



The friendship network

Instead of knocking on our neighbour's door for advice, today most people are more likely to ask Google or message someone on Facebook or Twitter. It's no surprise to hear that the internet is being blamed for the breakdown of traditional communities. But there is another side to the story; many new online groups are helping people who live near each other and have similar interests to get together and make 'real-world connections'.

Garden together

You may have heard of Garden Share schemes, where those who have a garden or a piece of land they find hard to keep up themselves offer their space to keen gardeners and growers. At the Landshare.net website, you can register your interest to offer land that needs some TLC, find land to cultivate, or share your gardening experience by offering to help out.

Garden Partners, funded by the NHS, is one of many nationwide

schemes set up to prevent accidents to the over-60s in the garden and to connect older people with younger, fitter gardeners. "Often, the man does the garden and if he dies, his widow doesn't know how to look after the plot, which leads to great stress," Sarah of Garden Partners explains. "But it also helps the volunteers. They tell me they like feeling useful and enjoy the fresh air and getting access to a garden they wouldn't otherwise have." The scheme can also mean that older people feel less lonely and isolated. Sarah says she has known volunteers to call on their garden owner to check they were OK. "One woman told me it was like having another grandson."

Streetwise

Many other online groups offer the chance to meet like-minded people in the real world. Localised Facebook pages, for example, are useful to find out about events and connect with your neighbours. In Bristol, Becci Glew set up BS4 Connect to

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support small businesses in the area. "It's about sharing events and important information around a busy community," she says, "which can give people a sense of belonging. The online group has encouraged many residents, who would previously never go near social media for fear of the unknown, to have a voice! We have nearly 2,000 members who are loving their community online and who are also meeting up and getting to know each other offline too. That has to be a good thing!" To find out about community groups in your area, the national website Streetlife is a good place to start.

Crochet crew

If you have specific craft interests, there are countless online communities you can visit, and many include directories to help you find clubs that you can join in the 'real world'. The Creative Crochet Collective Facebook page, created by Jacque Tinkler in 2011, now has well over

131,000 fans.

There's also an affiliated Facebook group, called Creative Crochet Crew, where members can share their own work and ask for help, feedback, or ideas. "Other group members are only too pleased to assist," says Jacque. "The love of crochet unites people from all around the world!"

Many of the members have met others face to face. "A lot of great friendships have been created that way! It's especially gratifying to see when people living close by are connected online, and then get together in real life!" says Jacque.

She adds: "I always correct those who tell me that Facebook is anti-social. I have many more friends as a result of my online friendships, and I know of many crochet groups that have begun as a result of connections made online. With the right attitude, social media is actually very social in real life as well!"



Online and beyond!

Are you a member of a group online? Or perhaps the internet is still the great unknown? Either way, we'd love to hear from you:

- Tell us your internet top tips, the online groups you belong to, and if the internet has helped you make real-life friends.
- Or, let us know if you don't know where to start and what you'd like help with.

Write or email us at the address on page 2 and we'll try and share your knowledge or help you out in future issues.



Other online groups that offer real world connections

Free Cakes For Kids – uniting keen bakers with parents who find it difficult to provide a birthday cake for their child.

The Casserole Club – helping people share surplus tasty portions of home-cooked food with older neighbours in their area who are not always able to cook for themselves. Currently operating in four areas of the UK. If you don't have the internet, call 020 3475 3444 for more information.

Borrow My Doggy – matching dog owners with dog lovers, allowing people to enjoy the pleasures of having a dog, without facing the demands of looking after one daily. In return, the owner gets a break and the dog gets extra playtime, pats and walks.

The Reader Organisation – getting older folk together to share the joy of reading with sociable reading experiences.