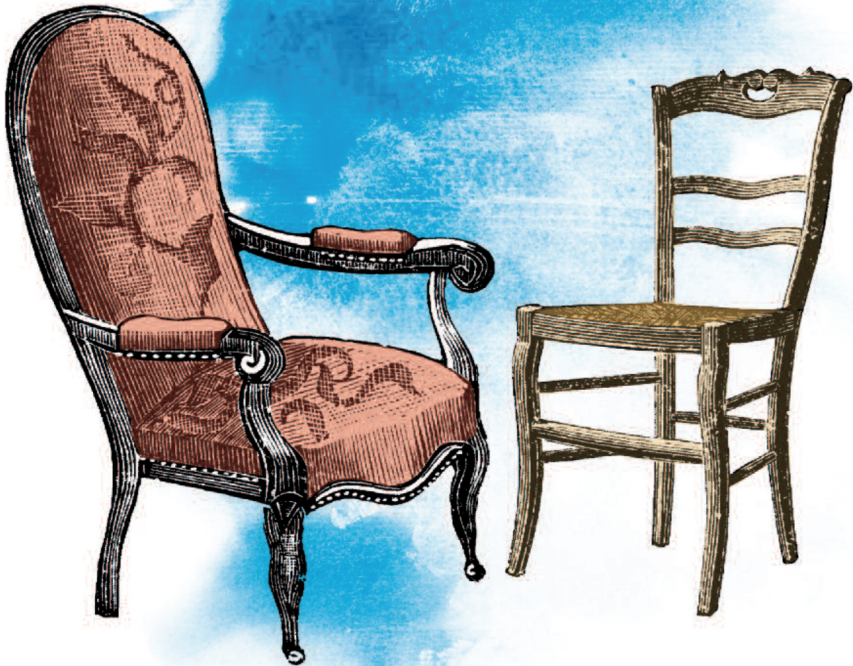


Be the change

a guide to creating safe and inclusive space



**"We need to be the change
we wish to see in the world"**

Mahatma Gandhi

Be the change

Be the change: a guide to creating safe and inclusive space

Stephanie Mitchell

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At one time or another, most of us have had the experience of feeling left out, of not belonging or of feeling out of place. This may be because we find ourselves in an unfamiliar setting, among people we don't know or, perhaps, somewhere more familiar and yet lonely in the crowd. Yet our sense of connection with others can, on one level, help change the very nature of our day and even, on another level, help to give everything else meaning.

This short guide is based upon the experience of Belfast Friendship Club (BFC), which began life as a social experiment and became an organic process, evolving over five years to sow the seeds of a social movement. This guide is an attempt to capture why and how it has worked and to identify the philosophy behind its success.

It should be read in conjunction with our *An ethos of hospitality: an evaluation of the Belfast Friendship Club*, available to download from our website at: www.belfastfriendshipclub.org/documents/ or in hard copy from South Belfast Roundtable (SBR).



Getting creative on a BFC holiday

Introduction

Belfast Friendship Club

In 2009, BFC began welcoming newcomers to the city and into the safe and neutral setting of a café where they could freely meet others including those born or otherwise settled here. It now routinely attracts 30-60 people each week from 15+ nationalities, a wide age range and many walks of life. Including the 5-10 newcomers each week, members arrive via friends, classmates, relatives, colleagues, housemates or having been 'signposted' from elsewhere. Or they may have seen posters, been given any of our promotional material or perhaps seen our website. In any case, most arrive through word-of-mouth.

'Belfast Friendship Club – a huge gift to Belfast'
Duncan Morrow, University of Ulster, 2013

On arrival, all are greeted at the door and given a simple, handwritten name badge. The only information recorded as people arrive is their first name, their country of origin and whether this is a first visit to the club. Newcomers are then invited to circulate freely, perhaps having been introduced to someone to ease the process. As noted in our evaluation, *'what is striking about the club is that "nothing happens", except a round of announcements at the end of the evening, yet it is an intensely social occasion'* (Wilson, 2012).

With very rare exceptions, no activities are laid on and nothing else is organised during the two-hour weekly meetings which have become the 'heartbeat' that drives all else within the club. Those gathered can use the space however they wish and this generates a sense of connection arising from the apparent 'unity in diversity' that transcends the usual barriers operating to separate people from one another. In the five years since it began, BFC has grown beyond all expectation, welcoming a great many people from many walks of life and from all over the world to its weekly meetings, events and other activities. This is made possible by the diverse electoral ward and city context within which BFC is situated, although many of the lessons being learned apply elsewhere.

'Building what we have in common and being aware we share more than less'
BFC member

The context

In the past ten years Northern Ireland has seen a great increase in inward migration. The European Union has expanded and we have seen a significant number of non-EU migrants take up posts in our health services as well as a much smaller number seeking asylum. People come for a variety of reasons, some for a short time and others to make this country their long-term home.

It is worth remembering that migrants who come to Northern Ireland are arriving into contested space and it can often be difficult to find a place to fit into a community itself neither cohesive nor integrated. Many would suggest that one of the legacies of the conflict in Northern Ireland is a culture suspicious of anyone different. Clearly this can prove a barrier for newcomers in terms of social integration.

In setting up BFC, South Belfast Roundtable identified sectarianism and racism as by-products of entrenched intolerance and lack of understanding of the 'other'. Researchers argued that friendship was a potential solvent of such intolerance, showing that even knowing someone else who had a friend of 'the other sort' could reduce prejudice (Turner *et al*, 2007).

While it is entirely possible to grow up, play, live, work, study, socialise and otherwise operate

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among groups of people largely familiar to us, we may also be aware of new faces in the neighbourhood who perhaps never feature in any of these settings and with whom we may only have a nodding acquaintance at best as we pass in the street or queue in local shops.

Contact theory claims that true acquaintance lessens prejudice and that knowledge on its own does not change negative attitudes or stereotypes about others. Actually getting to know people seems to be what makes this difference possible. Research suggests that the opportunity to make lasting friendships is more important than cooperating or learning about the other group, and places and spaces are needed where this can happen.



BFC members celebrating a birthday

Who is the guide intended for?

If you are associated with a:

Youth group
Community group / centre
Neighbourhood association
Parent and toddler group
Parent / teacher group
Lunch club for the elderly
Charitable organization
Faith-based organization
LGBT organization, women's group, disabled rights group etc.

Questions you might ask are:

Do we include young people from BME* backgrounds?
Are there 'new' locals who don't use the centre?
Are we representative of everyone now living locally?
Are there new families nearby who would benefit?
How involved are the parents of children new to the school?
Do we know of isolated elderly people who might benefit?
Do we include those from BME backgrounds?
Might our 'outreach' lead some to feel excluded?
Have we considered 'multiple identity' of people from BME backgrounds?

* Black and minority ethnic (BME) is a term often used to describe those who don't originate from these islands.

This guide can help equip group leaders and/or participants of all beliefs and faiths with some questions to think about, some practical examples and a list of factors to consider in helping them move towards more inclusive targets and increased diversity in their settings.

Whether you are in the planning stages or are already part of a group seeking to become more inclusive, this guide is designed to help you think constructively about how best to move forward by examining what you do and how you do it, and to identify some of the many (often invisible) barriers that may be preventing what you aim to achieve.

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(1) Creating safe space

What's your agenda?

Be transparent about the motivation behind your group – and be explicit about it! Our agenda at BFC is to welcome individuals into a safe space in which they can relax and form meaningful relationships with one another regardless of background. Seeing similarity rather than difference means that our common humanity can come to the fore. Everything else that we do continues to evolve from this.

Attitudes and principles – how we treat one another

Respect

Perhaps respect is most simply described as treating others the way you would wish to be treated, so having due regard for the feelings, wishes and dignity of others. In practice, this means recognising the fact that we don't need to be the same in order to get along, to learn from each other or enjoy one another's company. This applies regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, faith, belief system, gender or sexual orientation.

Equality or equity?

In settings where individual circumstances may vary a great deal, it's important to make things as obviously fair and even-handed as possible, including all opportunities on offer.

This is key to the ethos of BFC and doesn't just 'happen' of its own accord, but needs to be done quite deliberately. Although differences in members' circumstances may vary enormously, this is not apparent at the club itself or any of our events - nor should it be.

Something as simple as ensuring everyone can enjoy a cup of tea, coffee or juice, regardless of actual ability to pay, may be required. Within BFC, for example, all events and other opportunities we promote are free of charge or we acquire some free tickets to give away, making them accessible to all. These examples demonstrate equity rather than equality.

Impartiality or multi-partiality?

BFC offers '*a space for diverse people to experience common ground*', where all beliefs and faiths can exist in a non-discriminatory environment. Whether it is called 'impartiality' or 'multi-partiality', the principle at stake here is to create settings that are not dominated by allegiance to any particular view but which can contain and hold them all. This makes it possible to explore cultures, world-views, faiths, beliefs and value systems in a respectful way. In other words, allowing us to compare notes on the experience of being human.

Impartiality is also evident in policies such as the absence of alcohol at BFC events, as it could be a barrier for people from certain backgrounds perhaps leading them to feel less welcome or even unsafe. We find that we can cater for events most inclusively by offering vegetarian food.

Solidarity or charity?

Understanding ourselves as 'citizens of the world' helps adjust attitudes to our various roles and can counter the tendency to see things in terms of 'provider' versus 'user', or 'leaders' versus 'members'. This is a subtle but crucial distinction.

*'It is a club I will recommend to everyone.
It makes you feel at home and welcome in Belfast'*

BFC member

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Recognising that, throughout our lives, we are all in need of help, support or companionship at different times brings our commonality to bear on the experience of being human. How important is it to be unconditional, i.e. not to expect anything in return? What can we learn from others? BFC's commitment to the principle of solidarity creates an atmosphere in which help can be asked for and offered in the recognition that, over time, everyone benefits.

Unity in diversity: 10 steps towards inclusion

We are fundamentally sociable creatures! A culture of hospitality in which everyone can feel welcome, regardless of background or circumstance, activates something that exists within us all but that may just be dormant. Putting into practice the list below enables us to overcome many barriers that are commonly experienced, allowing us to relax and blossom instead. This is made possible by:

- Welcoming people warmly as they *are* and not as we might wish them to be
- Practising a compassionate, 'no blame' approach towards others (and yourself!)
- Recognising that *everyone* has strengths and weaknesses
- Recognising that *everyone* is vulnerable in their own way
- Recognising that *everyone* has a valuable contribution to make
- Suspending any assumptions about others – even what you think you know!
- Being alongside others, neither looking up to them nor down at them
- Being open to recognising the leadership qualities in all
- Never underestimating your own power to change someone's day – if only briefly
- Never underestimating the power of kindness or appreciation

Bringing out the best:

Principles of respect, equity, impartiality and solidarity brought to life through these 10 steps have created a particular way of being within BFC commonly known as our 'DNA', which is tangible wherever members gather. Being infectious, this is easy to recognise and respond to. A significant element of this 'DNA' is sincere warmth, experienced both by newcomers and members of BFC alike. It brings out our best selves.

BFC volunteers at a 'Small Worlds' workshop



The importance of physical space and 'neutral' settings

The very fact that an event is held somewhere may lead to assumptions about the people or the organisation running it and, therefore, any 'agenda' that may be operating. For example, events held in a particular place of worship may give the impression that those with other beliefs are not as welcome – even if this is completely contrary to what is intended. Starting with something as seemingly benign as a prayer can have this effect.

Is the location likely to be a more natural choice for some than others? Does it have associations that may lead some to think they might not be as welcome as others? Is it situated in an area that is safe for everyone to access? How can you check this out?

In our experience, although neutral spaces are rare and safety for ALL can never be 100% guaranteed, the risks of this can be minimized by ensuring that no form of religious proselytising, political or other recruitment is knowingly taking place.

'It became a safe harbour for me, which I can rely on'
BFC member

Visible (and invisible) barriers

Until we have a chance to experience 'unity in diversity', after which differences matter less, visible (and invisible) barriers can send immediate signals about whether a new space is likely to be the 'right' one for us.

Visible barriers can include things like:

- Appearances: How do others look – does anyone here look or dress as I do?
- Behaviour: What are others doing – am I comfortable with this?
- Money: What, if anything, might I need to pay for?
- Physical symbols / statues / quotations: Are these something I can relate to or not?
- Promotional materials: Are these designed / written to attract someone like me?

Invisible barriers can include things like:

- Atmosphere or 'ethos': Is it warm and accepting?
- Behavioural norms: Are there some kinds of 'rules' that I need to know to join in?
- Hidden agendas / expectations: Are these acceptable or even possible for me?
- Beliefs: What, if any, is the belief system operating here? Am I being 'preached at'?
- Commitment: What am I letting myself in for by staying – how easy will it be to leave?
- Belonging: Is there a place here for someone like me?
- Gender issues: Am I comfortable with the social mix and the forms of greeting?

First impressions

These *really* matter! As when meeting someone for the first time, enduring impressions are created within a matter of minutes – or less. Hovering in the doorway of a new space is a very difficult thing for us to do and we are keenly aware of what may, or may not happen next. Does anyone notice we are there? How do they respond? This first impression may well affect how we feel about the space and whether we want to stay.

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Ubuntu and the language of inclusion

How do you habitually think, speak or write about your space? Is it in terms of 'us' (organisers, paid employees, committee members, volunteers etc.) and 'them' (beneficiaries, members, newcomers, casual visitors, cleaners)? There is a need to show that there is no dominant culture and any tendency to identify with so-called 'developed' western nations as superior to others can foster a worldview based on assumptions about who is more likely to benefit whom. It can deny other rich heritages of experience about how to exist in relation to one another and on this planet.

Ubuntu: 'A person is a person through other persons'

Desmond Tutu explains this concept as '*the very essence of being human*'. If you have *ubuntu* then '*you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have.*'

'A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.' (Tutu, 1999).



Exploring on a BFC holiday

'Sometimes I was feeling so down that it was the only thing in the week that made me happy, that gave me some hope'

BFC member

(2) Consistency and continuity

Feeling welcome / extending a welcome

Given the importance of first impressions, the responsibility for this falls to those who take on the proactive role of host. Ideally, this requires an ability to develop a kind of 'radar', allowing us to notice new arrivals, make an initial approach, demonstrate warm interest and effectively become the 'bridge' through which to welcome others – one at a time! The welcome given to familiar or more occasional visitors alike can convey a sense of pleasure that they have chosen to attend and a continued interest in their lives.

The experience of being recognised or remembered is highly significant and so one or more 'hosts' can, between them, provide a sense of continuity. Amongst BFC membership more generally, this recognition spills over into the street, since being greeted in an otherwise unfamiliar place can counter feelings of isolation or disconnection.

Hosting

The significance of this role cannot be overestimated since it is crucial. For the host(s) it involves sensitivity to and an awareness of a great many factors. Actively managing the space is necessary throughout as is being positioned somewhere where newcomers can be easily seen and engaged at any time. Members of BFC speak of being welcomed into a 'family' – even if they have never attended before!

'I know from those who come along that the single most important factor in BFC is the facilitator, who embodies the "DNA" that we seek to replicate'
Denise Wright, Race Relations Coordinator

Relentless presence and 'holding' the space

For those whose lives are chaotic, uncertain or subject to fracture – and those seeking asylum, for example, may find this to be the case through no fault of their own – reliable and regular meetings may take on added significance. Many of our members are separated from their children and/or their families and cannot go home. For this reason, BFC members know that we can be relied upon to **be there** at the same time and in the same place, regardless. The simple knowledge that we 'hold' the space can provide reassurance, whether it's possible to attend or not.

Managing and 'working' the space

Hosting is a pro-active role that calls for constant vigilance and a heightened level of awareness of what is happening at any time. For those hosting the space, this 'radar' extends into other kinds of awareness. Noticing body language helps us see who may be looking lost or awkward for some reason. It can sometimes be helpful to intervene, maybe asking a question, making an introduction or diverting attention in some other way.

It also involves sensitivity to how someone *may* be feeling, i.e. looking through the lens of the discomfort that can arise when cultures come into contact. An example of this might be a young Muslim woman finding herself in close proximity with unfamiliar men.

However, it's also important to recognise that individuals may want to use a space differently from one another. The freedom to behave in an intensely sociable way, or to be quieter and more withdrawn, may be appropriate at different times for us all; each is equally acceptable.

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The business of names

Names matter! Nicknames we acquire or shortened versions of our original name may be more or less acceptable for different reasons, depending on their associations for us. While we may have no choice over birth names, we do exercise choice over how we are known as adults and this is a humanising element of our identity.

Paying attention to someone's name, to the spelling and to how it is pronounced are important factors within BFC. Wearing an accurate name label eases introductions and means we need not rely on memory - or worse still, stereotypes.

More importantly, however, it asserts and dignifies the *person* behind other aspects of the identity they carry. It also tends to make other differences in status, role, or income evident elsewhere seem irrelevant – at least within the space itself.

Belonging and owning

In time, the hosting role can be shared, such that even relatively new members may find themselves welcoming far more longstanding members. This ownership of roles actively promotes a sense of belonging, making length of membership and other such factors irrelevant. A space where anyone may take on some form of leadership, depending upon their interests and inclinations, tends to dissolve notions of hierarchy.



Cooking breakfast on a BFC holiday

'It is nice to meet people in the BFC but it is even nicer that, once you've met them there, you often see them in the street, in the city centre, so you really feel arrived in Belfast'
BFC member

(3) Setting the boundaries by removing the barriers

Handling what happens: getting started

Being clear about the motivation behind what you hope to achieve helps attract others who can share your vision. Remaining open to others' suggestions about possibilities for growth and adaptation will help you remain flexible in the face of change.

Word will spread if what you're offering meets a need and small numbers matter less than the diversity present. For example, the fact that BFC attracts those seeking sanctuary or asylum indicates something about the nature of what's on offer. Be patient and 'hold' open your space.

Handling what happens: meeting and greeting

Demonstrate your interest and your warmth and make your welcome personal! Being greeted individually matters, regardless of whether you are a newcomer or not, and this applies to pairs or groups arriving together. It is easy to feel overlooked in a crowd.

Being able to arrive at any stage and stay, however briefly, but still feel welcome is important and this is conveyed in the nature of the greeting that you offer. At BFC we are accustomed to the wide spectrum of ways in which members inhabit the space.

This can mean anything from arriving before the start and staying for the duration to a very brief visit. Participation may be every week, every few months or only for events. Nevertheless, *all* are greeted on arrival and *all* wear a simple, handwritten name badge such that no differentiation is apparent between regular attendees and new arrivals.

Handling what happens: permission to engage

People will arrive with different ideas about what to expect, so it's important to put newcomers at ease by briefly explaining what's about to start or what's already going on and any part they might play in this, should they choose.

Participants are likely to have widely differing feelings and preferences about being there, so the easier you can make this the better it will work. Offering introductions can sometimes be helpful in getting started, since not everyone feels comfortable with meeting unfamiliar others.

'A great way to bring the community together'
BFC member

Handling what happens: galvanising a sense of participation

Encouraging others to play a part in the gathering, however small, and appreciating any contribution can help bolster a sense of belonging. Although this is more organised for BFC events, it happens very informally at our weekly meetings where members contribute information through a round of announcements. These often delight us by featuring spontaneous and unexpected offerings!

Members may spontaneously set up or clear up the room, take on a 'hosting' role, arrive bearing information about something that may interest others, make an announcement about opportunities they are involved in or planning to lead, or even sing a song!

Our Thursday meetings are a small fraction of what can happen during the rest of the week. Some simple guidelines apply to what is promoted, however. One example is that all opportunities are free so that everyone can participate regardless of their ability to pay.

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BFC members exploring the Mourne mountains

Handling what happens: responding to sensitive situations

Your space may attract individuals who are facing significant stresses in their lives and appreciate a safe place in which to relax and forget their worries for a little while at least. There may, occasionally, also be some whose struggles include issues with their mental health, or their own behaviour. From time to time there may also be others who have issues with alcohol or substance abuse.

As already mentioned, new arrivals may hold all sorts of misconceptions about your space, exhibiting behaviour which can lead others to feel awkward, compromised or even unsafe. These can include instances of:

- Inappropriate physical familiarity
- Inappropriate language or attitudes
- Being chatted up
- Being latched onto, 'talked at' incessantly or unable to escape someone's attention
- Being asked for contact details, lifts home or accompaniment somewhere else
- Expecting children to be cared for or watched over

This may be brought to your attention or you may notice it yourself but, in either case, discreet yet firm handling is required to restore safety to the group as soon as possible. This needs to come from someone who can take responsibility on behalf of the group for clearly explaining the agenda and expectations, correcting any misconceptions.

This may be done at the time, intervening to ask for a quiet word away from the group or following it up as soon as possible afterwards. We find that a gentle approach works best, simply stating what you have seen or heard and the reasons why this isn't appropriate – without any sense of blame. For example, although BFC is a highly sociable environment, it is made clear when necessary that it is *not* a space for any kind of dating which would immediately make it unsafe for some.

Hidden agendas and bounded space

BFC has attracted many generous offers and opportunities for its members to enjoy and, because it is an inclusive and easygoing space, may give the impression that 'anything goes', which is far from the truth!

Its diversity and openness also attract other kinds of attention, only some of which may benefit or interest members and fit within our ethos. Since we offer a context in which to relax, be yourself and maybe forget about your usual concerns, some kinds of enquiry would be counterproductive, maybe bringing those very concerns to the forefront again.

Informal 'policing' or even 'gatekeeping' of the space may sometimes be necessary and we find that it is essential to monitor approaches in the best interests of our membership. Responses are usually decided on a case-by-case basis and some examples have included:

- Recruiting members to groups or classes
- Recruiting participants for research purposes
- Recruiting sales personnel
- Recruiting interviewees for writers, journalists or broadcasters
- Recruiting subjects for art projects
- Selling of goods or services



BFC members volunteering for Homeplus

'I felt like part of the community, not being on my own anymore'
BFC member

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(4) Thoughtful leadership

Being authentic

Being consistently mindful of and employing the 10 steps towards inclusion (p7) in the treatment of, and attitudes towards others has been crucial in our experience of BFC.

Applying these at all times, and not simply when the group meets, communicates your values, how 'safe' you are to be around and whether you can be relied upon more generally. Although *at least* one person needs to look after the safety and well-being of the whole group, the 10 steps apply to anyone taking on a leadership role within it.

Thinking about the group as a whole, and on a regular basis, it helps to consider:

- What's going well? Why?
- What's not going so well? Why might this be?
- What could be done differently?
- Are there any other improvements, ideas or suggestions to be considered?
- What's happening more generally in the area that the group could address?
- What other opportunities might benefit the group or its members?
- Who is 'missing' from current membership? Why is this? Any suggestions?

'That warm place which I will never forget'
BFC member

Scenarios to consider

Your initial responses to the following real-life situations that could arise may identify areas in which your attitudes or beliefs are challenged. How would you respond when:

- Someone who volunteered to help you arrives over an hour late.
- A member tries to enlist others in a gospel meeting being held in their church.
- A newcomer who is profoundly deaf or partially sighted arrives into the group.
- The group plan a celebration event in the summer, focused on food, and some Muslim members point out that the proposed date falls within Ramadan.
- A member who has recently joined arrives with young children who run amok.
- A dishevelled newcomer asks for help finding overnight accommodation locally.
- A member who has not attended for many months arrives, obviously drunk.
- A young man who speaks no English and is seeking asylum has been signposted to your space.
- A member arrives with leaflets promoting a gay rights parade in the town.
- A 17-year-old girl arrives alone and asks for a lift home.
- Someone wants to sell raffle tickets for a local good cause and you know some members have little if any money.
- You overhear someone telling a sexist joke.

If something like this or anything else should arise, the 10 steps may be helpful in thinking through and overcoming any barriers and are the guidelines that we use within BFC.



BFC member with his 'Inspiration' award from Springboard

Multiple perspectives: whose are you missing?

Seeking feedback, information, ideas and suggestions from members whose backgrounds are as diverse as possible will help expand and adapt the vision for the group and this, in turn, can promote growth. At BFC we find it helpful to be continually open and receptive to members' views and ideas.

This creates a culture that encourages a stream of suggestions from members, who can then expand into the space, finding roles for themselves based upon shared interests, others' needs, or perhaps a desire to introduce some new element into the mix.

Maintaining safety but allowing growth

Maintaining the ethos of a safe and inclusive space that is *not* prescriptive but *is* facilitative in its encouragement of others is a delicate balance indeed. All suggestions, ideas and opportunities within the law need to be considered in the light of risks versus benefits. For instance, a suggestion of holding a celebratory BFC event in a pub might appeal to some but would not be sufficiently inclusive when taking into account the best interests of the membership as a whole. So, when anyone comes forward with a suggestion, key questions that can help are:

- Is this idea / suggestion beneficial to the whole group? Or enough of the group?
- What might go wrong?
- What are the implications of this?
- What precautions could be taken to minimise the risks?
- Is there a legal perspective to consider?
- In a worst-case scenario, what might the tabloid headlines say?
- Could the decision to go ahead be justified retrospectively?

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Challenging stereotyping and paternalism

Taking on or being prepared to take on any role expected of others demonstrates your willingness to invest yourself in engendering what works. However, this needs to be matched by also being willing to admit your mistakes with good humour! Being aware of roles traditionally taken on by women, or men, always presents an opportunity to challenge them, thereby encouraging others to do likewise.

In a society that tends towards the socially conservative, there is always a risk of paternalism – the practice of treating people in a condescending manner by providing for their needs without fully recognising their capacity for self-determination. An attitude that seeks to 'do good' may easily slip into this at the expense of empowerment.

According to self-determination theory, lasting happiness is built on only three basic psychological needs that we all share (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These are listed below and the evidence to date suggests that BFC supports individuals to develop all of these capacities.

Relatedness: connection to others

Competence: taking on challenges and experiencing mastery

Autonomy: having a sense of acting of your own accord and in harmony with your sense of self.



BFC members volunteering for Belfast Activity Centre

'Belfast Friendship Club for me was a place to chase away the stress'
BFC member

(5) Building social capital

Recognising and releasing inherent potential

The table below is adapted from Margaret Wheatley's 10 principles for creating healthy communities. These have mirrored our trajectory of growth within BFC.

It seems that:	So:
We support what we create	Drawing on innate creativity to make it 'our' space, by open invitation, brings commitment and ownership alive
We act responsibly when we care	Getting connected helps us identify what really matters
We think best in conversations	Getting the conditions right helps our thinking to flourish
To change the conversation, change who's in it	Noticing whose perspective you may be missing is important
Expect leaders to come from anywhere	Seeing others' greatness even if they can't is essential
Focus on what works	Tapping into our innate creativity gives us energy
The wisdom resides in us	Finding solutions is made possible by slowing down and reflecting together
Everything fails in the middle	Learning is cyclical and often done best when things fall apart
We can handle anything as long as we're together	Relating well to each other is key
Generosity, forgiveness and love are crucial	A 'no blame' culture makes all the difference!

Signposting

Arriving in a new country, for whatever reason, can be a bewildering experience at best, even if we are fluent in the language. Whether we are looking for a new job, joining family members or fleeing persecution, all of us are faced with similar difficulties from time to time. These may include needing help with getting around, accommodation, schools, healthcare, particular goods and services or rights, entitlements or asylum claims. It might be something as simple as understanding a letter that has arrived, or having to write one. It might be making sense of the information on a website, filling in a form or maybe making a telephone call.

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While at BFC we don't have the expertise to offer advice, we *are* able to offer support by 'signposting' our members to a range of qualified advisors and also, on a more personal level, by helping with things that we *can* do. This supports and encourages us to find our own solutions, promoting resilience and self-reliance.

Whilst recognising that many of us have related professional roles, we are also aware that any sense of the 'advice surgery' would undermine the very solidarity that we seek to create. This is yet another fine balance that needs to be maintained.

Volunteering

In the five years since BFC started, we have also come to understand the value of volunteering as a 'fast track' to integration, both within the club and elsewhere. This is particularly the case for those who are lonely, troubled or facing an uncertain future.

Many who arrive seeking asylum have no concept of a 'welfare state' and no idea that, by law, they cannot do paid work to support themselves. For others, losing or trying to find a job can be a soul-destroying process during which time hangs heavily and hope may dwindle. For these reasons, the opportunity to contribute time, energy, and enthusiasm to some other cause can be a win-win situation, particularly if it involves being part of a sociable group. This promotes psychological and emotional wellbeing and can also create a powerful sense of belonging – as well as being a lot of fun!



Volunteering for Belfast Hills Partnership

Accompaniment and support

Although potential volunteers may really want to get involved and opportunities are plentiful for voluntary work, our experience has been that simply handing out leaflets or 'signposting' members to other organisations is rarely effective. What works best is to create a context in which all are welcome to join in as a group, making it easy to come together for a common purpose. One example of this was our day out on Black Mountain (see photos above), which attracted 13 participants from 9 nationalities, some of whom had not met each other before.

Be the change

Not everyone has an understanding of the world through maps and it can prove difficult for some people to find their way around in unfamiliar surroundings. Equally, turning up somewhere alone can be challenging, at least for the first time. Providing the reassurance that at least one other familiar person will also be there can overcome initial reservations. For these reasons, we usually suggest gathering in a known location before making our way to the activity together.

Having once overcome any initial barriers to volunteering elsewhere, it then becomes much easier to return individually or as part of a smaller group. In this way, a culture of cheerful volunteering has developed within BFC that now feeds into most if not all of our activities and events, as well as supporting the work of many other organisations. Buddying with others for various purposes in pairs or small groups has also been a natural outcome for many members, within and outside of the club's activities.

Hothousing constructive social activism

The ethos described has naturally given rise to various forms of social activism that have come about via BFC. A recent example is the community group Association Darfur of Northern Ireland, created as a result of a Volunteer Leadership Programme designed as part of the Belfast Integration and Participation Project.

Fluid teamwork

The vast majority of what goes on within and around BFC operates on the basis of volunteering and, in turn, volunteers tend to draw on the support of others, thereby drawing them in. For example, our 'Megaswap' events attract a growing number of members and supporters, all keen to help and with many turning up to do so on the day.



Setting up the 'Megaswap' – BFC volunteers and their friends

However, this belies the huge amounts of collective effort behind the scenes to create contexts in which all this is possible and our experience is that both newcomers and established members gravitate to becoming involved. Our annual BFC summer holiday, for example, is made possible by continual opportunities to volunteer, in a wide range of ways, drawing upon the goodwill, interests and expertise within the group.

'Belfast Friendship Club – an inspiring movement that encourages community cohesion (and so much more) across social class, faith, nationality and ethnicity'

Robert McCrea, Chief Executive, Migrant Help, 2013

Be the change

(6) Other thoughts

Becoming a 'friendship club'

Since 2010, there have been five other attempts at setting up something similar to BFC across Northern Ireland, set in different contexts, facing other challenges and enjoying varying levels of success. Of these five, two are still operating, two have closed and one was never able to progress beyond the initial planning stages, having found a 'neutral' venue too difficult to locate. However, the lessons from these other settings are remarkably common, judging from interviews with some of those involved.

All the ventures were responding to a perceived need in their own contexts and the location seemed to be crucial, both in terms of its neutrality and accessibility. Finding a leader / leaders with the necessary approach, attitudes, skills and experience – *'the right personality type'* – was also significant. However, other factors also affected viability.

Successes included evidence of meeting a need in various respects. These included attracting individuals of different religious backgrounds as well as BME members and those with disabilities of varying kinds, having a network of 'latent' members who turned up for events and also retaining a band of volunteers whose personal development benefited.

Challenges included the need to promote the group, to undertake outreach and to develop guidelines for handling different challenges – including protecting the agenda from well-meaning but misguided attempts to proselytise. There were also difficulties with language, funding, prescriptive leadership and dwindling numbers. In one setting, the 'dream' was expressed of opening up the group to those from across the historic divide. Interestingly, the BFC model seems to have achieved this effortlessly.

There was some recognition that, if building relationships was the agenda, then perceived success was not about numbers and also that 'one-off' visits might prove *'just as valuable'*.

Overall, there was a sense of significant learning and an appetite to continue, some of those involved recognising that they themselves stood to benefit at least as much as anyone else!

'Friendship Club is my home'
BFC member

Steps taken in setting up BFC

We:

- identified the need for a Friendship Club
- clarified our vision and value base – the what, why and how
- talked to stakeholders and potential users
- sold the vision to others from a wide range of backgrounds – minority ethnic support groups, universities with overseas students, employment agencies, community groups, statutory providers (e.g. Northern Ireland Housing Executive, health trusts), churches, other faith groups and advice agencies – and ensured support from councils and politicians
- identified partners who shared our values and our aims and who were willing to invest
- set realistic goals

Be the change

- identified the resources needed – venue, cost, staffing, publicity, launch costs
- talked with potential funders and secured funding
- put an action plan in place – making sure everyone knew what was expected of them
- held a good launch with publicity – using BFC cards for wide distribution and posters for display in partner organisations to help signpost potential users
- were prepared to take a long-term perspective, allowing time for trust to grow and numbers to build
- made sure we found the right person to facilitate BFC – who had the 'DNA' we were hoping to develop
- recorded evidence e.g. numbers attending events, written comments and photos
- were not shy in sharing and celebrating our success!

Dedication

The race relations coordinator and founder of the concept behind Belfast Friendship Club dedicates this publication to Rosa, Imelda and Gita, whose lives touched hers as a former community nurse. Helping to care for them in their later years, she learned of their stories as migrants to Belfast in the 1930s and 40s – and how none had managed to make many friends, living somewhat isolated lives in their own homes. She was inspired to think that *'if only there had been a Belfast Friendship Club'* they could have known and supported one another. Many years later Belfast Friendship Club was born.

The bigger picture

The island of Ireland was uninhabited until after the ice age. Those who see themselves as part of an indigenous population might recognise that their ancestors came here in search of a better life, to flee persecution or just to explore what was across the water. Given a chance to contribute to society, our new neighbours bring just as rich a heritage as our predecessors – the Celts, Vikings, Normans, Ulster Scots and Huguenots.

Dr Stephanie Mitchell

*'I want to say thanks to the people who envisaged it could be possible
and the ones who have actually made it a reality'*

BFC member

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Acknowledgements

As publishers of this guide, South Belfast Roundtable wish to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed, and also the Community Relations Council for making this publication possible. We also wish to thank all those who offered edits or suggestions for the text.

For more information about anything in the guide or for any enquiries about developmental work with your organisation please see:

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Community Relations Council



"This publication has received support from the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council which aims to promote a pluralist society characterised by equity, respect for diversity, and recognition of interdependence. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Council."

December 2014

South Belfast Roundtable

Since 2004 South Belfast Roundtable (SBR) has operated as a partnership of over 85 member groups from the community, voluntary, minority ethnic, statutory and political sectors who work to promote diversity and tackle racism in South Belfast. It works under the areas of building good relations, education and training, monitoring and managing race-related tensions and integration initiatives.

About the author

Stephanie has extensive experience in community development, and also as a counsellor, as creator/facilitator of personal development programmes, as a published researcher in education and, latterly, as integration project coordinator for South Belfast Roundtable.

She brings warmth, creativity and humour to her work, which is person-centred, highly relational and based on critical assumptions about our shared capacity to find joy in one another, regardless. Key questions about what *really* matters to us and what makes the difference in helping us to thrive individually and collectively guide all her work.

Cover artwork: Dunbar Design

Published by South Belfast Roundtable

How can Belfast —or any modern city for that matter— best manage its growing cultural diversity?

One small, but important, answer to that question comes
in the shape of the **Belfast Friendship Club**.

This remarkable initiative, which provides a warm welcome to newcomers to a city still wrestling with a history of intolerance, is a model of good practice worthy of international replication.

This booklet outlines the principles behind its success.

