



Research Centre  
for Children, Families  
and Communities



Canterbury  
Christ Church  
University

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## Final Report

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Client      Beyond The Page Ltd

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Project      Evaluating the impact of the United  
Mothers programme

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## Executive summary

### Context and project aim

United Mothers is a collaborative programme currently operating in East Kent, produced and managed by Beyond The Page Ltd, in partnership with Wantsum Arts. The programme's unique offering combines teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) with Natural Voice techniques including singing, plus drama and other creative activities and aims to achieve lasting change in relationships, communication and participation. Sessions are attended mainly by mothers who are learners of English but also those who already speak English as a first or additional language.

This project aimed to evaluate the impact of women's attendance at United Mothers groups on their integration into the local community.

### Method

Fourteen participants were recruited through opportunity sampling of women who were attendees at a United Mothers class in East Kent at the time of the research project. Participants were invited and supported to create personal sociograms to visually describe their community connections. The researcher discussed the visualisations with each participant on a one to one basis, focusing on their migration 'story', the nature of their social connections, their views on the United Mothers sessions and their perception of the impact of their attendance on their lives.

### Key findings

Contextually, we found that the social networks of the women were small and close connections were likely to exist within their co-ethnic communities. The strongest links that the women had outside these co-ethnic connections was in connection with their children's schools, as a result of their regular presence there and connections made with other parents through their children. However, the strength of these connections seems reliant on English language ability – those with weaker language skills had not developed any strong connections with English speakers at school. Some women also had developed limited connections through their place of worship or work. More distant connections or 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), which have been traditionally considered as instrumental in the lives of migrants in supporting the acquisition of social capital (see Bourdieu, 1986 and Putnam, 2000), were also minimal. This appears to be a result of limited opportunities for the women to develop connections as a result of their caring responsibilities.

Analysis of the discussions with the women, centred around their sociograms, enabled us to establish key themes around the value to them of the United Mothers groups and their perceptions of the impact of their engagement with the classes on their integration into the community. From this, we developed a tentative framework through which we consider that United Mothers supports the women's community integration. The framework describes a three-stage process:

**Stage 1: Women are successfully recruited and engaged** as a result of the following features:

- Positioning of United Mothers groups at the centre of the women's social communities
- An open door policy and relaxed attendance requirements widens reach
- No cost barrier to attendance
- United Mothers group facilitators are welcoming, friendly and skilled practitioners

**Stage 2: Holistic needs are met** as a result of the following features:

- Skilled differentiation – members' diverse language learning needs are understood and met
- Classes offer positive energy, fun and enjoyment
- Acceptance is offered, trust is built and United Mothers groups become a place of safety
- Group activities connect with other community hubs e.g. school, health, religion
- Close connections and friendships develop between group members
- In-house opportunities are created for members for work experience, volunteering and paid employment

**Stage 3: Community integration is supported** as a result of the following benefits:

- Enhanced language confidence
- United Mothers members' connections with community hubs are strengthened e.g. schools
- Enhanced social confidence
- Enhanced wellbeing
- United Mothers members gain paid employment or work experience
- Individual social connections increase and or are strengthened
- United Mothers groups become active community hubs in their own right
- Members' tolerance and understanding of other cultures is enhanced

### Final conclusions

This project aimed to evaluate the impact of women's attendance at United Mothers groups on their community integration. Creation of individual sociograms and accompanying discussions with fourteen women enabled us to draw a range of conclusions around their involvement with United Mothers and their perceptions of the impact of this on their social connections and lives.

Key findings indicate that United Mothers successfully provides women with support and opportunities to further their integration into the community. We tentatively suggest that the nature of this support operates within the framework of a three-stage process through which women are successfully engaged; diverse, holistic needs are met; and community integration is supported through varied means. Of specific note is that attendance at United Mothers groups supported more than a third of the women that participated in the research to gain some form of employment through their attendance at the groups. A second key finding relates to the identification of the United Mothers groups as active community hubs in themselves and, thus, the women who attend and participate as active citizens.

## Main Report

### Background and context

United Mothers is a collaborative programme, produced and managed by Beyond The Page Ltd, in partnership with Wantsum Arts. These two community organisations operate in East Kent (see [www.beyondthepage.org.uk](http://www.beyondthepage.org.uk) and [www.wantsumarts.co.uk](http://www.wantsumarts.co.uk)). Weekly sessions, lasting around two hours, are held in several community locations in the district and are free to attend for all women, although they are generally aimed at those who are mothers of young children. Originally linked into primary schools, they are now neighbourhood groups, with a range of referring agencies, in addition to group members. There is one closed group (not included in this study) at a safe house for women who have been trafficked or are victims of modern-day slavery.

The programme's unique offering combines teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) with Natural Voice techniques including singing, plus drama and other creative activities and aims to achieve lasting change in relationships, communication and participation. Sessions are attended mainly by mothers who are learners of English but also those who speak English as a first or additional language. Where possible, a representative of the school staff also attends the sessions. The United Mothers groups do not run for a fixed period but, at present, are dependent on the continuance of external funding.

### Project aim

The initial aim of this project was to evaluate the United Mothers programme aim of achieving *change in relationships, communication and participation* by capturing the changes in United Mothers programme attendees' perceptions of their community networks across a four to six month period and by understanding the role of the United Mothers sessions in these changes. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that it would be necessary to adjust the evaluation aim in line with the fluidity of the women passing in and out of United Mothers sessions, and also the nature of the data that could accurately be collected in a short period of time. Ultimately, this project aimed to evaluate the broader contribution that United Mothers makes to the attendees' community integration. As had initially been planned, community networks were visualised by participants through the creation of personal sociograms. Discussions with participants, using the sociograms as a prompt for questions, enabled us to better understand the women's social contexts and how United Mothers impacts on the women's community integration.

Sociograms are visual representations of social networks and include the individuals and groups within an individual's perceived community and the connections between these entities. They have been utilised in research in various forms, including electronic and hand-written versions, over many decades (Tubaro et al., 2016) and previous work has indicated that they are a useful tool with which to measure the networks underpinning communities of school staff (Penuel et al., 2009) and migrant communities (Ryan and D'Angelo, 2017). The specific ease of creation of 'hand created' sociograms offer the unique potential for communication of thoughts and perspectives which bypasses sophisticated use of the written or spoken

language and may offer a preferable means of expression for those reluctant to engage in research verbally. For these reasons, this type of data collection may present a rare opportunity to gather data in a common format that is both egalitarian and comparable from people with different English language abilities.

## Method

A literature review and scoping exercise was carried out to inform the development of a sociogram template and the most appropriate procedures for administration and facilitation of the creation of the completed visualisations by this unique group of participants. Fourteen participants were recruited through opportunity sampling of women who attended the United Mothers classes in East Kent. After the research had been introduced and appropriate consents obtained (documents were available in languages other than English where necessary), participants (working in a group environment) were invited to create personal sociograms with guidance from the researcher. Where necessary, language support was provided for those who required it. The researcher discussed the visualisations with each participant on a one to one basis, focusing their migration 'story', their social connections, their views on the United Mothers sessions and how they felt their attendance impacts on them. Interviews with participants varied in length from around 15 minutes to around 25 minutes and were audio-recorded.

The sociogram and discussion data was thematically analysed to better understand the impact of United Mothers on the community integration of the women who attend and a tentative framework for the process through which United Mothers supports community integration was developed utilising the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

## Building relationships and obtaining consents

We are extremely grateful to Sheila Macdonald of Beyond The Page and Jodi Watson of Wantsum Arts who have assisted the project by allowing the researcher to attend as many United Mothers sessions as required, facilitating the recruitment of research participants and planning time for data collection.

All United Mothers attendees that were approached to participate in the research agreed to do so. Consent was obtained from potential participants using documents written in plain English, translated into other relevant languages where necessary, and by ensuring that verbal explanations of the process were clear and transparent.

## Ethical considerations

The research was carried out according to the ethical requirements stipulated in the proportionate review process of Canterbury Christ Church University. This was applied for and granted on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2018. Data and research outputs have been anonymised and confidentially stored. For the purposes of this report, in view of the small number of participants and the need to protect the women's identity, the women's names have been replaced with participant numbers (UM1-UM14). Given the small sample size, specific

demographic detail which can be linked to these pseudonyms is not provided to protect anonymity and, for the same reason, any reference to nationality in the quotations has also been removed.

## Results and discussion

### Setting the context: the women's social connections

We asked the fourteen women in our study to plot their social connections on a sociogram diagram and Figure 1 overleaf represents a 'best fit' summary of their networks and community links. The centre of the concentric circles represents themselves and their closest relationships and connections. The next concentric circle represents regular and friendly social connections and the outer circle represents distant social connections or 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). The oval 'components' are people or groups of people with whom the women declared a meaningful social connection. The detail of the components indicates which language is mostly spoken by the women in connection with this part of their network and also whether individual components applied to most or just some of the women interviewed. Where neither of these is indicated, it can be assumed that the component was represented in all women's individual sociograms. The orange lines on the diagram illustrate where there is an overlap or connection between social groups. That is, that either a person or people that belonged to one social group also belonged to another or that a link existed in the form of visitors or visiting between social groups. The size of the oval 'components' is not relevant, though their proximity to other oval components and their positioning within the circles or on the borders of circles is indicative of the relative connection between components and in relation to the women.

### Close social connections

The creation of the sociograms had originally been intended to be limited to local connections. However, the discussions which accompanied the sociograms indicated the immense importance to almost all the women of keeping in touch with family and friends in their home countries: *transnational, co-ethnic* connections. Almost without exception, the participants described strong and enduring ties with this social group. A reliance on transnational, co-ethnic relationships via telecommunications for emotional support has been long recognised in migrant populations (Wellman, 2002) and, accordingly, the women in this study exploited modern communication technology such as social media applications and videophone software to maintain regular contact with loved ones. Some described almost constant contact with their mother '*every day, every second...*' (UM14) and for many the emotional strain of being separated from their close families and friends was pronounced and impacted considerably on their sense of wellbeing, particularly if they were not able to visit regularly or if they were worried about a loved one's health.

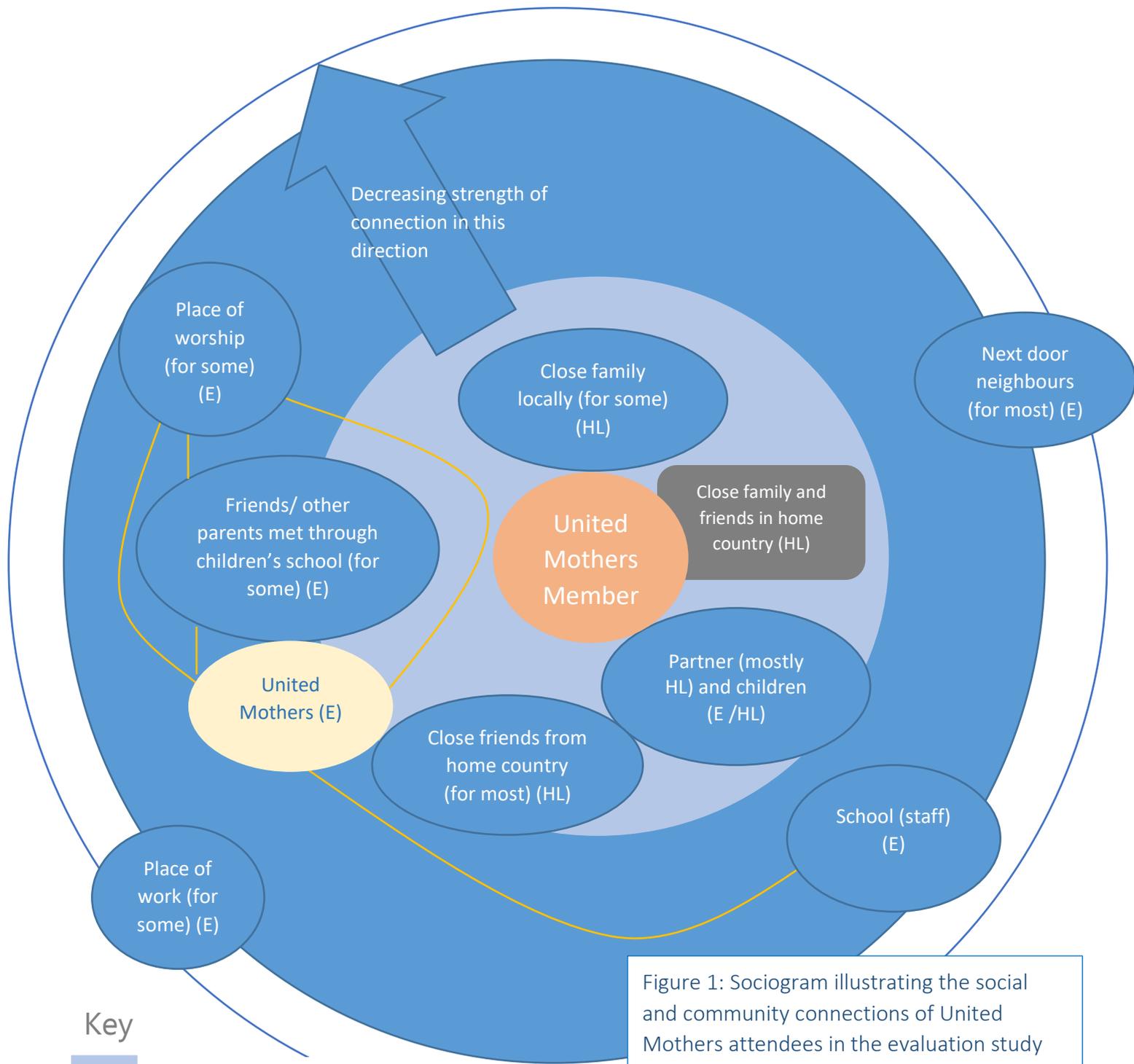


Figure 1: Sociogram illustrating the social and community connections of United Mothers attendees in the evaluation study

- Key**
- Inner circle: closest social connections
  - Middle circle: more distant, but regular social connections
  - Outer circle: Weak social connections
  - Connections between these groups
  - HL Speaks home language with this person/ this group
  - E Speaks English with this person/ this group

This centre circle of the closest connections also contained a range of co-ethnic social networks in the local community for almost all women in our study: all lived with partners or children or both and, additionally, most also had strong connections with at least one other family member or friend who shared their national heritage but who lived locally. Of those women who lived with partners, all described conversing in their home language (with the exception of two women whose nationality was different to their husbands, in which case they spoke English). Most communication with children was in a mixture of English and the home language, whilst conversations with other co-ethnic family and friends was always in the home language. This gravitation of social networks towards co-ethnic groups is well documented (e.g. Ryan et al., 2008) and is to be expected given the advantage of shared language and culture and the relative challenge of building relationships with the wider community. Some women in our study described how co-ethnic connections had been invaluable to them upon arrival in the United Kingdom (UK) for instrumental and informational social support such as providing work and advising about getting children into school. For some, this support was still well-utilised some years into their migrancy, particularly if their English language ability remained weak. However, the extended maintenance of strong ties with co-ethnic individuals can occur at the expense of broadening social networks and is generally considered to be socially disadvantageous (Griffiths et al., 2005). Additionally, the expectation that migrants can fulfil their social needs from within their own communities both over-estimates the availability of support resources and underplays the diversity that exists within co-ethnic groups (Ryan et al., 2008). Community integration is reliant upon the building of new social connections in the locality which is increasingly recognised as a complex process (see Ryan, 2016). However, in our data, despite almost all participants describing themselves as open to new friendships and social connections, most of the women were frustrated by the challenge of developing new friendships and making new social connections. They described being thwarted by barriers of language, confidence and the limited work and leisure opportunities afforded by family responsibilities. For example, UM10, a member with relatively strong English described the difficulty of inserting herself into the fast-paced chat in the school playground:

*Whenever I stand with the English mothers, they speak with each other so sometimes I don't understand. It's very hard to mix with them.*

Connections that *had* developed with English nationals appeared to have done so because of proximal convenience: some women described being on friendly terms with their nextdoor neighbour, for example, and others had developed strong connections with the mothers of their children's friends following playdate requests. Though in some circumstances, employment is likely to offer an opportunity for migrants to meet people and improve English language skills, this appeared not to have happened for the women we interviewed. Most were at home caring for their families and although some of the women we interviewed went to work, all but one worked in a job where they spoke no or minimal English either because the job did not require them to converse (e.g. cleaning) or because the other workers spoke their home language.

Overall, the social networks of the women were small and close connections were likely to be from a co-ethnic community. The strongest links that the women had outside these co-ethnic communities was with their children's schools as a result of their regular presence there and connections made with other parents through their children, though the strength of these connections seems reliant on English language ability – those with weaker language had not developed any strong connections with English speakers at school. Some women also had developed limited connections through their place of worship or work. More distant connections or 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) which have been traditionally considered as instrumental in the lives of migrants in supporting the acquisition of social capital (see Bourdieu, 1986 and Putnam, 2000), were also minimal. This appears to be a result of limited opportunities for the women to develop connections as a result of their caring responsibilities.

#### Development of a tentative framework of the process through which United Mothers supports community integration

Analysis of the discussions with the women, centred around their sociograms, enabled us to establish key themes around the value to them of the United Mothers groups and their perceptions of the impact of their engagement with the classes on their integration into the community. Given the lack of clarity in the academic literature around the key tenets of community integration (e.g. Ager and Strang, 2008), we employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which prioritises the views of the women over established (but contested) models of community integration. Using this thematic approach, grounded in the views of the women, we developed a tentative model of the process through which United Mothers supports the women's community integration. The model is illustrated by Figure 2 overleaf and comprises three key stages:

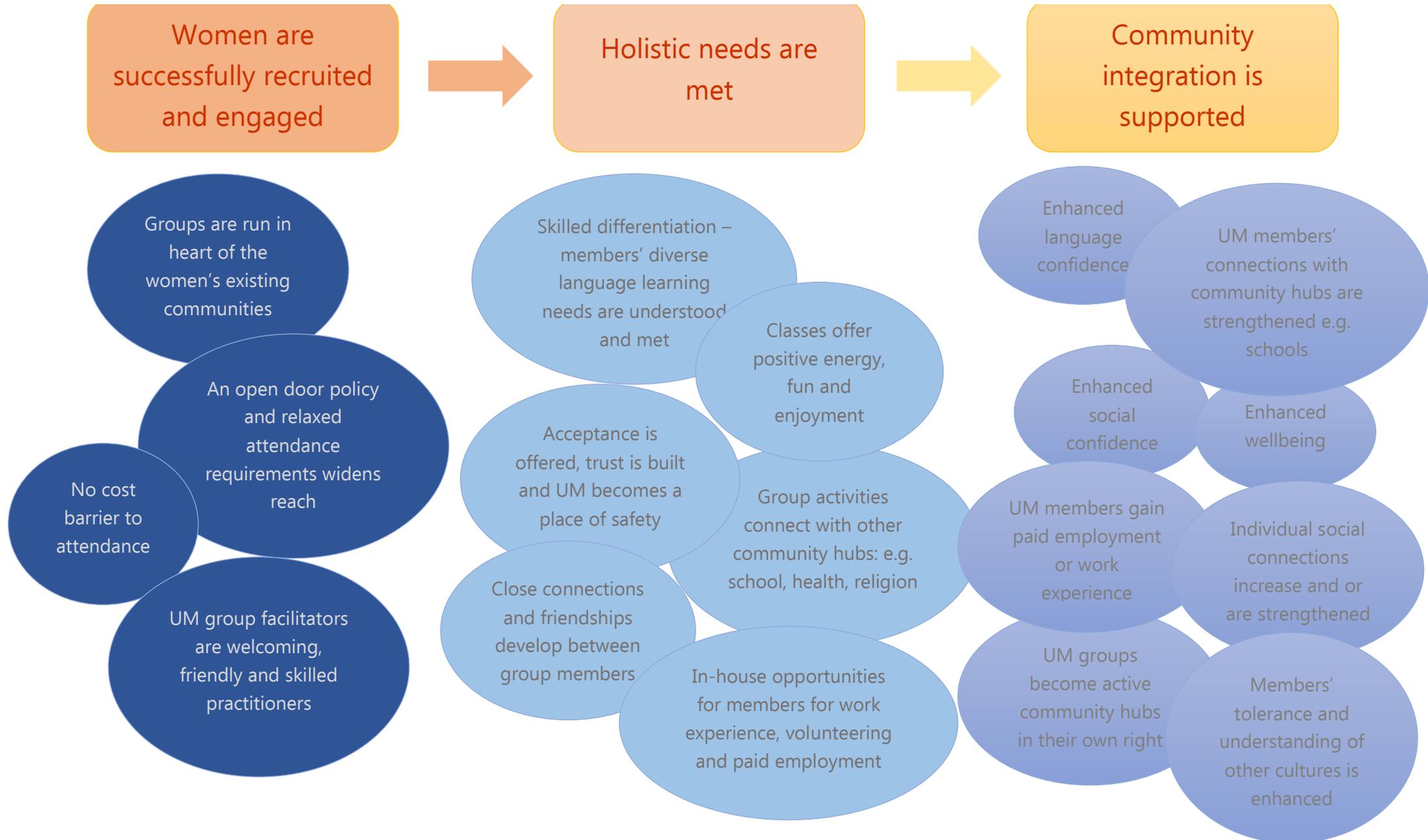
**Stage 1: Women are successfully recruited and engaged**

**Stage 2: Holistic needs are met**

**Stage 3: Community integration is supported**

The model is discussed and analysed in full below, using quotations from the women where appropriate.

Figure 2: A tentative framework for the process through which UM attendees' community integration is supported



## Stage 1: Women are successfully recruited and engaged

Key tenets of this stage:

- Positioning at the centre of the women's social communities
- An open door policy and relaxed attendance requirements widens reach
- No cost barrier to attendance
- United Mothers group facilitators are welcoming, friendly and skilled practitioners

The section above entitled 'Setting the context: the women's social connections' sets the scene for the positioning of the United Mothers groups. It describes close social networks which mainly comprise co-ethnic connections with a limited opportunities to speak English and forge connections with the broader society. On their sociograms, the connection with the United Mothers groups was plotted by the women at the edge of their close, inner circle or in the next concentric circle. It provided a regular and enjoyable calendar event which was keenly anticipated and, crucially, which brought them together with a group of women that they described as friends. The 'open door' policy of the groups' operations also meant that many women attended with a close friend or family member, further strengthening their connection and commitment. Most women were first attracted to the groups by the offer of 'free ESOL' and it is notable that in addition to the social aspects of the gatherings, the UM groups offered, for most, a rare opportunity to speak, practise and learn English. This is reflected in the quote below from UM13:

*I stayed in this group because it's the only place where I speak English...And I know many people, even they've lived here ten years and they don't understand – just simple things. ...because I think that people who come from [geographical area] normally they live in their own communities. You don't need English in factory.... If you come here to work, go direct to factory, in shops you don't need because you don't go in shops where you need to ask. At home they watch their own TV...*

Like many of the women we interviewed, UM13 had attended an ESOL class provided by the local authority but had completed all courses that were provided and had found herself searching for something else to help her continue her English learning. This experience is consistent with Macdonald's (forthcoming 2019) observation that traditional ESOL classes can lack flexibility and do not generally support integrated research into the English-speaking community.

Many of the women who were interviewed described living in challenging financial circumstances in which they struggled to meet their monthly household financial commitments. It is unequivocally recommended, therefore, that in order to be accessible to the women it hopes to support, United Mothers remains 'free of charge'. In addition, we recommend that the (continued) provision of a group with an associated creche is prioritised in funding applications. Macdonald, (forthcoming 2019) notes that childcare solutions and funded classes are two practical solutions to the barriers of young women accessing ESOL classes. We also support the maintenance of the 'open door' policy and flexible attendance

requirements which widen the reach of potential United Mothers attendees, since regular attendance for adults with caring responsibilities or on irregular shifts can become impossible (Macdonald, 2013) and, furthermore, the experience of the United Mothers facilitators is that the flexibility of the 'open door' is frequently utilised by members (Macdonald, forthcoming 2019).

With the policies above in place and by locating themselves at the heart of the women's existing social networks with strong connections to primary schools and a Children's Centre, United Mothers groups are well positioned to recruit the women that it hopes to support. This has been borne out by recent numbers of attendees, particularly at one group. However, once recruited, a challenge remains in engaging and retaining attendees in order that they can be supported on a longer-term basis. It was clear from our data that the positive 'first impressions' offered to new recruits by both members and group facilitators – the latter consistently described as 'friendly' and 'professional' – has been instrumental in supporting initial retention. This quote from UM5 encapsulates the general sense that was conveyed about the atmosphere of the group:

*I just love the people in there...The people are very friendly. The members, but also Jodi and Sheila. They know how to talk to people.*

## **Stage 2: Holistic needs are met**

Key tenets of this stage:

- Skilled differentiation – members' diverse language learning needs are understood and met
- Classes offer positive energy, fun and enjoyment
- Acceptance is offered, trust is built and UM becomes a place of safety
- Group activities connect with other community hubs: e.g. school, health, religion
- Close connections and friendships develop between group members
- Inhouse opportunities for members for work experience, volunteering and paid employment

The 14 participants that we spoke to in this project were diverse in all respects: their ages ranged from 18 to 48, they had migrated to the UK from (or spoke of a family heritage from) seven different countries and described unique and divergent life histories that had preceded their arrival in Thanet and at the United Mothers groups. Unsurprisingly, the reasons they gave for deciding to first attend and stay as active members at the United Mothers groups were equally diverse. Most women stated that they were hoping to improve one or more aspects of their English language ability, though this ranged from starting out as a beginning learner to being fluent but wanting to perfect an accent. The quotes below from UM2 and UM5 illustrate just two of the diverse language learning needs that the women we interviewed recalled as part of their decision to first attend the groups:

*I know my English is not good. I need to speak to people in English to function...going to doctor, going to council, going to bank. I need to talk [to] my neighbour.*

*When I heard it was a language class, my first thought was 'I don't need that'. But when I came here, it was a bit different. A bit of socialising, the multi-cultural thing. And the thing they were focusing on was fluency. That was the thing I was looking for, and I found it here.*

Despite the differences in English language ability and divergent language learning needs, all but one of the women we interviewed stated that they felt their needs had been or were being met through their attendance at United Mothers groups. This is testament to the ability of the group facilitators' expertise and skills in ESOL teaching and differentiation.

For some of the women we interviewed, language learning or improving language confidence was not the only motivation for attendance. For this group, the social contact offered by the group was at least as important as the language learning and they described being attracted by the sense that they would be accepted, that they might make friends, meet people from different backgrounds or, paradoxically, that the other group members would be 'like them':

*I like it because there are many people in the same situation...many people a long way from home. (UM4)*

*I like United Mothers. The people are kind. They are not racist. (UM7)*

*For me, the language is not the issue. I can interact and I can convey my point. The most important thing for me is socialising, making new friends. Actually, when you're living in a community, we should know each other, be able to help each other. (UM13)*

The United Mothers teaching approach embeds a unique, cross-disciplinary model that combines ESOL with Natural Voice techniques including singing, plus drama and other creative activities' (United Mothers, 2019). The response of the women we interviewed to the features of this creative approach was wholly positive. The voice work and activities which take place at the start of the session were described as fun, relaxing, confidence building and something which set them up for a productive day, as the quotes below illustrate:

*It's relaxing. No one is shy. (UM1)*

*It's relaxing. Because there are no men there. It's fun. (UM3)*

*I like it. It's helpful. It cheers you up first thing in the morning. I like it. (UM4)*

*I do like the exercise, straight away as we come in. Waking up our souls and minds and refreshing [ourselves]. It makes me want to do more when I go home. (UM2)*

*Jodi's exercise...at first I was thinking 'what is she doing?'; then I realise that it is really helping me because when I am making faces in front of these strangers, it rubs off the fear. I don't have to be shy. (UM10)*

*I like it [the warm up], I feel good! (UM7)*

More broadly, the women described the group space as 'full of positive energy' (UM4) and those who had experienced both, drew favourable comparisons between the United Mothers groups and a more traditional English language learning class:

*You feel more relaxed. You don't feel like 'you sit, you write, you feel like you're in school'. (At United Mothers) You feel like you're at home, you feel comfortable. (UM3)*

The enticing atmosphere of the United Mothers groups has already been described as an important tenet of the initial recruitment and engagement process detailed above. However, the sense of the groups as 'friendly' as an outgoing feature was unanimously valued and cited by the women that we interviewed. For some women, it made their time in the groups simply more enjoyable, whilst for a minority, the friendship bonds contributed significantly to their wellbeing:

*Everyone's really nice. Just so friendly. It's a sisterly bond. [Retells an anecdote that had happened at home and she had shared with the group that day]. The fact that I could tell someone about it. I was telling everyone and they were laughing and giggling. It was nice to have someone. Normally I'm at home and I don't have anyone to talk to because the kids are at school (UM9)*

Furthermore, for some women, ideas around friendliness moved towards the concepts of trust and safety:

*The main important thing about this group, is that we don't let anybody down. We are just holding hands. If someone is making a mistake, we are not going to laugh at them. (UM4)*

This notion of trust was reiterated by UM13 who articulates its particular resonance to the lives of migrants:

*There is a moment of trust. Trust is the thing. I can trust this society [United Mothers], these people. They will not betray me. Because many people who migrated, they went through the biggest hurdles of betrayal. From their own government, from their own people and this is a very big issue that sits deep inside us.*

Some women with stronger English language abilities had fewer needs around language and described being involved with United Mothers as providing a welcome opportunity to 'help others' or gain experience that might be useful to them in seeking work. UM13 describes how she had come to the UK with a strong English ability but, before finding the United Mothers group, had been without the confidence or the local knowledge to find a way to use her skills:

*I think I wasn't very willing to [join a community group]. No confidence. Not enough to offer something...I don't know. It's quite tricky because I know I can offer a lot but on the other hand I didn't know how to and where.*

Similarly, UM8, who also came to the group with a strong English language ability, explained how being able to support others was a valuable part of her United Mothers experience:

*I really like to be helpful too. There are a few ladies who really like to come and approach me for help...I do try to help them because although we don't speak the same language, I can still try to help them.*

Both UM14 and UM8 have been offered volunteering and paid assistant work in the United Mothers groups.

Finally, in terms of needs that were described as met through the United Mothers groups, several women described finding meaning in the connections made between United Mothers and other community hubs. Migrant mothers of young children have been previously described as navigating a specific 'borderline of citizenship' because of the necessity of daily interactions with educational and health settings (Macdonald, forthcoming 2019). The United Mothers groups have received informal presentations from local health and community leaders and from school staff and have made visits to places of worship and cultural centres. In particular, informational support received during visits from school staff were mentioned as beneficial:

*They started to invite visitors. Like the [headteacher] who came today. So that was stretching into the real society, the community. (UM13)*

*Sometimes coming to class is a headteacher and this helps with the children. (UM11)*

This particular focus on community integration in connection with children can be further contextualised by Macdonald's (forthcoming, 2019) observation that migrant women often find it easier to visualise the (future) communities surrounding their children than around themselves.

In conclusion, the women we interviewed described finding value in a wide and diverse range of elements of the United Mothers groups. The needs that are met through the groups are holistic and extend beyond those that might normally be expected from a traditional ESOL class. Our data indicates, however, that the women are hugely enthusiastic about what they perceive to be the benefits of attendance.

### **Stage 3: Community integration is supported**

Key tenets of this stage:

- Enhanced language confidence
- United Mothers members' connections with community hubs are strengthened e.g. schools
- Enhanced social confidence
- Enhanced wellbeing
- United Mothers members gain paid employment or work experience
- Individual social connections increase and or are strengthened
- United Mothers groups become active community hubs in their own right
- Members' tolerance and understanding of other cultures is enhanced

### *Enhanced language confidence*

The provision of ESOL underpins the establishment of United Mothers and we were keen to try to capture some sense of the impact of attendance on language abilities. However, drawing firm conclusions in this respect was a challenge given the limitations of the design of this study (without a control group) and the complexity of isolating language learning in a classroom whilst exposure to the language outside the classroom continues. However, other than two women whose English abilities were very strong, the women we interviewed indicated that they considered that attending the group had supported their language learning:

*When I came here, I thought that I could not pronounce words nicely, but now my pronunciation and vocabulary is improving. (UM10)*

*It's really helped me a lot. The more you speak, the more you learn. (UM2)*

*Because every single time, I learn something. However, I said my English, it's that profound level of English. Every time [at United Mothers], I learn something (UM13).*

Other women, whose English ability prevented them from fully articulating their perceptions of language learning, reiterated that attending the groups gave them their sole opportunity in their week to speak English, which is logically likely to have a positive impact on language learning. This was captured in great simplicity by UM7:

*I like. I learn. I practise.*

### *Enhanced social confidence/Enhanced wellbeing/Individual social connections increase*

Confidence in English ability was often followed up by the women we interviewed by a description of how they felt attending the United Mothers group had given them more overall confidence, particularly in respect of meeting others. This 'social confidence' was sometimes bound up with perceptions of improved language abilities but was also explained as an outcome of positive social experiences in the group, particularly in connection with the groups being friendly and supportive. The quotes below illustrate some of the range of circumstances where the women felt their social confidence had improved as a result of attendance:

*It was good for me because before I was very confident but (I had lost it). This was good for me, because I get more friends. (UM9)*

*I have more confidence now...when you meet someone new. Even when you meet English people. I don't scare like before. (UM10)*

*United Mothers certainly gave me something about confidence. The ability to speak to somebody you don't know. (UM13)*

For a very small but important number of women, a link was made between attendance at the groups, increased confidence and notably improved wellbeing. UM8 describes how coming to classes enhances her life:

*I'll still keep coming. (It gives me) experience...it change the colour in your life.....This kind of stuff makes life meaningful. I do still want to come.*

This long quote below (purposefully unattributed) powerfully describes the positive impact that becoming involved in United Mothers has had on one woman's wellbeing:

*For six months, I was stuck at home, not seeing people, not engaging with people. So the first time [I came to United Mothers], I was a bit quiet, shy, not talking as much. But now [six months later], I am talking more, I'm laughing more, socialising more. I have boosted my confidence. Even my family have seen a huge difference in me – I'm more happier, joking, laughing.*

*I just feel better about myself. I feel like I am somebody. Before I felt like I was nobody. You know, when you go through tough times, you feel like you're nobody, you're worthless. But, coming to United Mothers, you feel like you're somebody. You're a human being. You're noticed.*

Enhanced social confidence can also be linked to the generalisation of social connections made in the UM groups to other places. All of the women we interviewed described how their social connections had widened because they considered other members of their group as 'friends':

*Everybody (in United Mothers) is my friend. (UM3)*

All women that we spoke to concurred that they would happily greet and speak to other group members if they met them in the street or at the school gate:

*When I see people (from United Mothers) at the school, we start talking, chatting. (UM10)*

#### *United Mothers members gain paid employment or work experience*

We described in Stage 2 how some women had relished the opportunity to gain volunteering or paid work experience within United Mothers as a result of their involvement. For another woman, attending the group helped her to make professional connections that she would not otherwise have made (sometimes referred to as 'bridging capital' (Putnam, 2000)). This led to her gaining a volunteer position which has since converted into paid work:

*United Mothers has been a saviour for me here in England, because when I came here I don't know anybody. Here I meet different people, different professionals. I make friends. They also came to know about me, what kind of person I am...This is how I got the opportunity as a volunteer. (UM2)*

A second woman described how her increased confidence (as a result of her involvement in United Mothers groups) could lead to employment elsewhere:

*I finally can maybe come out of my shell. I can be of use to a wider community. I don't know how to say how does it feel. It feels right. It definitely gives me a chance to be visible for others who might potentially think of me [for work] in another place. (UM13)*

Overall, as a direct result of their involvement with United Mothers, five of the fourteen women that we interviewed had gained volunteering or paid roles either within or outside of groups.

#### *Members' tolerance and understanding of other cultures is enhanced*

*That's the only common thing. They might have might have different background – different religion, different culture, all that. But they are really kind people, they are kind to each other. Especially the ice-breaking part when we start talking, move around, stuff like that. Everyone tries to help each other, and that's it. Yeah. When they smile at each other, that's it! That means they are connected and it doesn't have to be the same religion, same culture whatsoever. (UM8)*

The focus of this evaluation was on the impact of United Mothers group attendance on the social connections between those who attend and the wider local community. However, an unexpected theme emerged in the data which is linked to one of the underpinning values of Beyond The Page: to 'break down the barriers of ...cultural differences' (Beyond the Page, 2019). Our discussions indicated that attendance appears to enhance knowledge and tolerance of other cultures. Several women described how they had little opportunity to meet people other than those from their own ethnicity: 'I meet different people, which I don't get the opportunity (for) in my regular life' (UM4) and others expressed delight that they had learned something new about another culture that had surprised them and which they had shared with family and friends. Finally, some women described how meeting women from different cultures had increased their confidence in speaking with people outside their own community and had reduced their 'fear of the stranger'.

#### *United Mothers groups become active community hubs in their own*

Finally, in respect of Stage 3: Community integration is supported, we concluded by reviewing the data as a whole that United Mothers groups have themselves become strong and active community hubs through which the women have started to become active citizens. Through meeting regularly, sharing experiences, supporting each other and through their involvement in community activities and by welcoming visitors, United Mothers attendees are effectively beginning to integrate into their local community. Beyond The Page and Wantsum Arts facilitate this integration not only by running the United Mothers groups, but by organising community events and facilitating community involvement. The quote from UM8 below successfully conveys the shared sense of community that surrounded a recent event:

*The activities we do, the events that we do...excitement. In this group, we do get excited a lot. Coz when Jodi and Sheila have got an idea, like [the Power of Women event]. We were excited, the whole group was excited, the whole group wanted to share something. And on the day, I see from their faces they are all smiling, happy, proud of*

*themselves and the group...We share the excitement, we share everything. I think sharing is the main thing.*

## Final conclusions

*After joining this group, actually, my confidence level is up. Now I can face different people as well. It has really helped me. You can see how many from different countries people are over here. Their languages, their style, you know. The main important thing about this group, is that we don't let anybody down. We are just holding hands. If someone is making a mistake, we are not going to laugh at them. We are always helping them. This thing, the core of this group has helped me to understand, to face things. Before that, I was afraid of walking the streets, you know, strange faces. But after joining this group, I have many friends. Wherever I am going, I say 'hello, hi, good morning!'. I am more confident to make friends. It's more easy for me now. I know if someone is Afghani...I know a person from Afghanistan [through United Mothers], so maybe the other person I am meeting is a bit the same. (UM10)*

This project aimed to evaluate the impact of women's attendance at United Mothers groups on their community integration. Lack of clarity around the definition of community integration posed a challenge but allowed us to prioritise the values of both Beyond The Page / Wantsum Arts and the aspirations of the women themselves in our study design. Ultimately, creation of individual sociograms and accompanying discussions with fourteen women enabled us to draw a range of conclusions around their involvement with United Mothers and their perceptions of the impact of this on their social connections and lives.

Key findings indicate that United Mothers successfully provides women with the support and opportunities to further their integration into the community. More than a third of the women that we interviewed have been supported to gain some form of employment through their attendance at the groups. By any definition, moving into employment and/or gaining employable skills and experience are considered to support integration into a community. A second key finding relates to the identification of the United Mothers groups as active community hubs and thus the women who attend and participate as active citizens. This is clearly apparent from the several successful community events with which United Mothers has been involved, but also can be reasoned from the mutually supportive nature of the groups and the connections that are fostered with other community groups. These findings are clearly aligned with a key element of the activities of Beyond the Page, namely 'engaging with organisations as active, creative partners and acting as a broker between these stakeholders and language-learning women' (Macdonald, forthcoming, 2019).

Aside from these clear markers of the enhancement of community integration, our data indicates that United Mothers groups benefit the women who attend in a wide range of

additional ways, all of which are positive on an individual level and most of which could be reasonably considered to ultimately lead to enhanced community integration. For example, all of the women that we interviewed considered that either their English language and/or social confidence had improved as a result of attendance. Improved language skills are clearly linked to social integration and when coupled with greater social confidence, any impact is likely to be enhanced. Most women also reported a wider social network, though the evidence indicated that this widening was limited to other United Mothers members. Other effects that were reported by some of our sample were improvements in wellbeing and enhanced cultural understanding, which are clearly valuable at both an individual and community level.

An understanding of the process of integration of migrants into communities has historically been subject to over-simplification in the academic literature. Traditional assumptions about how social networks are accessed by migrants to improve circumstances are now being challenged (e.g. Ryan, 2016) and the processes are now being understood as complex, dynamic and more dependent than was previously acknowledged on the actions of people in making connections, rather than the availability of the opportunities to make connections. With this in mind, we conclude that Beyond The Page and Wantsum Arts should persist, as far as possible, in supporting the wide-ranging holistic needs of the women who attend United Mothers. Whilst acknowledging the significant demands this places on the groups' facilitators in terms of expertise and skills, this appears to be the optimum route to best equip the women with the language skills, confidence, connections and opportunities to afford them their best chance at community integration.

#### [A note about our sample](#)

We are very grateful to the fourteen women who gave their time and shared their story to make this research possible. These women attended United Mothers at the time of their interviews and for this reason may have felt compelled to speak favourably about the impact of their involvement. An attempt was made to minimise the impact of this effect by reassuring the women of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data, by asking open questions and by using a relaxed, informal interview style. However, as is often the case, the data that resulted may be slightly biased. We suggest that this is taken into account when conclusions are drawn and recommend that further research is carried out to capture the views of those who choose to leave United Mothers without explanation. Additionally, the constraints of this project meant that we interviewed less than 10 % of the women who have attended United Mothers' groups over the time it has been running and, hence, our findings are somewhat limited in generalisability by this small sample size. Nevertheless, we consider the individual accounts of the women that we interviewed and the conclusions we drew from their analysis to be as important to the development of the United Mothers initiative as any aggregate data that could be gathered from the groups, since the former provides the crucial contexts and experiential nuances that would otherwise be missed.

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