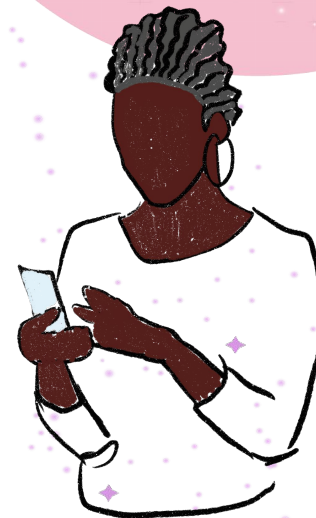**neighbourly**lab

WhatsApp

The power of neighbourhood communications groups for local government and partners

Workshop for Community Partnership Annual Forum
3 March 2023

Presented by Grainne O'Dwyer, Senior Programme Manager, and Charlotte Zemmel, Researcher

Who we are... a non-profit organisation, that aims to massively increase Social Connectedness in the UK

What we do... ethnographic research, behaviour change experiments and build and share the evidence-base of "what works" to increase connectedness

neighbourlylab

The kinds of areas we explore... daily microinteractions, experiences of loneliness, EDI, digital inclusion/exclusion and more

Who we partner/work with... the organisations who shape how we live together (e.g. Local councils, tech-firms, planners, transport providers, retailers)

In this presentation:

1. Introducing the power of neighbourhood communication groups

2. The ability for these groups to connect residents with local government and partners

3. The opportunity: supporting local government and partners in helping to start and support these groups

4. Workshop – the value of these groups to you and how you can increase their use
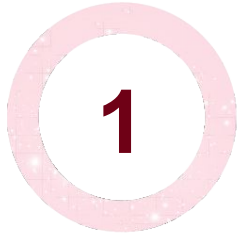
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Introducing the power of neighbourhood communications groups

Neighborhood communication groups exert massive connective power in communities, creating and reinforcing a web of interaction
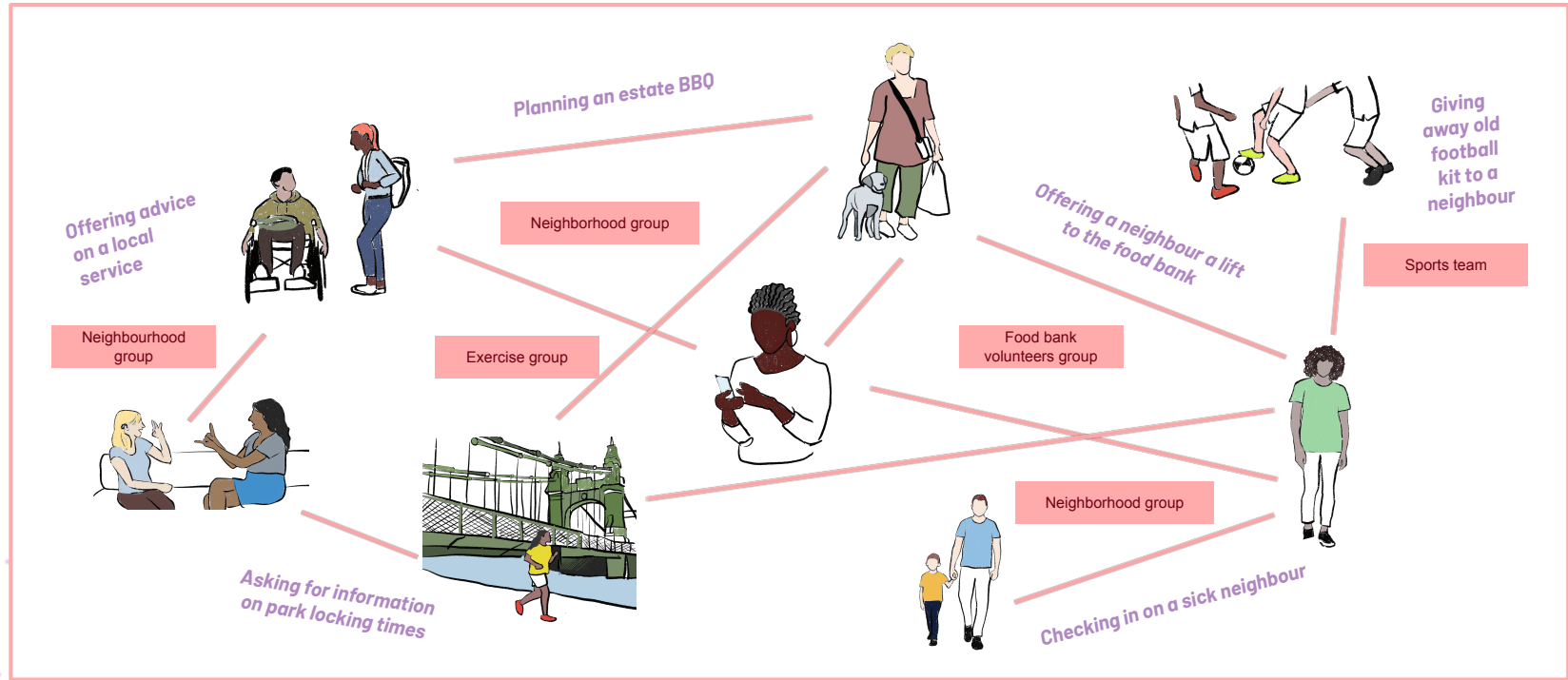
We undertook a mixed-methods exploration of the current landscape of these groups...

Desk Research to understand current experiences and perceptions of these groups broadly

Ethnographic deep dives to better understand the lived experiences of these groups

Quantitative survey to gain a breadth of understanding of current experiences
- n=1,600; all members of a neighbourhood or local organisation group
- N=4,560, non-group users
- Nationally representative sample
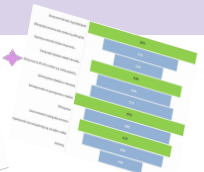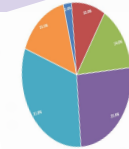
The research was co-funded by WhatsApp, who were equally interested in learning about the experiences in these groups - uses, benefits, challenges etc.

Neighbourhood communications groups are a tool to help promote connection: they are inclusive and enable neighbourly support everyday

Characteristics

- An online communication group using a platform like WhatsApp, Next Door, Facebook

- Block, street, or estate level

- Inclusive - everyone in the area is invited

- Place-based and bounded by 'my area'

- Often informal, but sometimes set up by local public services (police force, council)

- Allow for variable attention and commitment

There are high levels of help being given and received in these groups...

- 62.3% answer questions/help out

- 45.3% ask questions/ask for help

... with frequent interaction and support

48.0% engage daily,
36.2% engage weekly
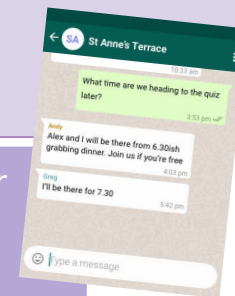
It's become part of the way of life of our area, like meeting on the street or chatting over the wall in years gone by

Member of Neighborhood Group, Swindon

ss=741

These groups have a wide variety of different uses, many of which help to inspire community action and engagement

Use	Percentage
Sharing information on discounts or voucher codes	25.1%
Organising small, local social gatherings (e.g. pub nights or coffee)	41.8%
Casual conversation including jokes and memes	42.5%
Offering advice on local services or suppliers	46.4%
Gathering opinions, feedback or information to share with local council or local government	35.4%
Sharing information from local council or local government	42.4%
Giving away unwanted items (e.g. furniture, books, food)	53.2%
Addressing a local issue - e.g. safety issues, roadworks, noise complaints	56.0%
Organising community initiative (e.g. street clean up)	32.8%
Offering helpful services to neighbours (e.g. dog walking)	41.4%
Sharing community-wide, organised event information (e.g. annual fair)	40.9%

ss=741, Q8a

…and while residents experience many benefits, staying informed, connected and feeling safer are key benefits for residents in these groups

Category	Percentage
I have my voice heard by local authorities	23.6%
I have the opportunity to ask neighbours for help when I need it (e.g. babysitting)	39.4%
I find opportunities to help my neighbours	48.4%
I receive recommendations on services (e.g plummer, painter..)	49.4%
I receive recommendations on local amenities (e.g. restaurants, gyms, dry cleaners…)	40.2%
I help organise local events and get-togethers	28.3%
I keep up to date on local issues	61.8%
I get to know new people and make friends	49.8%
So my neighbours can watch out for me and I can feel safer	46.4%

These groups have a significant impact on how residents feel about their local area

*73.2% agree

I think the group has had a positive impact on our local area

26.0%	47.2%	10.8%	1.7%	0.3%

*69.8% agree

I feel much more connected to my neighbours since joining the group

23.8%	46.0%	11.7%	3.5%	1.0%

*68.3% agree

I know more people in my local area as a result of joining the group

23.8%	44.5%	12.4%	4.0%	1.4%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ strongly agree ■ agree ■ neither agree nor disagree ■ disagree ■ strongly disagree
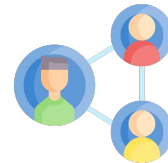
If you don't live near your family, then your neighbours are who is closest to you in times of an emergency.

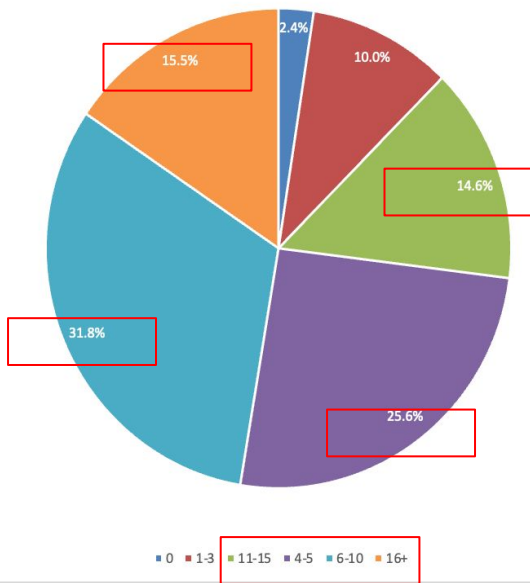Member of Neighborhood Group, Manchester

*ss=741, Q10 responders who either "agree" or "strongly agree"

Importantly, these groups do not replace in-person interactions, but rather enhance them

*Most people have met between 4 and 15 new neighbours as a result of the group

2.4%
10.0%
15.5%
14.6%
31.8%
25.6%

Legend: 0 | 1-3 | 11-15 | 4-5 | 6-10 | 16+

*ss=741, Q11 **ss=741, Q12a, ***ss=741, Q12b

And different types of socialising are occurring through these groups too...

3/4 of responders say that **face-to-face meetings** between neighbours have occurred as a result of the group:

53% of these responders meet for **local community events** (e.g. fairs, street parties)

40% meet for **coffee dates**

***And **42%** now have **casual chats** on the street with their neighbours

A key benefit of these groups is their ability to encourage sharing amongst neighbours in a variety of different ways...

The second and third most common things that happen in neighbourhood groups are:

- **53.2%** **Giving away unwanted items** (e.g. furniture, food, books)

- **46.4%** **Offering advice on local services**

*On our group, people always give away surplus food or ingredients that are nearly out of date. That way, the giver **doesn't waste and the receiver doesn't have to buy***

Member of a neighbourhood group, London

Morning all, would anyone like this doll's house, complete with hot-tub, firepit and walk-in wardrobe? Just let me know and you can pick it up, thank you. Here's the link: https://www.selfridges.com/GB/en/cat/lol-surprise-omg-house-of-surprises-wood-doll-house-122m_R03807197/

08:48

ss=741

..and this sharing is leading to ££ savings for the majority of neighbours

More than 50% of individuals in these groups **have saved money and leveraged their collective purchasing power, thanks to being part of their group** *

*Someone asked for a window cleaner recommendation, and turns out loads of people needed one so a neighbour called the guy and **haggled a group rate for us***

Member of Neighborhood Group, Cardiff

*Someone on my group was **giving away a fantastic winter coat** in my size! That saved me loads.*

Member of Neighborhood Group, Swindon

This highlights the value of these groups for councils looking to support their residents through the cost of living crisis

ss=741

2

The power of these groups in connecting residents with local government and partners

Many groups are helping to inspire community action and collaboration with local government

*57% of responders use their group to **communicate with their local government**, most of which involves **getting their voice heard:**

65% of these residents use the group **to report local issues (e.g. crimes)

**58% campaign about local issues through their groups

57% use their groups to **share their feedback on proposed local developments and changes

It's incredibly handy for getting people involved in local issues - one or two messages vs 30-40 door knocks. You're hearing from people who you'd never catch door knocking

Member of Neighborhood Group, Swindon

*ss= Q8a responders who chose either "sharing information from local council or local government" OR "gathering opinions, feedback or information to share with local council or local government"
**ss= 422, Q13a

VOTE

Usually, participants get their voice heard through a **group member who is involved with the council** (**49%** of the time), or through a group member who is **particularly engaged with local issues** (**48%**).

*I worked for Salford City council for a long time – they are **extremely community-minded.** It's great to see the effort they put into working with us on our WhatsApp group. I'm glad I can use my council connections to help my neighbours.*

Member of neighbourhood group. Greater Manchester

*We call Alan the **local guru,** because he always keeps up to date with council info and puts us in touch with the right people when we have problems*

Member of neighbourhood group, Birmingham

Crucially, the ease and informality of engaging in this way means that **more residents are having their voices heard via these groups**, including those who may be generally less involved in community action

ss=422, Q13b

These groups enable novel ways for local authorities to engage with residents:

A **member of our council will even join our group** from time to time, for example to plan Armed Forces Day or to deal with issues in the park. Then, they'll leave again to respect our privacy.

Member of neighbourhood group. Greater Manchester

We had a number of break-ins recently and shared some **doorbell camera footage** on the group. This was then **shared with the council and police** who were actually able to catch the guy as a result! The council have now worked with us to improve security.

Member of neighbourhood group, Birmingham

I needed some help distributing leaflets about a local issue with the pub at the end of the street. I asked on our group if anyone could help and **I got a load of volunteers that I wouldn't even have thought to approach!** I got way more engagement with the issue than if I had just gone door knocking. Helped us make the case to the council that this was a real issue.

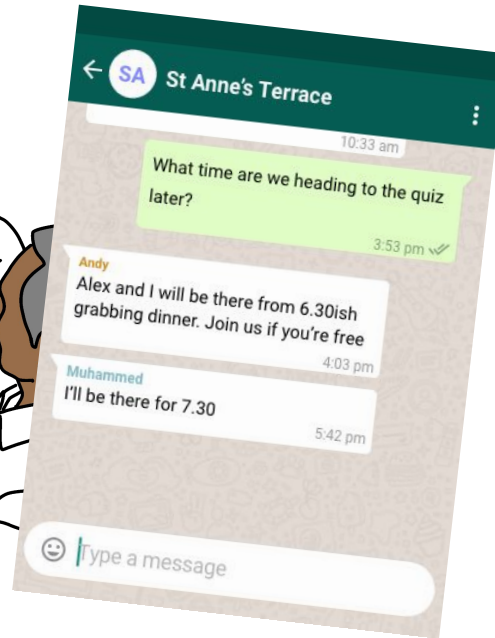Member of neighbourhood group, Swindon

Case Studies to illustrate the power of these groups in connecting residents with local councils and services
(these are from Neighbourly Lab's ethnographic research in September 22)

My neighbourhood WhatsApp group… Connects neighbours on and offline

neighbourlylab

My name's John and I live with my partner in Birmingham. Pete a few doors down had a post-lockdown BBQ where he suggested that we start a WhatsApp group to discuss **local security issues**. The next day, he put a leaflet through everyone's door. Now, the group does much more than just highlight security issues, in fact, **it's more of a social group now**. Every month, we go for a drink at 'Spoons or for a pub quiz. Through the group, I met Allan. He's widowed and quite lonely, so it's been great to support him. Pete, the admin, has some **connections to the MP and council**, so whenever we have an issue like road flooding, he sorts us out. I've seen more of my neighbours since joining the group than I ever did before!

📍 **Birmingham**

Chat messages shown in image:

St Anne's Terrace

10:33 am

What time are we heading to the quiz later?
3:53 pm

Andy
Alex and I will be there from 6.30ish grabbing dinner. Join us if you're free
4:03 pm

Muhammed
I'll be there for 7.30
5:42 pm

Type a message

My group provides help with...

✔️ Connection and belonging   ✔️ Support and information   ✔️ Community Action

My neighbourhood **WhatsApp** group… *Empowers community action*

neighbourlylab

Portley Road Group

Does anyone have feedback for Councillor Ben on the new park development?

3:53 pm

Edith

Edith in #51 here. Ensure there are benches for the eldery.

4:03 pm

John

And I need a ramp into the toilets for my chair. Number 40, John

4:42 pm

Type a message

I'm Brian and I live with my wife in Eccles. I joined my neighbourhood WhatsApp group about 3 years ago. The main function of the group is to **share information about security and safety issues**. The group is also used to **engage easily and effectively with the local council**, we organise regular meetings with the council and even have council members join the group periodically to help plan events. People can easily feedback their opinions to council this way, much better than knocking on 40 doors. We recently **organised a big park clean up with with the council** on our group. The group makes me **feel safer and more connected to the local authorities.**
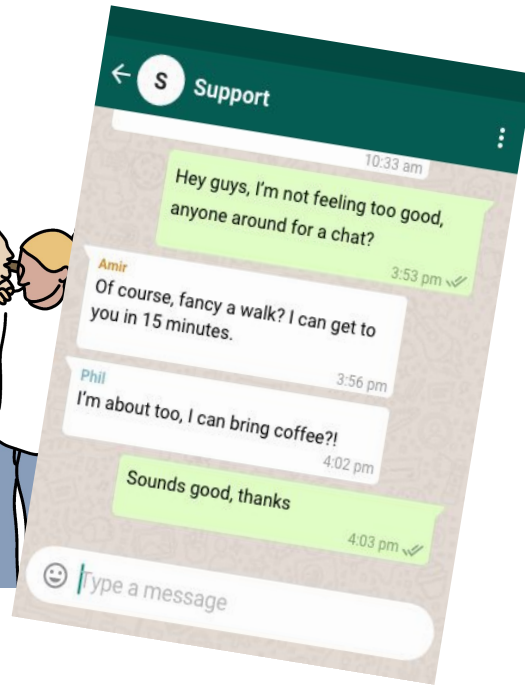
Greater Manchester

My group provides help with…

✅ Support and information   ✅ Sharing and saving   ✅ Community Action

My organisation's WhatsApp group... Helps service users to feel more supported

neighbourlylab

Support

10:33 am

Hey guys, I'm not feeling too good, anyone around for a chat?

3:53 pm

Amir
Of course, fancy a walk? I can get to you in 15 minutes.

3:56 pm

Phil
I'm about too, I can bring coffee?!

4:02 pm

Sounds good, thanks

4:03 pm

Type a message

Our organisation helps people reintegrate into the community after a period in custody/prison. **WhatsApp is vital at all levels of our organisation**. Our board connect via whatsApp, our management team, staff, and volunteers. It is most valuable for our service users, who **can get support 24/7, either from peers in support groups or by contacting trained support staff directly.** Our volunteers help individuals manage crisis via WhatsApp where the are **not comfortable talking face-to-face, providing a vital lifeline** for people going through a hugely challenging transition. **WhatsApp helps our service users know they are not alone.**

Scotland

My group provides help with...

✓ Planning and logistics   ✓ Support and information   ✓ Community Action   ✓ Connection and belonging

Academic studies reveal the <u>life saving benefits</u> of neighbourhood groups during times of crisis

International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

Volume 63, September 2021, 102450

ELSEVIER

An analysis of social media use and neighbor-assisted debris removal in Houston following Hurricane Harvey

Courtney Page-Tan [1] ✉

It's not just social media that has these benefits, but platforms specifically designed to connect neighbourhoods

This study found that:

"individuals who used Nextdoor were **more likely to receive help** from neighbors to collect and pile debris following Hurricane Harvey compared to individuals who indicated they never used the platform, **a finding not found among Facebook and Twitter users**"

3

The opportunity: supporting local government and partners in helping to start and support these groups

Despite the power of these groups, uptake is low, particularly amongst low income residents

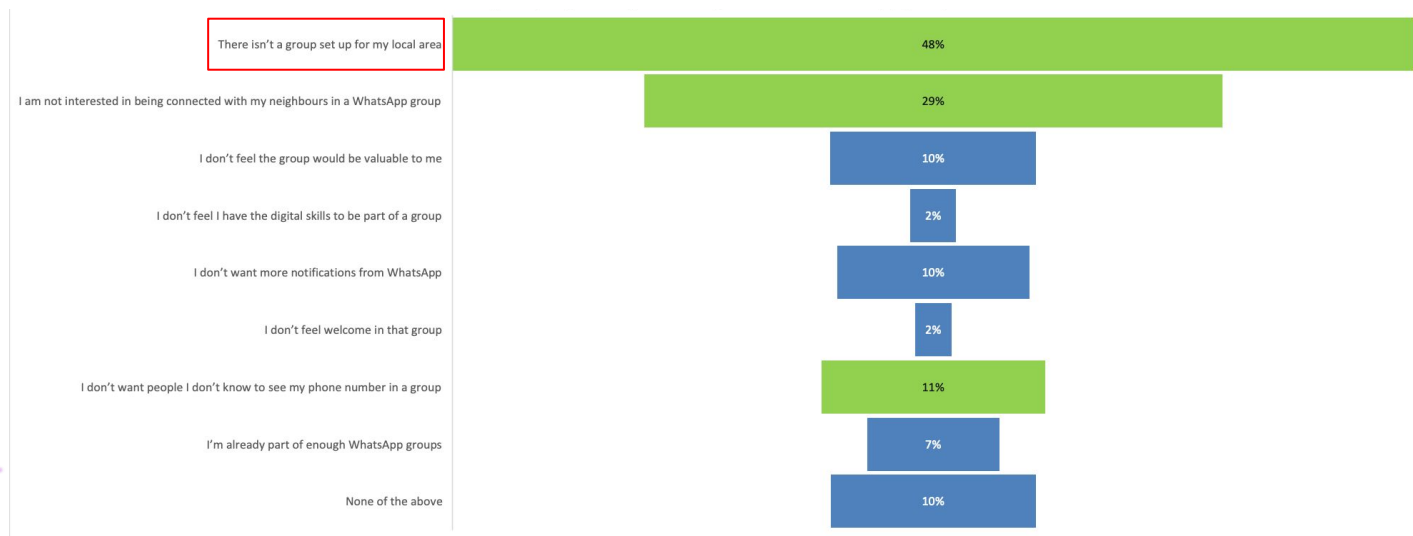Only **12%** of Britons are part of neighbourhood groups

Which means that the vast majority of us are missing out on the benefits of these groups, and **particularly those on lower incomes**, who are underrepresented in these groups*

Income level	Overall	Neighbourhood groups
High income	7%	11%
Middle income	55%	58%
Low income	38%	31%

This is particularly concerning when you consider that being connected to the council **may be of greatest benefit to those with lower income in the face of the Cost of Living crisis.**

ss=741

The biggest barrier preventing people from joining neighbourhood groups is simply a lack of an established group for them to join

There isn't a group set up for my local area	48%
I am not interested in being connected with my neighbours in a WhatsApp group	29%
I don't feel the group would be valuable to me	10%
I don't feel I have the digital skills to be part of a group	2%
I don't want more notifications from WhatsApp	10%
I don't feel welcome in that group	2%
I don't want people I don't know to see my phone number in a group	11%
I'm already part of enough WhatsApp groups	7%
None of the above	10%

The biggest barrier to access being a lack of established groups **presents a significant opportunity to help make these groups more widespread across the country.**

ss=4,522

So how do we make these groups and potential support more widespread?

The key is in initiating more of these these groups, because once established they shape-shift and adapt to what is needed, and they endure

The key task: *find ways to spark the formation and joining of these groups*

The second task will then largely take care of itself: groups will organically find their own way of benefiting each community

Neighbourly Lab is on a mission to help grow these groups and realise this potential nationwide. We're want to explore how Local Councils and partners can encourage / incentivise participation in these groups.

Some councils have already recognised the power of community comms groups and are helping to establish and get involved with them...

*Lambeth city council have a **Neighbourhood Champions scheme** where they support locals who set up community initiatives such as neighbourhood Facebook or WhatsApp groups/pages.

East Riding council **register local WhatsApp groups and advertise them on their website. These groups start with a few neighbours and then grow thanks to help from the council. This enables more neighbours to join and keeps the council aware of the issues posted on them.

Councils like Frome have integrated local groups into their neighbourhood engagement initiatives…
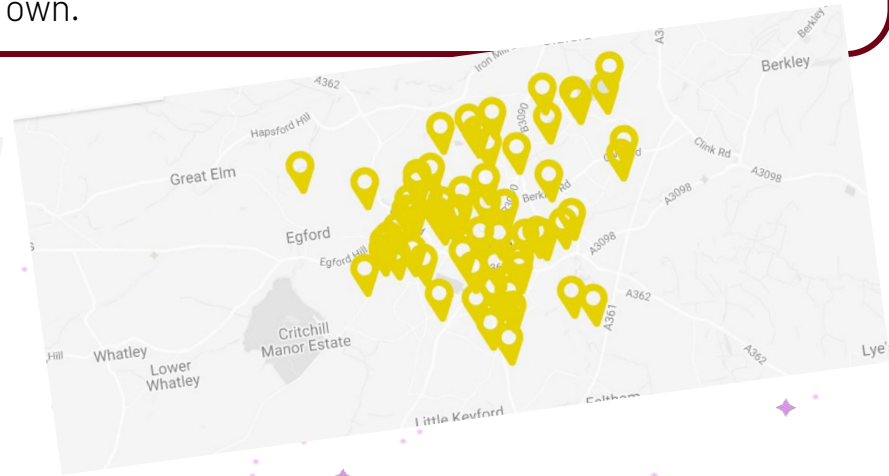

***Frome Town council has a **map of the online neighbourhood groups in the area**, which is part of a **neighbourhood network** managed by a council member. Residents can get in touch with the council member to join an existing group or to get support in starting their own.

Advice on how to get a group started

If you haven't got a Neighbourhood Group set up, but you'd like to, here are some tips to get started.

• Link in with one or two other neighbours first of all to talk it through if you can. Lots of groups have found it's nice to have other people to bounce ideas off

• Decide how you'd like to stay in touch e.g. WhatsApp, then put a note through the doors of the people in your street or the area you've decided your group will cover

• Collate phone numbers/emails and set up whatever works for you – each street is different. Some prefer a Facebook group or WhatsApp, or email group. Bear in mind some neighbours won't be online and may need a doorstep chat to stay included

• It works really well to link in together for something fun to start with. Perhaps you'd like to get involved in a community weeding day or organise a street art exhibition in your windows

• If you'd like some help to get started, contact Hannah Stopford our Community Development Projects Officer

4

Let's workshop some ideas...

How are we already linked in with online community groups and how have they been used by us?

Now in your groups, let's think about...

What can we do to encourage them to get set up in our area?
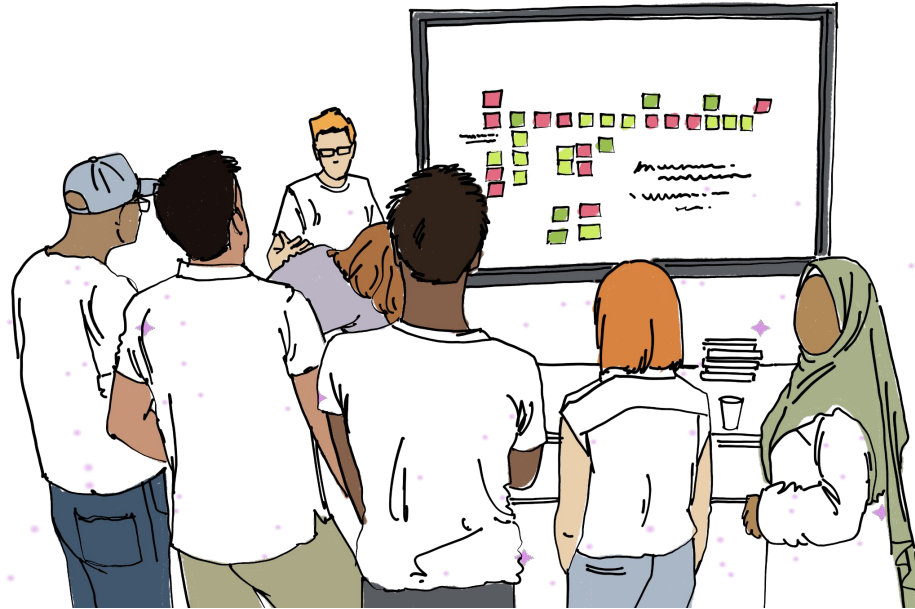
What do we see the value of these groups being for us?

15 minutes group discussion time

Let's share back what we discussed

So how can *Neighbourly Lab* help bring these ideas to life?

The next step is to **run trials**, testing out some interventions and seeing what works for getting these groups started and for ensuring that people are getting civilly engaged on them.

We will **work in partnership**:

We will:
- **Work with members of your team to identify the best areas to trial** these initiatives
- Explore how existing resources can be utilised as motivators for getting these groups going and working well
- **lead the evaluation of the interventions**
- **monitor effectiveness**
- **make evidence-based recommendations** on how to make engagement with these groups sustainable and scalable.

If interested in learning about how we might work together to help connect your communities, please get in touch with Charlotte (charlotte@neighbourlylab.com)

Thank you.   Please ask us any questions

Grainne O'Dwyer | grainne@neighbourlylab.com
Charlotte Zemmel | charlotte@neighbourlylab.com