



# REVISITING OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

Learning the lessons  
about doing things differently  
to grow strong neighbourhoods



community links

## ABOUT COMMUNITY LINKS

We are a social action charity, rooted in east London and nationally focused.

Our vision is for confident communities ready to create and seize opportunities. Our mission is to generate change in the communities we work with by ensuring access to all forms of opportunity; learning, skills, employment and social networks. We are sharing the lessons and promoting innovations with a national audience of policy and decision-makers. We want to share and spread what we've learnt.

Our unique approach has been developed over almost 40 years. Not unique in the individual activities and programmes that we undertake, but in the combination of them – and critically the connectedness of them. The external environment, locally and nationally, has changed significantly over that time and never more than in the last three years. We have adapted and changed too; this new book is largely about those changes, what we have learnt, what we need to do next and what, in our judgement, government should learn from the Community Links experience. Of course we don't have all the answers but day after day we do wrestle with the problems and so experience a different insight from that of policy-makers further from the front line.

Our approach to everything we do is underpinned by our values:

**To generate change. To tackle causes not symptoms, find solutions not palliatives. To recognise that we need to give as well as to receive and to appreciate that those who experience a problem understand it best. To act local but think global, teach but never stop learning. To distinguish between the diversity that enriches society and the inequalities that diminish it. To grow - but all to build a network not an empire. To be driven by dreams, judged on delivery. To never do things for people but to guide and support, to train and enable, to simply inspire.**

In this short book we'll show you, through stories and data, how we work. We'll demonstrate the positive impact and show the extraordinary things that ordinary people make possible.

With thanks to Lankelly Chase Charitable Trust, our funders and partners in a three year programme to evaluate our impact and share lessons in social change and community building.

# THE CHANGE AROUND US

In 2010 we published a short book called *Out Of The Ordinary*. It explained the Community Links approach to social regeneration and showed how the quality of the user experience is shaped by the expectations that we hold for our staff and the way they work with service users and also the qualities we develop in the places where we work.

We described how the approach of a Community Links worker is characterised by a set of competencies that can be taught, managed, appraised and replicated and how appropriate buildings create the conditions in which relationships can thrive. Again these qualities of place can be identified and reproduced. We stressed that none of this mattered in isolation. All of it matters together.

In the midst of rapid and unrelenting change we have held fast to our values which underpin our work and have remained constant since we began. They determine what we do, how we develop facilities and services and what we expect of one another – staff, volunteers, supporters, partners and service users. Over the course of nearly 40 years we have learned from what works and developed specific approaches that now inform all that we do.

- **People we work with are the experts in their own lives:** Our work is developed from the ground up - driven by, and learning from, those with whom we work.
- **Needs are indivisible:** Many problems are interconnected and too often troubled people bounce from one agency to another. We work holistically with all ages and aim to tackle complex need with an interlocking series of projects.
- **People change lives:** Practical knowledge and resources are necessary to thrive and be free but it is the “deep value” power of an appropriate relationship that has the potential to transform.

- **A fence at the top of the cliff is always better than an ambulance at the bottom.** We want to prevent problems through “early action” not pick up the pieces and we want the people and the communities we serve to be “ready for everything”, ready to seize opportunity and to cope with adversity.

Some things have changed fundamentally and forever in the last four years, some things not at all.

When Community Links first started working alongside neighbourhoods, the nation was celebrating the Silver Jubilee; the Sex Pistols were selling vinyl records and inflation stood at 15.8%. The average weekly wage was £32 per week and an average price for a house was just under £5,000.

The messages of recession and austerity from the late 1970s sound very familiar to those of the recent past.

Government policy, framed, at least in the early years, by the rhetoric of the Big Society, has encouraged mutual aid, localism and a smaller state. Public services have been contracted out, more to the private sector than the voluntary but consistently away from government. Payment by results has characterised the operating model. Independent funding for the third sector has held up but some statutory income streams that have nourished our work for many years have dried up abruptly and entirely. The loss of Legal Aid for welfare advice was a particularly savage blow to a cornerstone service at Community Links.

Population churn continues to be a feature of our community in east London and of comparable communities elsewhere - about 20% move on and move out every year. Poverty continues to blight the lives of many who remain and most new arrivals fleeing war or destitution in other parts of the world:

- Two out of every ten people either leave or arrive every year, and those who leave have more skills than those who arrive
- One quarter of households in Newham live in poverty. This affects 50% of all Newham’s children
- Newham has the highest rates of ill-health and premature death in London
- And one of the highest crime rates in the capital

- Compared to other London boroughs, Newham has significantly lower educational attainment, the lowest employment rate, the highest number of young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET) and the highest rates of economic inactivity and benefits recipient.
- Newham has the lowest proportion of people with English as their main language of all local authority areas in England and Wales
- Newham has the highest proportion of adults aged 16-64 who have never worked (2%) in England and Wales, and a higher than average proportion of long-term unemployed (2.5%)
- Half the workforce in Newham is paid below the London Living Wage and over one in five less than the minimum wage

The cuts which Newham council has been required to manage since 2010 are equivalent to more than 50% of that year's budget. Local authorities and other public agencies across the UK but particularly in the cities and urban areas of England have had to reduce budgets quickly and substantially. Many initially reacted like rabbits caught in the headlights slashing short-term contracts and non statutory functions, not as part of a wider strategic realignment, but just because they were the things they could cut quickly. Preventative services, much of what we call early action, were particularly targeted. It was a false economy but an understandable one. The child who is a danger to himself or others cannot be abandoned. The detached youth work that might identify and turn around the "less important case" before it reaches crisis point was of a lower priority.

Now those rabbits have grown accustomed to the light and can see that the landscape has changed, possibly forever, certainly for the foreseeable future.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies say that more than half of the planned public spending cuts will have yet to reach the frontline by the time of the general election in 2015. Whatever the outcome of that election, life will get harder in communities which are disproportionately dependant on the public purse. Communities like ours. However, billions of investment in physical regeneration in east London will result in many tens of thousands of new homes and jobs in the next decade. These new communities and opportunities have the potential to transform this area.

Together with demographic change, this will result in 15,000 more people in Newham each year. And meanwhile, demographic change continues apace. The birth rate in Newham will go up from 4,000 per year in 2010 to 10,000 per year in 2020. This will result in a population, merely six years away, where over 50% of people are aged under 25, increasing the need to ensure the early action support we provide is embedded and effective.

Need is escalating and resources are diminishing, not just here in east London. As funds have been cut over the last few years, acute services have been prioritised at the expense of earlier action. More problems have become more difficult when they might have been prevented. These trajectories are unsustainable but they are not inevitable.

We know the public service economy won't bounce back any day soon but there are other ways of doing things. We have done some of them for years. This book is about that work; how it has changed, how we have adapted to seismic shifts in the operating environment, what's worked and what hasn't.

# LOST AND FOUND

Over the last four years we have endeavoured to develop and deliver a strategy that adapts to continuing change, adheres to principle and above all meets need.

We have endeavoured to address this stubbornly high and in some cases rapidly rising level of need like so many other voluntary agencies, in a period of suddenly and significantly diminished funding. It's not just the amount of funding – it's organised on radically different principles, and entirely different relationships with the local and national state.

Reorganising and rebuilding on shifting sand has inevitably been difficult. Some of what we have tried to do hasn't worked or at least hasn't worked yet. Just as two times Nobel Prize winner Luis Pauling once said "the way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas", we've tried and we have learned and we share that learning, as well as our achievements, in this book.

Since the beginning of 2011, Community Links has suffered significant cuts in funding. As a result, we have a far smaller staff team (220 permanent staff in December 2010, 125 in September 2014) and operate from fewer buildings (26 in 2010, 9 in 2014). We reach fewer people (30,000 in 2010, 12,000 in 2014) but they have more complex needs and require more thoughtful, joined-up support.

We've lost a lot, but found some new ways of working locally. We also established the National Early Action Task Force, assembling experts from across sectors to ask *how do we build a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that, as now, copes with the consequences?* Will our efforts, locally and nationally, deliver stability and success? Too early to be certain, for now the wind still blows, but we do think that the learning is worth sharing and we fervently believe there are actions we could take together that would significantly improve our chances of success and far, far more important, improve the chances and the circumstances of the people we serve. We end with those recommendations

# CHANGING PLACES OR CHANGING PEOPLE?

Our Early Action Task Force has worked with the Welsh government on the development of their Future Generations bill. In the course of this work we have spoken to young people in North Wales. Over and over again their stories have begun “we live in an area that used to have mines...”. Inquire a little further and you discover that the speaker doesn’t remember the mine - it closed before they were born - but the local story has never moved on.

Begin a similar conversation in east London and you will seldom hear young people say “this is an area that used to have docks” although, of course, dock work was once as significant in Newham as mining in Wales. The east London economy has changed and thrown up a new set of openings and opportunities for the rising generation. The change hasn’t always been positive. Half the workforce in Newham is paid below the London Living Wage and more than one in five less than the minimum wage, but the story has moved on and continues to move on rapidly and relentlessly.

One in every five of our community leaves each year. Many, perhaps for good reasons, they have trained hard and secured stable employment. They can plan for the future and are ready to settle. They move out of the borough, usually further east towards Redbridge, Havering and Essex, as generations of migrants have done before them.

Others move for the opposite reason. Their financial circumstances are uncertain, possibly short-term contracts on very low wages, possibly periods of unemployment, their accommodation is inevitably affected. They can’t put down roots and they move from short-term let to short-term let sometimes in Newham, sometimes beyond.

Both groups are replaced by vulnerable people from across the world and the cycle begins again. This perpetual churn means that Newham features continuously in the various league tables measuring poverty, ill-health and social exclusion. Its easy then to look at Community Links and conclude that, if this is still one of the poorest areas in the UK, we have been busy doing nothing these last 30 years or so. That is to confuse the people and the place. Lives have been changed but, for the most part, the territory has not.



Passenger and cargo ships no longer berth at the docks, yet east London is still one of a small number of places in the UK that attract new waves of people who are likely to be disproportionately poor and, initially at least, ill-equipped to flourish. Few of our new arrivals have qualifications which are recognised in the UK. The 2014 Newham Household Panel Survey showed that 36% of the population here have no recognised qualifications – double the London average.

This does not mean Newham residents aren't "hard working families playing by the rules". On the contrary, many work very hard, often on more than one job, but for very low rates of pay. More than 50% of the workforce here earns below the London Living wage and over 20% are illegally employed on less than the minimum wage.

Massive physical regeneration may break this cycle of "getting on and getting out". It is a measure of the scale of the current changes here that the Olympic Park, Westfield shopping centre and surrounding developments, although famous internationally, are actually responsible for only about 20% of the current investment in physical regeneration in east London. This large-scale investment and development makes us hopeful. It shapes perceptions and ambitions and throws up the opportunities that are so evidently absent in north Wales – but it is not inevitably and automatically a good thing: The Canary Wharf development on the Isle of Dogs has been a very big part of the east London story over the last 30 years. Parts of this area, which less than a generation ago was one of the poorest regions in Western Europe, now has some of the highest land values in the world; of course, they are not occupied by the same families. Poverty hasn't been eliminated or even reduced. It has been relocated.

## Sally Muylders, Neighbourhoods Manager

“It’s up to each of us to claim the legacy – no one will deliver it for us. Becoming connected should be a movement, something that we all try and do across age, location, class and difference.”

As a child, I would stand on the platform at Stratford station waiting for the train home facing what can only be described as a wasteland. There were train tracks, the odd engine and, in the distance, tower blocks, but mostly it was an expanse of space with nothing there. For someone like me, who grew up, worked and lived most of my life in Newham, the land that Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park now occupies simply did not exist prior to 2005. No houses, no shops, no destinations – just space.

When I was invited to a viewing gallery to look at the site as part of my work with Community Links, I couldn’t believe what I saw – in the middle of east London, right under everyone’s nose, there was a mass of land filled with opportunity and waiting for development. Winning the Olympics was astounding enough, but to be presented with a vision that included whole new neighbourhoods, schools, community facilities, all set within the natural beauty of a landscaped park, was phenomenal.

Timber Lodge, the purpose-built structure in the park that houses a café and community space, and is part-run by Community Links, is now open and for the people that we work with – those who aspire to start their own group or enterprise or those who already run one - access to the affordable, high-quality spaces will be a chance to take their projects to a whole new level, raising their profile and extending their reach beyond the local to the entire east London community and even wider.

The large housing estate opposite the Community Links centre on Barking Road is being redeveloped now. This will be the third time that the estate has been knocked down and rebuilt since the slum clearance programme in the 1950s and early 1960s. Previous programmes, particularly the tower block phase, which Community Links campaigned so vigorously around in the 1980s, entrenched the poverty here and exacerbated the social exclusion.

On both the Canning Town Estate and the Isle of Dogs massive public investment in buildings, albeit in very different kinds of building, has largely failed to secure material improvement in people's lives. Yet there are still few social programmes running alongside the enormous physical regeneration. This is no longer just about poor incomers – it is equally as important to link the new better-off families who have moved to the Olympic Park with their neighbours if the legacy is to be achieved for all.

No single agency is able to do all the above. That's why the building of partnerships across the sectors has always been important to Community Links and is one of our three key strategic priorities for 2013 to 2016.

**What we've done:** In 2010, Community Links was working from 26 centres across Newham and into Tower Hamlets. By the autumn of 2014 we will have consolidated our charitable activities into seven Community Hubs and two Trading Hubs. Whilst we would always prioritise people over places, there are some key neighbourhoods where a physical presence is essential, and a space for people to do things together underpins real social change. We have chosen, with fewer resources, to focus our work in the neighbourhoods where deprivation is most acute and the scale of physical change is most significant: Stratford, Canning Town and the Docks. The challenge for these neighbourhoods, and for those who have invested in them and care about them, is for new and old residents to come together, identifying and developing the assets, resources and knowledge they need to ensure that EVERYONE benefits from the billions of physical investment.

**What we've learned:** We think there are four big lessons that can be drawn from the experience of east London and that they have relevance to us all - public, voluntary and private sectors:

- 1) The fact that social indices in an area remain stubbornly static does not necessarily indicate that social programmes have failed. It might do, but it equally might not. We need to invest more in longitudinal studies that follow the person, rather than remain on the patch, if we want to better understand the value of neighbourhood-based work in communities like east London.
- 2) Similarly, changes in the physical landscape are not a reliable proxy for changing people's lives. The promised "trickle down" from Canary Wharf never reached the ground but at this relatively early stage we think that the Olympic developments, and certainly Westfield, are creating jobs, homes and opportunities which offer real potential for social as well as physical regeneration. At the very least they help to change the story and so lift aspirations. No young person here would describe Stratford as "the place that used to have the biggest railway goods yard in Britain".
- 3) Our job at Community Links is to support local people to be ready and able to seize these opportunities. We are not responsible for this on our own, but it is our principal responsibility. This means helping to remove the immediate obstacles that might make lives difficult like debt or inadequate housing, and helping to build the skills and confidence that will enable people to progress.
- 4) Keeping capabilities within these communities and recycling the prosperity that comes from progression would have a multiplier effect; one that is currently denied by the "get on and get out" pattern. We need to reduce the churn, in order to do that we need the planning and development of the built environment to reflect the aspirations of a mixed community – mixed tenure housing, decent places to rent, starter flats and family homes.

**Why it works:** These are neighbourhoods where Community Links has deep roots, a track record, and local trust. We are skilled at integrating newcomers into the communities where they arrive. Through community outreach and human-scale practical projects we put people in touch with each other, breaking down barriers, reducing social exclusion, building strong networks where people are able to support each other. Often this has been about offering a hand to people who may not speak English and may have come from a troubled past. Now we are also reaching out to those moving into the new shiny flats around the Park and at the Dock.

# ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Supporting people to be ready and able to seize opportunity may have improbable beginnings: Providing access to an exercise bike isn't why we run the Asta Hub, but done well, it leads into other things like computer training, job search, employment. The important thing here is that the menu of opportunities is created by service users. At the most obvious level people know what they want. It is also a fundamental belief at Community Links that people who experience a problem understand it best "the toad beneath the harrow knows exactly where each tooth point goes". (Kipling)

Exercise bikes, Spanish classes and even cookery lessons are not necessarily ends in themselves but as budgets have shrunk and needs have escalated over the last four years it has been important to remember that the means here are ends in the making. Engaging people in activities they enjoy and feel comfortable with is only a first step but it is often a vital one.

Many of the activities at our Hubs are either open access or have a low threshold. This provides for a range of service users, some with high needs some with scarcely any. In practice the level and complexity of need has risen significantly over the last four years. This trend has developed in a period when our resources have shrunk.

From the outset projects are designed to encompass more than the specific focus on which they are based – be that sport, cooking or photography. Skills such as group work, sharing knowledge, communication and confidence building are an integral part of the process. People need the tools and information to get-on but the road to survival is a rocky one and all too often people fail to achieve their dreams because of setbacks. Throughout the project – and beyond – Community Links staff are always there to provide support, encouragement and advice.

## Tracy Smith, Asta Community Hub Manager

Tracy knows exactly what to do when a new face appears at the centre. Tracy herself walked into a Community Links building several years ago wanting to work with children. After volunteering on a Youth Crime Diversion project she was offered paid sessional work with the team and began a college course. Working and studying with support from Community Links mentors and managers Tracy achieved a very good degree. She began full-time work with young people and was responsible for the initial “Future Links” employability course for young people - now a well established Community Links project.

Moving from youth to a wider community development role as centre manager was a big step, but Tracy has been instrumental in making our Asta Community Hub a focal point for these isolated and disjointed communities. “People come in to use our gym, or attend a toddler’s stay-and-play session and I talk to them – find out about them and what they want. Usually we have something else that is helpful to them – and often they can offer something useful to us”. Recently one woman who had been attending English Language classes approached Tracy saying she had been a computer technician in her home country and wanted to offer computer classes at Asta. The woman’s husband volunteered to come in over a weekend and upgraded the centre’s well-used computers – repairing a few that been faulty. Tracy is clear that some volunteers can initially take-up more time than they offer back: “It’s important to ensure they are confident in their role and feel supported. Each volunteer gets a detailed record of their hours and tasks – something to show a future employer”. Whatever the point of entry, Tracy and the Asta staff are looking for progression routes, helping overcome barriers, signposting and supporting centre- users to seize the next opportunity for volunteering, training or employment.

**What we've done:** We have endeavoured to tackle the rapidly changing conditions by reconfiguring key services in our Hubs. At the same time as focusing our work in fewer neighbourhoods, Children, Youth and Community Work teams were integrated into one Early Action Team who work alongside local residents in and around the Hubs to co-design and co-deliver new types of activity. This results in Hubs which offer a wide range of activities, currently including play, sports and arts, growing and cooking, health and wellbeing – crucially, involving more of the local residents more of the time.

**What we've learned:** It is not our experience that most service users at Community Links lack aspiration. On the contrary, as the level of staffing we are able to deliver at Hubs has reduced, so the engagement of local residents has increased. Residents themselves are planning the programme of activities, and co-delivering many of them with support from our staff team. The programme is different in each Hub fitting exactly with local need and reviewed as often as is needed. The number of residents taking part overall has gone up. But there's a fine balance. Reduce the staff numbers too low, and the engagement begins to drop. Keep them at the right level, and we can support people to do remarkable things together.

**Why it works:** These activities may seem 'soft' but they provide a space where people get to know each other before they feel comfortable to take their next step. The act of co-production offers opportunities in itself to develop confidence, skills and connections. For example, open access play sessions with a high staff ratio have become Stay and Play sessions which parents are required to attend. This enables us to engage with families in a way that we couldn't when parents could drop off their kids and we'd do the playing.



# VALUING THE PROFOUNDLY LOCAL

Community Links began on a bus. We paid £360 for an old Routemaster, stripped out the seats and converted it into a very basic play-bus which we then staffed with volunteers and took to a range of sites mainly in the south of the borough on a regular evening and weekend timetable. It wasn't until two years later that we acquired our first building by which time the play bus had begun to develop a wider purpose delivering regular advice sessions and occasionally other activities as well.

The ancient Routemaster was replaced by two newer models. A Community Bus became a permanent feature of our work and a frequent sight on the streets of Newham for the next ten years. We learnt a lot about mobile facilities: They are cold in winter and hot in summer, expensive to maintain and insure and surprisingly small. The buses that might squeeze 70 passengers shoulder to shoulder in rush hour can feel overcrowded with 20 people holding a meeting. Travelling to and from the venue takes an hour out of the day and finding parking sites that were big and prominent and not likely to be illegal was never easy. However the buses had one great virtue. They moved. It was the reason why we persisted: They took us to where people are rather than requiring people to come to us.

Some people who need our services have difficulty travelling – people with disabilities, for instance, parents with young children. Others lack the confidence or the knowledge to travel very far. The bus was always local. In addition to the practical advantages of easy access this lent a facility the sense of belonging to any given neighbourhood that it happened to visit. We held a children's competition to name the first bus. Some suggestions were wildly creative but "Our Bus" was voted the most popular. It is tht sense of ownership as much as access that has driven our later commitment to Community Hubs.

However it's not all about buses or buildings. Operating at a profoundly local level we gain a fine grain understanding of the communities we work alongside. Our growing health programme for instance grew from an insight that cancer survival rates in Newham are amongst the worst in the country. Different factors contribute to this including late presentation, meaning that people with symptoms of cancer delay seeking help from their GP, reducing treatment options and survival rates.

Research indicated that Asian women have lower than average awareness of breast cancer symptoms; confidence to detect breast changes and knowledge of the breast screening programme. Traditional methods have not succeeded in reaching this group and so we sought a different approach. The key objectives were to encourage Asian girls and women to embed regular self-examination as a lifetime habit and to increase confidence to seek medical help sooner. We sought to reach mothers, with these messages, through their daughters, by intensive work within the community of one girl's school in Newham. It worked - we know lives were saved. A similar community development approach to health with other local communities has since produced results in the related areas of lung-cancer, bowel cancer and more recently diabetes. Our profoundly local approach and detailed community understanding achieves results that conventional health education programmes could never deliver.

In *Out Of The Ordinary* we identified four sets of "qualities of place" derived from conversations with service users and staff about what makes a Hub work for them and why. These are consistent qualities but successful Hubs embrace the individual. They are profoundly local – they wouldn't work if they weren't - but this does make comparison and learning more difficult.

## Thamannah Miah, medical student and public health volunteer

I have been involved with Community Links for over six years now in the health awareness projects. Initially someone from Community Links came and spoke about the project while I was at school. I was looking to get involved in volunteer work to improve my CV and personal statement for my university application. I got involved and I loved it. It's given me confidence in public speaking and really made a difference to me personally. I became interested in public health awareness in schools and now I am a Volunteer Outreach Worker visiting schools and public events like street parties, fairs and the Mayor's Show to share public health messages about the signs and symptoms of diseases; lung cancer, bowel cancer and breast cancer awareness and we have just introduced diabetes as well. My work with Community Links was a large part of what I spoke about in my interview for medical school and I really believe that is what supported my application.

Not only does this help me to understand the community that one day in the future I will be working in, but it also gives me an opportunity to practice some of the skills that I am learning at university within a community setting. Community projects are so valuable they are at the heart of what is going on, especially in public health and prevention it counteracts so many everyday problems. We underestimate how much difference our communities can make for themselves.

**What we've done:** As resources shrink and need increases, the only way to work with people for as long as it takes is to create the right pathway for them through the range of services we provide (never letting them see the knitting in-between). For some people a quick fix, a new skill learned or a targeted, specific intervention works well and they move on positively. For others a long, patient, tolerant relationship is needed, particularly with young people who drift in and out of anti-social behaviour. In this way, by developing trust with a neighbourhood manager, a family can access a range of interventions that begin with participation in a neighbourhood summer barbecue, and end with an eviction averted, a child returning to school, a parent moving into work and a brighter future all round.

**What we've learned:** Starting on the door step, with a set of activities which are comfortable, enables people to take the first step. We then work with people for as long as it takes. Some respond well to an intervention such as youth work and quickly move into college and beyond. Others need far more time, patience and support to make the same journey. We provide this day-in-day-out for as long as people need us.

**Why it works:** It is not our role to force people along a path that they do not want to take. It is our responsibility to make the path available and inviting. We endeavour to build from a “presumption of willingness” – people want to succeed. A refusal to engage therefore is ultimately a failure of the project, not the individual. We best mitigate against that possibility of failure with an approach that builds slowly on comfortable territory and that starts, metaphorically and also literally, from where people are.

# BEING INDEPENDENT BEGINS WITH BEING ABLE TO DEPEND

We are always there to provide support, encouragement and advice; some people are ready and willing to take responsibility. Some need much more support. Some need a kick up the backside. Shifting towards self-help and mutual aid, calls for sensitivity, creativity and discretion.

The emphasis in the Big Society rhetoric on helping people help themselves and help one another isn't wrong. Perhaps contrary to the political messaging it isn't a new idea either, but it is clearly right. However our experience with the Hubs shows that whilst the aspiration is rightly universal the process can be more complex and can take longer in more disadvantaged communities.

Encouraging residents to run their own library might be relatively easy in a community where the service users have sufficient time, free from work or caring responsibilities to volunteer regularly and reliably; sufficient pension or other income to take on work which is unpaid; sufficient skills and experience to be capable of undertaking the task with minimal training or support and, perhaps most important, sufficient confidence to believe that they can help in this way.

As we have shown most of our service users originally connect with Community Links because they are in difficulty, often multiple difficulties. It is precisely because they don't have the time, money, skills or confidence to flourish that they engage with our work in the first place.

We seek to put these things right but it takes time. We deal with the crisis or crises and endeavour to build skills and confidence gradually.

It is a model that is designed to meet need. It might save money, probably will in the long-term, but that is not the first objective.

Enabling service users to “put back” throughout the process, not just at the end has always been a characteristic of our approach. Many of our services are delivered by former service users but there is a big gap between supporting the delivery of a service and running it. It may seem paradoxical but we can best enable people to take responsibility, to help themselves, when our organisation is best resourced when we have the staff and the time to train, to encourage and to support.

Taking the paid staff out of the suburban library might leave a vacuum that suitable volunteers are already ready to fill. Taking them out of the Rokeby Hub without investing in training and gradual transition just leaves a hole.

We also work with people more able to forge their own path. We’ve increasingly focused on enterprise, and with the support of corporate partners our “Links To Enterprise” programme can now help people to progress through our Business Boot Camps. Here people access the information and develop the skills to help them set-up their own businesses or begin the journey to self-employment. Our programmes work side-by-side with business mentors, banks, and retail outlets (such as Westfield) to provide opportunities to ‘practice trade’ before taking the plunge.

And, of course, it is when our service users, particularly our young people, are ready and able to take on responsibility that they are most likely to follow their dreams and move out. Like the parent in the empty nest, we may regret the loss, but we know also that we wouldn’t have done our job if they stayed forever.

To help people help themselves, to help them move on, Community Links and organisations like us need to be a permanent presence in the communities we serve. Our organisations need a stable income stream to facilitate the growth, the development and ultimately the independence of others.

**What we've done:** We've helped neighbours link up with each other to provide support where social care no longer exists and to set up community groups and local enterprises that meet local need or a gap in the market. We have introduced a new Enterprise programme which supports people – particularly young people aged 16–30, to hone existing entrepreneurial skills and develop confidence; to enhance employability, and provide support and guidance to those wishing to set up a business or new enterprise.

**What we've learned:** As the welfare reforms bite, living costs rise, and for the first time in decades we are providing food parcels to families with working parents – some working up to three jobs – the creativity, care and entrepreneurial spirit alive in the poorest neighbourhoods is astonishing.

**Why it works:** We recognise the statistics showing that people are coming off benefits as a result of reforms into extremely poorly paid and insecure self-employment. Basing our support around an individual, not a business idea, we encourage all participants to gain vital enterprise and practical life skills, assisting them to become more independent and skilled. We help them to connect to and secure opportunities, drawing on the relationships we have patiently nurtured with the regenerators in east London such as Westfield Shopping Centre and the Legacy Company. And we enable them to create their own opportunities, becoming the wealth generators and the job creators of the future.

## Adam Attew, Entrepreneur and Volunteer

I first came across Community Links via my mum – she was going along to a group at one of their centres I got roped into a walk around the Olympic Park and met a few of the Community Links staff. We chatted about my interest in baking. The Centre was planning a party for the Royal Wedding in 2011; cake is synonymous with parties, so I was asked to bake a cake for the party.

I became involved making cakes for events and started doing cake decorating lessons. Looking back I am proud that I had the confidence to put myself forward and offered to bake for coffee mornings and community activities. Some bigger events came up. I joined the committee at the Rokeby Centre and started baking at other Community Links Centres. As it began to grow I was baking, jam making, delivering home baked goods for parties and teaching classes in various centres.

I now run a business working from home. It's definitely changed from being a sideline into a business and I've registered as self-employed.

The Community Links Enterprise team are now talking to me about my business plan and I have a website in development and a business mentor lined up. When I am ready to progress there will be further support for me. I have definitely become more businesslike and I wouldn't have done that if people weren't pushing me and creating opportunities for me.



# READINESS: COMMON SENSE BUT NOT COMMON PRACTICE

We talk about “readiness” because a successful community should be defined not only against the countless things that don’t happen – heart disease, under achievement at school, violence in the family - but by reference to its strengths. We should all be ready and able to benefit from opportunity, to learn at primary school, to thrive in secondary, to succeed at work, to be responsible parents and contributing adults and, because we all experience difficulties at some point in our lives, we should be ready and able also to manage adversity - to cope with losing a job or a relationship, to rebuild after illness or bereavement, to adapt to change.

The language of “resilience”, withstanding the worst, presupposes problems, victims, perpetrators. It is more commonly used by policy makers but it is reactive, reductive, pessimistic, discouraging and, at its very best, not enough. The language of “readiness”, becoming the best that we can be, identifies assets and builds on strengths. It is proactive optimistic, aspirational and motivating.

Our Hubs are committed to supporting the development of communities that are ready for everything with a joined-up range of activities which are open to all; building skills and knowledge and seamlessly connected to intensive support for those who need more confidence.

It is clear that there are opportunities in east London at the moment but communities and individuals have to be ready and able to take them up. Building a range of skills is critical in taking people closer to the training, employment and leisure offerings that can change their lives. This is common sense but it isn’t common practice not least because most statutory agencies find it very difficult to think about and especially to budget for, the longer term. If it’s not a crisis, it’s not a priority.

A lot of our work with the Early Action Task Force over the last four years has focused on longer-term planning and budgeting: We believe that now more than ever we need to be reaching for the goals of the government's own fiscal framework – and “look beyond near-term pressures to support reforms that better position the UK for meeting long-term demographic, economic, environmental and social challenges, any of which could imperil long-term fiscal stability if left unaddressed” (HM Treasury 2010).

These Treasury goals are unachievable without changing a spending review process which sets the parameters for planning and budgeting in government and beyond. The normal three year outlook is inadequate when, as the framework points out, we need policies that add up in the longer-term. We have argued for ten year spending plans with year one and year ten costs published and updated in each Spending Review.

Each would include firm plans for the first few years, as now, and the implications of every spending decision, over the next ten years. The plans would of course be subject to regular review and updating, as circumstances and governments change but the projections would enable current priorities to be established on the basis of longer-term value.

Other factors, particularly the electoral cycle, also contribute to a short-term bias in public policy but it is in the processes of government, as much as it is in elections, that choices are framed and, and, almost by default, options constrained and decisions made. Without a “ten year test” governments will come and go but spending capacity and service demand in Newham and elsewhere will continue on divergent paths barely meeting current needs and accumulating impossible liabilities for the future. This is plainly unsustainable. A “social crash” is inevitable with the poorest areas forced into impossible choices between for instance child protection and social care for the elderly but of course unable to choose. Why wait for such trouble when it could be avoided?

**What We've Done:** The Early Action Task Force, set-up and led by Community Links has successfully:

- 1) Brought together leaders from across the sectors to unite behind a call for early action. This breadth of experience – from charity, business and the public sector – has given us credibility when dealing with everyone from large funders to senior civil servants. We have not been dismissed as the ‘usual suspects.’
- 2) Taken the case for early action to the heart of Government, prompting a Public Accounts Committee enquiry and National Audit Office report into early action leading to agreement from the Treasury that it will assume leadership on the issue across Government. Margaret Hodge MP, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, described our latest report as ‘essential reading for anyone planning for the next Government.’
- 3) Persuaded political parties of the importance of early action: ‘prevention’ has been a key theme in both the Labour and Liberal Democrat policy reviews partly as a result of the Task Force, and we hope to see it reflected in manifestos for 2015.
- 4) Worked with some of the UK’s biggest charitable funders to shift their spending and thinking towards early action, culminating in the launch of the Early Action Funders Alliance and its first initiative – a £5m Early Action Neighbourhood Fund- a fund for which we have been invited to make an application.
- 5) Inspired and supported the case-makers, for example in the Welsh Government’s introduction of a Future Generations Bill, Lancashire Police’s pioneering early action services, and in several local authorities around the country.
- 6) Built and supported a network of hundreds of commissioners, charities, funders and statutory agencies committed to early action and keen to embed it in their own work.

**What we've learned:** The work of the Task Force has not only embedded the concept of early action in policy discussions, but begun to demonstrate it in practice, whilst preparing the ground for others to apply this approach across a broad spectrum of public services.

**Why it works:** Investing in a society to promote well-being, reduce needs and help everyone contribute their best is a positive, forward looking agenda which shifts the emphasis away from simply cutting services toward more effective investment of public money generating a “Triple Dividend”: Thriving Lives. Costing less. Contributing more.

Taking this approach at the project level we task our staff to consider at each point of interaction if they could act earlier to improve our service or prevent a problem starting. This approach has yielded practical expression in, for example our Advice Champions project where local people are trained and supported as advice “first aiders” supporting their neighbours to spot problems early and resolve them before they grow into a crisis.

# THE IMPORTANT AND THE URGENT, NOT EITHER OR

One Community Links trustee observed recently that “we used to talk about hardship at these meetings. Now we talk about destitution. How did we let that happen?”

Our mission is very clear. We talk about readiness. We want to “generate change... tackle causes, not symptoms ... find solutions, not palliatives”. We don’t want to “do things for people” (mission statement) and “we don’t seek to make them dependent, but to be the influence on the lives of others that makes them free” (*Out Of The Ordinary*).

However it is very difficult to plan changes in your life, to work hard on learning and personal development, to feel confident and optimistic and to reach for those opportunities in the Olympic Park or anywhere else if you’re worrying about what the children will eat this evening. Over the last four years household bills have increased dramatically particularly on utilities. At the same time income has remained static, or in some cases reduced, job cuts or fewer hours, benefit changes like the bedroom tax and the council tax and the brutal and sometimes incompetent application of sanctions have, in various combinations, battered those who were already on low incomes with increasing ferocity. At our advice sessions we have seen the results: illness, debt, family breakdown and, yes, destitution.

There is a danger of our resources at Community Links getting sucked more and more into crisis management. This isn’t a problem of professional discipline. Crises happen all around us. Responding quickly has to be just as important as responding strategically. No one will think about training or volunteering or long-term development if they are scared about the debt collector calling tonight and much though we resent the need for Food banks, we now operate one.

We have to blend the planned and the unplanned working on carefully considered early action programmes but responding also to the needs at our door; a delicate balance but also an important one.

Many of the activities at our Hubs are either open access or have a low threshold. This provides for a range of service users, some with high needs some with scarcely any. In practice the level and complexity of need has risen significantly over the last four years. This trend has developed in a period when our resources have not grown. We have endeavoured to tackle these rapidly changing conditions by reconfiguring key services. Open access play sessions with a high staff ratio have become Stay and Play which parents are required to attend and Public Legal Education – effectively training service users to advise others - has helped us to meet increasing need with diminishing resources.

Reconfiguring more services to encourage local peoples to participate in co-delivering them is a successful development which we would expect to maintain even if circumstances allowed us to change again. We should probably have done it sooner and must keep pressing ourselves to reconfigure in the future but the new provision is not sufficient. The children who previously attended our open-access sessions but who don't attend now because they can't bring an adult, or the client with a problem that is too complex for a trained volunteer are likely to be people that most need help. Sustaining critical services for people with the highest needs has been a very important but very challenging priority for us over the last four years and will need to be a feature of our work in the future.

In 2010/11 Community Links lost all the Legal Aid income that had paid for early action advice. Explaining the decision to cut Legal Aid from these categories of social law justice minister Lord McNally captured perfectly, if accidentally, the superficial attraction and also the longer term absurdity of this approach to public spending: “we will not devote limited public funds to less important cases on the basis that they could lead to more serious consequences.” Lord Bach used a line from the Great Gatsby to express his disappointment with ministers: ‘They were careless. They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.’

## Legal Aid Champions

In an innovative partnership with Law for Life, Community Links has designed a **Public Legal Education** programme, and trained 20 local volunteers as **Community Advice Champions** to provide early intervention help. They have learned how to recognise when problems are developing into legal issues and how they can prevent these issues escalating. They share this knowledge with their neighbours and friends – impacting a whole community.

At Community Links we provide legal and debt advice to over 5,000 people in crisis each year. As well as dealing with immediate need our approach is to equip clients with the skills to prevent problems recurring and connect them to our employment support services. This new project extends our support to a wider audience and, crucially, ensures support is offered earlier. So far the main legal issues the project has dealt with are Welfare Benefits (43%) Housing (25%) and Debt (18%) a smaller number of immigration and employment issues have also been resolved.

Almost a third of the people helped with Welfare Benefits were affected by one of the following issues:

- **Bedroom Tax**
- **Council Tax reduction**
- **The benefit cap**
- **Benefit sanctions**
- **Employment and Support Allowance re-assessment**
- **Personal Independence Payment PIP**

We estimate that, in total, our clients were missing out on up to £2,000 per week to which they were entitled. This reflects our recent research finding that, as a result of the cumulative impact of welfare reform, life is becoming tougher for many of the people we work with. However this innovative programme and the associated volunteer training has given Community Advice Champions the knowledge and confidence to spot problems early on and to help people access the right support to deal with those problems whilst they are still manageable.

**What we've done:** We trained local people to become 'Advice Champions' in their communities. We also embedded our legal advice service in the heart of the community helping people deal with their problems before they become critical. At the same time we have maintained our specialist legal advice service so that those in crisis can be seen promptly and get alleviation from immediate hardship.

**What we've learned:** A long-term strategy, balancing the urgent and the important, is now more important than ever. Like many voluntary organisations we sometimes talk glibly about working for the day when our services will no longer be needed and have urged others to adopt a similar attitude. We are ambitious for obsolescence. But also like many others the rhetoric has sometimes run ahead of the reality. We know that we should constantly interrogate ourselves "could we or should we have acted earlier" but the fence building at the top of the cliff must be completed before the ambulance is stopped at the bottom. Successful early action is funded from savings, not driven by cuts.

**Why it works:** Champions are empowered through training and up-skilling which raises their self-esteem and self-belief. With this new confidence they are the perfect people to be able to support neighbours and friends with issues they may be experiencing; they recognise the signs of a problem starting. But whilst we know that we need to move people into seeking advice earlier, there will always be people in crisis as rules change and people's circumstances take a turn for the worse. By addressing the critical issues we enable people to take a breath and then support them to progress into other services within their own neighbourhoods.



# RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE LIVES, NOT TRANSACTIONS

Practical knowledge and resources are necessary to thrive and be free but it is the “deep value” power of an appropriate relationship that has the potential to transform.

All our experience shows that strong personal relationships change lives. Personalisation has been a policy objective of this government and the last, but too often customising services has been confused with humanising them - both are worthwhile but are quite different. Polyclinics even call-centres, may offer a service that will meet individual needs more quickly, efficiently and flexibly than the individual GP operating on their own but the service will be less personal. The polyclinic suits the busy commuter seeking holiday jobs (customised); the small practice GP may be preferred by the parent of a chronically sick child visiting the surgery every week (humanised).

Our Deep Value Literature Review (Bell and Smerdon 2011[[www.community-links.org/our-national-work/publications/deep-value/](http://www.community-links.org/our-national-work/publications/deep-value/)]) revealed a huge body of evidence supporting the proposition that better results are achieved where, in design and delivery, primacy is given to the quality and consistency of the individual interaction (humanised). Yet services are increasingly structured to, for instance, support the most troubled families with a dozen or more case workers each managing a superficial contact with the family. Over and over again child abuse inquiries reveal not that there was no professional interest but that professionals were falling over one another. ‘Deep value’ relationships should replace transactions as the organising principle at the heart of all our public services because they have a material and well-evidenced impact on the outcomes, on our physical health, economic performance and on long-term costs.

In practice we see opportunities for everyday connection consistently eroded in the name of efficiency. Rents paid online, GP appointments fixed through a console on the wall, benefits received electronically. Welcome advances perhaps for the busy and the well-connected but one less human interaction for the isolated and the unsupported.

We all, and particularly our public servants, need the maturity and the good sense to speak about love, what Barbara Fredrickson has called “that micro-moment of warmth and connection that you share with another human being” (Fredrickson 2013). We need to understand the place of trust and kindness in the public realm and, above all, to do no harm, to consistently and deliberately design it in to service reform, rather than design it out.

Again and again across our work we see the life changing impact of the right relationship at the right time, comforting and disturbing, challenging and supporting, sustaining and enabling. Each relationship will look different but there are common characteristics of success which we identified in *Out Of The Ordinary*. Staff competencies needed to achieve them can be taught, managed and evaluated. But the process isn't tidy and if there are quick wins we are probably playing the wrong game. Every relationship needs time to succeed but none will follow a fixed timetable. All need stability to stand a chance but nothing can be guaranteed. This leads us to the conclusion that there are too many moving parts to flourish under a business model predicated entirely on the regular attainment of fixed targets. It must change; there are no quick wins.

**What we've done:** Community Links has begun work with service standards and an implementation framework that are being piloted with the Department for Work and Pensions. We believe government should lay the foundations for a different way for working with a set of generic deep value service standards and it should require an implementation and evaluation framework to be developed in each service area. Now we need a cross-government commitment to embed this approach and to the transformation of every service through the systematic prioritisation of relationships.

**What we've learned:** Staff competencies needed to achieve Deep Value relationships can be taught, managed and evaluated. But the process isn't tidy and if there are quick wins we are probably playing the wrong game. Every relationship needs time to succeed but none will follow a fixed timetable. All need stability to stand a chance but nothing can be guaranteed. This leads us to the conclusion that there are too many moving parts to flourish under a business model predicated entirely on the regular attainment of fixed targets.

**Why it works:** We see the evidence here everyday

## Eugenie Coles, Employment Advisor

Spencer Trowbridge is a former British Army soldier who has served overseas. He enjoyed his time in the Army, but in the end had some complicated family issues to deal with and experienced a breakdown. He was finding it hard to engage with people – especially people he didn't know and was diagnosed with a mental health condition. Spencer was referred to Community Links by the NHS mental health team. He was keen to find something useful to occupy himself. He initially met one of our outreach advisors based at the primary school and children's centre where his children attend; Community Links deliver some of our employment services from community settings – directly connecting to people where they are.

Spencer's advisor Eugenie Coles supported him to get his CV in order, complete job applications and practice interview techniques. Eugenie says: "The first thing I have to do with a new client is to build trust - when someone comes looking for work I don't promise what I can't achieve. Often my clients have been knocked back and we have to spend a bit of time building-up their confidence – getting them to believe in themselves and their own abilities before they are ready to move on" Support goes beyond simply trying to find work, and includes all aspects of recovery even supporting Spencer to attend counselling sessions at Community Links. With Eugenie's support, when he was ready, Spencer got a job with Barking and Dagenham Council where he still works as a driver using the HGV qualification gained during his time in the Army. Spencer says: "Working again has been good ... now I'm back on the ladder. In the future I'd like to study – maybe use what I went through to become a counsellor myself. I'd like to know I'm helping someone in the way I've been helped". Eugenie does what is needed for each of her clients and always sticks at it; she kept Spencer informed about all sorts of job vacancies and training until the right opportunity arose, as she says: "There is no point sending someone off to get job if they are not ready to succeed."

# NO QUICK WINS

There are no quick wins, the payment process isn't neutral; it can support or it can undermine the choice and the application of the most appropriate strategies and the achievement of the best results

Community Links was one of six organisations to be funded under the DWP's new Innovation Fund in 2013. Although the fund would pay for exactly the kind of work that tackles multiple disadvantage and that we want to prioritise it was a bold move for us because the programme is entirely funded on Payment by Results (which we were used to) and required a social investment model (which was new to us). We embarked on a challenging journey with a social investor which necessitated the timely delivery of stretching results month-by-month. When the minister responsible for the programme - Iain Duncan Smith - visited in 2013 he met some of the service users and we explained some of the challenges. He met a young man who had settled into the programme at the third attempt - as yet he hadn't "achieved" anything. The young man's mother suffered from a mental illness. He was her sole carer and had been for most of his adolescent years except for the periods when he was living with a succession of foster carers. Unsurprisingly he had struggled at school. Already Community Links had invested more hours than we would be paid for and as yet we hadn't been paid anything. Was that wrong?

The Minister's response was considered. "It isn't in principle the wrong thing to do" he said "but this is the wrong programme to do it in". Fair point, we said, but what then would be the right programme for a young man who needs sustained and patient support for as long as it takes? The Minister suggested that we look for charitable donations.

Payment-By-Results is an unforgiving discipline. We don't think it inevitably leads to cherry-picking but it easily can if the right safeguards and protocols are not built-in from the outset. There is nothing wrong with paying for the harvesting of the lower hanging fruit so long as there is also provision made for the more challenging. Our concern is around the availability of that kind of funding.

This isn't just about government. The PBR sensibility has infected others in the wider funding community. It is not uncommon now for corporate sponsors in particular to set tough targets and expect strict adherence. Again, looked at case-by-case, there is nothing wrong with that approach but there is a problem with the aggregate if we find ourselves saying, in effect, some people are too expensive to be helped. It is inconceivable that any NHS hospital would turn away a patient because they were too ill. We are similarly resistant to such an approach but we need help to build a better understanding of the need for more nuanced, sophisticated, trust-based funding regimes.

Evaluating outcomes and paying for interventions that are effective and not for ones that aren't, is the duty of the public service commissioner and the independent funder. We welcome measurement and expect to be judged and paid on the results we achieve but paying for the right outcomes isn't the same as paying for those that are easiest to measure. A blunt approach to payment by results can drive the wrong behaviour and lead to unintended outcomes.

Our record shows that we are not risk averse. Nor are we afraid of scrutiny but there is work to be done with the most disadvantaged and that is an uncertain business. It would have been easier for Community Links to have followed the money over the last three years by focusing entirely on services which harvest the low-hanging fruit. Easy but not why we are here. We and others like us need funding that stretches us and scrutinises but that above all pays not necessarily for the easiest results, but for the right work.

**What we've done:** We've improved our ability to deliver Payment by Results contracts and 25% of our income is now on a PBR basis. At the same time we've doubled our independent fundraising income to support our Community Hubs and the work that we do with those who need longer term support.

**What we've learned:** In 2011, we said to our funders that we would work to develop the metrics which would enable our early action work in the Hubs to be funded via a payment by results approach and involve social investors. We've seen how a blunt approach to payment by results can drive the wrong behavior and lead to unintended outcomes. We no longer believe that this is an appropriate model for funding early action. However, we'll continue to deliver PBR contracts for those things that are easier to measure (into-employment programmes, pre-NEET support) and we'll apply the hard-learned lessons from our first Social Investment partnership to shape the next.

**Why it works:** Challenges remain, not least in our efforts to blend different types of funding to deliver holistic outcomes for communities.

# RESULTS PLUS TRUST. BOTH, NOT EITHER OR

Measuring what doesn't happen is more difficult than measuring what does. That's one reason why only 6% of government spending is focused on prevention. We, not just at Community Links but in the wider world, are still in the foothills of understanding how to measure and evaluate prevention although a substantial wave of initiatives and institution building, some resulting from the work of our Early Action Task Force, promises rapid progress in this space in the next few years. For now we should be ambitious and transparent in evaluating what we do but also be honest and bold about what we cannot measure and big enough to say over and over again that some of the things we've not yet learned to count may, none the less, be amongst the most important.

The development of the hospice movement over the last 50 years is one of the third sectors greatest achievements. It hasn't reduced the benefits bill, got the unemployed into work, equipped the next generation to be economically active but it is civilising, humane and for those whose lives have been touched by it of quite literally immeasurable value. Charity is not, first and foremost, about relieving the public purse and, though we at Community Links will argue that we do, it is not why we are here. We must sustain and develop the work on impact measurement and improve our understanding of what works but also recalibrate our approach to measurement and payment by results or risk becoming the generation of leaders that acted on the price of everything but understand the value of very nearly nothing. As sociologist William Bruce Cameron has said: "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted".

We need systems which acknowledge that though the precise impact of preventative services may sometimes be hard to measure the perfect should not become the enemy of the good. Sometimes knowing the cost of the status quo, economic and social, should be sufficient to allow for, and to support, measured innovation without guarantee of success.

And we need systems which respect the reality that services, like those provided in our Hubs, may be most important when the outcomes are most uncertain. The child who attends training twice and disappears,

who offends and re-emerges and takes six months to establish a record of attendance let alone achievement needs a patient service not one that depends for its sustainability on monthly results.

To meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and those who, without the help to change, are the most stubbornly expensive, we need blended payment regimes which back a process and pay for service as well for result. We can work with results-based payment if the cost base is assured in return for fidelity to a process. We now know enough to understand what those processes should look like and to be able to evaluate performance not just count results.

Trust is the bottom line. Such a measured approach requires more trust in both the partner and the process but there is a real and present danger that without it public services will become increasingly irrelevant to the needs of the most disadvantaged.

**What we've done:** We have worked with the Newham community all over the borough for 37 years. We have gained the trust of families by providing the best fun for their children at our open access play. We have continued to support these children through our youth offer and on to positive futures. All the while we work with the family providing all round support when needed. Some people who work with us came to us first as children. It is this constant presence and the quality of our care that builds trust and fondness over years.

**What we've learned:** we were delighted when, in 2010, we could share results showing that within a year of opening the Rokeby Hub, the crime on that estate had dropped by 56%. We hoped that this would be the basis of long-term funding for our work – given the amount that this reduction would be saving a range of public sector bodies, let alone the damage to the community ourselves. We set out to track community-wide indicators on crime, health and employment. Two years later we watched in horror as the stats fluctuated all over the place in the neighbourhoods where we work. We learned that far greater forces than Community Links shape these neighbourhoods, and that to tie ourselves only to statistical evidence is to misunderstand/undersell what we do.

**Why it works:** Where people have complex and chaotic lives and the environment around them is constantly changing they need a longstanding trusting relationship to enhance their security.



## Jason Forde, Community Enterprise Manager

Family life was tough for me growing up, a single parent looking after me and my four siblings. We never went on any holidays or to any theme parks – we had to entertain ourselves, so we'd just hang out on the streets.

My first contact with Community Links was one night when a detached youth worker introduced me to the Youth House and the CBS Youth Club. He said “You can come in here and chill-out it's warm and safe” – then I got to know about what was on offer, met some fantastic people. Not having a father figure at home, one of the Youth Leaders became a very influential mentor for me, he got me involved in some of the activities and I began to attend regularly. Community Links gave me a lot of experiences and opportunities that wouldn't have been open to me otherwise.

I moved on from the youth club and have managed a lot of different projects with Community Links; developing new ideas and delivering the youth offer. The biggest responsibility was when I was offered a manager post at the Community Links centre in the Royal Docks. I thought, “Wow this is a big job”, but I took the knowledge and the skills I had learned, developed a fantastic team, it just worked. I always believe if it's achievable, we can deliver it.

My current role in enterprise ties in with the national and local agenda encouraging communities to be more responsible for their own local area. My role is to support individuals and groups to develop into active members of their community, as individuals, an enterprise or even a money-making business. You just need one or two members of the community to step-up and say “Look we can actually do this” and we'll be there giving them encouragement, support and the nudge to help them get started.

## **EACH OF THESE LESSONS ARE IMPORTANT ON THEIR OWN BUT MUCH MORE IMPORTANT TOGETHER.**

### **LOOKING BACK WE SEE...**

- **That the rhetoric of the “Big Society” was often hollow and unoriginal but the themes beneath the banner are too good to go away and too important to be ignored**
- **That the public expenditure cuts of recent years will not be restored in the foreseeable future and that, nationally, we are living through a period of escalating need and diminishing resources.**
- **That these trajectories are unsustainable but not inevitable.**
- **That elements of the Community Links approach, particularly to early action and to relationship building, reduce need and should be the operating principles not only at the centre of our work but also at the heart of our public services.**
- **That such approaches can only flourish in the context of a thoughtful and trusting relationship between funder and funded.**

## WE CONCLUDE THAT EACH OF OUR LESSONS ARE IMPORTANT AND THEY REINFORCE ONE ANOTHER.

- The built environment is changing in east London. This is not necessarily or inevitably a good thing but it can be. Our responsibility is to ensure that it is.
- Early action, deep value relationships and the development of self help are ways of working which change lives and which in the longer term benefit the public purse. They are need reduction strategies and effective ways of working in this community and others like it
- They are all dependant on a high level of trust – trust between service user and service provider and trust between service provider and service sponsor.
- They all need long term commitment
- And they all need the assurance of stable support to sustain this constant approach.
- That support can only be assured when it is based on the consistent delivery of an efficient service and on the achievement of measurable results - a blended payment regime.
- Payment by results is a low trust arrangement suited to the funding of transactions that can be completed in a short time and can be easily measured.
- Work that is less predictable, longer term and more difficult to measure requires a higher trust relationship between funder and provider.
- Blended payment is better suited to the building of capacity, confidence and deep value relationships, to preventing problems not picking up the pieces and to the kind of work that is entirely dependant on long term stability.

## LOOKING FORWARD WE WILL BE...

- **Sustaining our commitment to the development of creative new approaches to early action, for instance through our work on enterprise (there aren't enough jobs so we help to make them) and health (health services can't cope with the huge increase in diabetes so we educate and support and reduce need).**
- **Promoting the importance of readiness and spearheading the campaign for a national shift towards earlier action across the sectors through our leadership of the Early Action Task Force.**
- **Campaigning for the recognition of deep value and for its application as the central organising principle at the heart of our public services**
- **Stretching, challenging and promoting the case for sustainable funding for the Hubs, the backbone of our work in east London.**
- **Developing the wider argument for blended funding.**
- **And as we began, ready to learn, eager to change, true to our founding values.**

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As with every endeavour at Community Links, this publication is the result of insight and skills from many members of our team. A big thank you for their contributions and helping synthesise the learnings from our complex, life-changing activity to find positive solutions and build stronger communities: David Robinson, Jude Simmons, Geraldine Blake and Richard McKeever. And a special thank you to every volunteer, service user and client who has worked alongside us over the years.

We are grateful to the Lankelly Chase Foundation for supporting the work of Community Links and helping us share our learning.





community **links**

# REVISITING OUT OF THE ORDINARY

When we published the first book in this series in 2010 we were at the beginning of what was to become the deepest economic recession in living history. We had just experienced the first deep cuts to our public sector grants. Four years on, the cuts continue. We have worked extremely hard to change our funding model. More of our work is supported by corporate partners and voluntary fundraising. Our grants from Government and local authorities have continued to decline. The heart of our work - providing 'early action' services and programmes that stop problems from occurring has seen the biggest drop in income. These programmes were 68% public sector funded in 2010, today it's less than 20%. This is a trend that seems set to continue.

When we published in 2010 we didn't include a cover price. And we haven't today. But as ever, we desperately need your support to deliver the inspiring, life-changing work that we know has the power to transform lives and neighbourhoods.

If you're inspired by what you discover in this review of our learning, please donate at [www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org).

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