase. They also secure money for the community to use and have paid to create the website, set up the social spaces, pay for the community awards event, the newsletter, summer play activities, this evaluation and the money that is available for community ideas at the Cash and Chips and Pies and Pounds events.

So as well as being Directors at Northern Heart and Soul they are both members of the organising circle and involved in growing Springfield, Beech Hill and Gidlow CommUnity.

There are other people too, like Victoria Finch who as well as running a digital company, and being one of the people behind Give it a Grow Wigan, is also very active with Springfield Beech Hill and Gidlow CommUnity. Northern Heart and Soul

sometimes pay Victoria to do work for the community. She created the website and keeps it up to date and put the newsletter together. She does a lot too in her own time - like working on the huge bid to the Green Spaces Fund to improve Diggle St Park.

There are other people involved in the organising group, some who will stay involved after the community party and others who we will say goodbye to. There's also space for more people to get involved in organising and to be honest we want it to be as open as possible so that people can contribute, and it not be too much of a commitment. You can find out more about the other members on the website and at the community party.

THIS EVALUATION HAS BEEN UNDERTAKEN BY NORTHERN HEART AND SOUL AND SUPPORTED BY A STEERING GROUP OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND AN INDEPENDENT CRITICAL FRIEND. GILL AND ANGELA WOULD LIKE TO THANK NICOLE, VICKY, AMANDA, JO AND ALICE FOR THEIR HELP AND CHALLENGE, MAKING SURE THAT WE WEREN'T MARKING OUR OWN HOMEWORK!

THANK YOU TOO TO ALL THOSE WHO ATTENDED STORY SHARING GROUPS, TOOK PART IN INTERVIEWS AND COMPLETED THE VERY LONG SURVEY!