

Community Links Report and Plan:  
Autumn 2020



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## Foreword



It is with the deepest gratitude that we share our Autumn 2020 report with all our supporters. We hope this update finds you well in these challenging times.

In towns and cities up and down the country and across the globe, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact. For us here at Community Links, we are seeing first-hand how challenging it is for individuals and families living in Newham.

Pre-existing issues such as entrenched poverty and deprivation worsened during the Covid-19 crisis, throwing up a whole new set of challenges for our community, our partners, and our staff who work tirelessly to be there for people in their time of need. This has been so in the face of significant increased demand for our services – in some cases up to 400%. Your support has meant that we've been able to ensure continued service delivery of essential programmes for our community, as well as the safety of our service users and staff alike throughout the pandemic and subsequent lockdown.

But with this unprecedented crisis, we have also seen heartening support and generosity from our partners, new relationships being forged, and exciting initiatives launched. Your continued help during this time means we can respond and navigate our way through much uncertainty with purpose, resilience and agility. We are also well positioned to take up new opportunities and innovate, to test ideas and to collaborate with others across different sectors.

So, with high hopes for a positive tomorrow for all, and with considerable pride in our work together, we share with you our Autumn update. Here we cover the situation in Newham and the impact of Covid-19, how we've responded, and our plans for the year ahead – outlining the challenges coming our way and towards the sector. We also set out opportunities to continue working in partnership to build stronger communities, for a better world post-Covid-19.

Our mission remains to support people to weather all sorts of storms. Covid-19 will be no different.

Thank you.

Chi Kavindele, Director

# Report

## The Newham context: evidence of need pre-pandemic

Newham is a rich and vibrant borough in east London with over 350,000 residents. It hosted the Olympics in 2012, is home to the Westfield Shopping Centre and, in recent years, has become an enterprise giant with increasing development and links to the City.

Newham continues to be, however, one of the poorest boroughs in the UK. Challenges for residents are on the rise due to housing shortages, unemployment and deprivation. For some locals, Newham holds a very different reality to the one of prosperity and development. It is one of exclusion and an increasing gap in which people find themselves as part of an 'old' Newham without access to the opportunities unfolding on their doorstep.

The following statistics illustrate just some of the challenges people are experiencing:

- 1 in 25 people in the borough are homeless, including 1 in 12 children, the highest rate in England <sup>1</sup>
- Child poverty is as high as 67% <sup>2</sup>
- A quarter of children living in poverty are from working families <sup>3</sup>
- Newham is within the most deprived 10% of boroughs in the country, ranking 12th of 317 local authority districts<sup>4</sup>
- Unemployment, pre-Covid-19, was at 14%, double the average for London <sup>5</sup>
- 32 areas of Newham are among the 6,500 most hard-up areas in the country <sup>6</sup>
- Pre Covid-19, use of food banks in Newham went up four-fold since 2017 <sup>7</sup>
- 33% of those who need welfare benefit support fail to register for Universal Credit, due to a lack of digital skills, language barriers, accessibility issues, mental health challenges etc. Only 54% of eligible people are capable of making

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<sup>1</sup>Shelter 2019, <sup>2</sup>Aston Mansfield 2017, <sup>3</sup>End Child Poverty 2020, <sup>4</sup> Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, <sup>5</sup>London Borough of Newham 2020, <sup>6</sup>Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, <sup>7</sup>Trussell Trust 2019, <sup>8</sup>DWP 2019, <sup>9</sup>MOPAC 2018, <sup>10</sup>Youle 2017, <sup>11</sup>National Mental Health Development Unit 2019, <sup>12</sup>MOPAC 2019, <sup>13</sup>StepChange 2018, <sup>14</sup> HMRC 2020, <sup>15</sup>The Sutton Trust 2020

a claim without any third-party support <sup>8</sup>

- Newham has the second highest rate of knife crime in London, with an attack taking place every 3 days <sup>9</sup>
- Courts in the vicinity of Newham deal with more evictions than any other Borough in London and there are significantly higher levels of homelessness than many London Boroughs. 65% of homeless people suffer a Personality Disorder <sup>10</sup>
- 21% of adults said that housing issues had negatively impacted on their Mental Health <sup>11</sup>
- The borough has more murders per year than any other London Borough <sup>12</sup>
- Over 7% of people in Newham are in problem debt, the area is known as the 'debt capital' of the UK with more betting shops per head of population than other London Boroughs. <sup>13</sup>

## The impact of Covid-19 on Newham

Covid-19 has exposed some of the deeply entrenched challenges in Newham, with dire consequences for local people.

During the first national lockdown, **Newham faced the second highest death rate of 314 boroughs in England and Wales**, with 144.3 deaths per 100,000 of the population. By contrast, the rate was 25.3 deaths per 100,000 in more affluent parts of the country.

**Newham also had the highest number of people on the Government Furlough Scheme in the country**<sup>14</sup>, as residents are disproportionately likely to be on zero hours contracts and to work for impacted industries employing low income workers such as hospitality, leisure and retail, the predominant employment types in the area.

The long-term impact on lost earnings is three times higher for those from poorer backgrounds and is likely to have a generational consequence for young people<sup>15</sup>. The pre-existing inequalities faced by families in Newham sees Covid-19, and its ramifications on employment, education and wellbeing, continuing to have a significantly adverse impact on the community and will do for decades to come.

## How we responded to the crisis

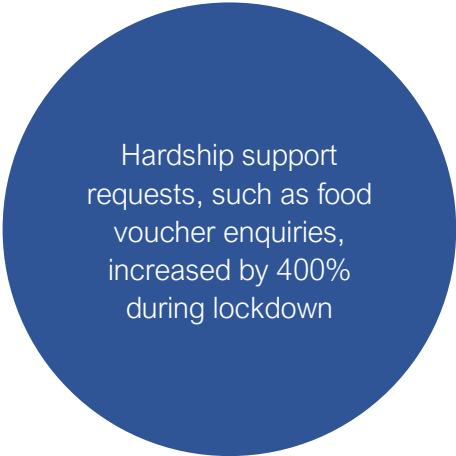
We are committed to supporting the people of Newham through these challenging times, as we have always done.

We anticipated that with the impact on jobs, declining household incomes would lead to a surge of need for advice and guidance. From the outset of lockdown

Community Links rapidly pivoted front-line services to remote delivery and mobilised volunteers, ensuring we continued to safely support people in crisis.

Many of our services saw a record level of demand during lockdown. During the peak of the pandemic we saw:

- Requests for advice and guidance increase by 23%
- Homelessness related cases increase by 316%
- Demand for our Emergency Food Support Service double
- Hardship support requests, such as food voucher enquiries, increase by 400%.



Hardship support requests, such as food voucher enquiries, increased by 400% during lockdown

We continue to see high demand for support from families who are concerned about the basics like food, bills, childcare and keeping a roof over their heads.

Responding directly to the dire impact of the pandemic on the people of Newham, we ran an emergency appeal to support their most pressing needs.

As a result of the emergency appeal, we launched:

- A local 7-day-a-week **Covid-19 telephone advice helpline**, in partnership with the local authority, who recognised our position in the borough, capacity to mobilise at pace and ability to refer to a broad partner network
- A **homelessness prevention service**, supporting people at risk of eviction or homelessness with advice, guidance and specialist support, in collaboration with Crisis, the national homelessness charity
- A **mental health and wellbeing service**, providing peer-support and wellbeing activities with the support of mental health charity Mind.



Over 1,000 enquiries since July 2020 to our new Covid-19 advice helpline

We are running two innovative new schemes to test ways of working in this new landscape:

- A **Violence Prevention Pilot** for at-risk young people and their families, providing peer support and advice for children and adults living in poverty, in conjunction with the Impetus Youth Endowment Fund
- A remote **Music Therapy Pilot** for young people in mental health distress.

## Maria's\* Story

*Maria is a qualified teacher and works part-time teaching children with special needs. She is also a single mother to four children, aged 14 months, four, 13 and 16. Maria lives in temporary accommodation after leaving her home due to her ex-partner's gang-related activities, which forced her to move home five times in almost as many years. Maria has no family support.*

*To supplement her teaching income, she was receiving the welfare benefits she was entitled to, however they did not cover her living costs and she accrued debts. Earlier this year she was served with a 'notice to quit' due to rent arrears of £5,000. She also had council tax arrears and numerous other debts.*

*In April, Maria came to Community Links for help with managing her finances. While helping her manage her debts, our specialist debt advisor raised the fact that her benefits payments seemed to be irregular and Maria's case was then referred to our pro bono support team from a partner law firm who carried out a benefits check. It soon became clear that Maria was entitled to £4,100 per year more than she was claiming.*

*This increase in her income made all the difference to Maria. It allowed her to begin to meet her financial commitments and put a plan in place to clear not only her rent and council tax arrears but also to start making payments towards her other debts.*

\*name changed to protect identity

## One year stabilisation plan and beyond

Given the impact that Covid-19 has had on the charity sector, it would be remiss for us not to reassure our supporters that Community Links is sustainable as an organisation. In July our Trustees approved a One Year Stabilisation Plan, which will see us through this turbulent period and allow us to focus on what we are here to do; to help the community. We began a strategic partnership with national organisation Catch22 in 2017. Catch22 are a social business whose values are closely aligned with our own. This arrangement allows us to retain our uniqueness, independence and east London focus, while assisting sustainability, and to progress further opportunities that create efficiency and maximise our impact and reach.

In the upcoming financial year, from September 2020 onwards, we will continue to develop the support our community says that it needs and will build on our role as a key community asset. We will continue to monitor emerging needs and test and learn innovative ways to support people. Our focus will be to deliver our programmes and to futureproof our work, ensuring that we remain at the forefront of emerging challenges in the borough. This includes addressing youth violence, the future of work for local people, rising deprivation, health inequalities and, importantly, drawing lessons for wider benefit.

## Newham and the third sector

Newham clearly has its challenges, as immediate issues caused by Covid-19 compound longer-term entrenched problems. However, the context is changing, and the voluntary sector is becoming more organised and impactful in working together, with Community Links at the heart of this effort. The value of the third sector is increasingly recognised by the local authority.

We are pleased to be working in strong collaboration with others and to lead change in the borough:

- Community Links was trusted to hold the Secretariat for One Newham in 2019. We led the bidding and delivery of all One Newham projects. Community Links alongside three other charities founded One Newham in 2018, an exciting initiative operating as a working group for the third sector in Newham in order to raise funds from the local authority for community projects, and to build capacity within the Voluntary Sector. One Newham is now a network umbrella body for 62 charities.
- The Council is now beginning to see the advantage of working with the Voluntary Sector. There is currently no Council of Voluntary Services (CVS) in Newham, however the Borough will commission this from next year onwards. Community Links and One Newham are well positioned to tender for this and is championing the commissioning of local charities.
- We are leading efforts to provide a civic society voice to council initiatives in the youth safety space, collaborating with other institutions such as the University of East London (UEL) to form the Newham Youth Safety Action Team to work across the borough over the coming year.
- We also supported Stephen Timms, MP for East Ham, in the campaign to end 'No Recourse to Public Funds', which bars migrants from accessing public funds during the pandemic. This is a particular concern in areas such as Newham where a significant proportion of people have complex immigration and asylum challenges.
- We are a London Living Wage Employer and supported London's Citizens UK branch for Newham (TELCO) in their recent campaign to increase living wage employment in the borough.



We actively contributed to a recent report by Danny Kruger MP titled 'Levelling Up Our Communities' on sustaining the community spirit witnessed during lockdown.

[View the report here](#)



Our work with public and private sector partners has been incredibly important during the pandemic, as we continue to respond to people in crisis and build community resilience for the long-term.

## Emerging needs and focus areas

Due to the rapidly changing external environment, we're closely monitoring emerging trends in the community, which include:

- **Employment** crisis increasing due to upcoming end of the Government Furlough Scheme and subsequent redundancies due to the economic climate. A **significant proportion of local jobs in Newham are in the hardest hit industries** – retail, hospitality and leisure. We will ensure we prepare our community, in particular young people, for the future of work and that they are equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to grasp opportunities
- **Housing and debt** - the freeze on evictions is leading to vulnerable people accruing significant **rent arrears**. With the lifting of the ban many agencies fear this will lead to **debt, evictions and homelessness**. We will ensure we are positioned to deal with surges in need for housing and debt advice services
- **Sustained increases in demand across all services**, meaning people are referred on to other agencies and not supported at point of contact due to capacity. There is concern that **the most vulnerable people are at risk of falling through the gaps**
- **A lack of centralised coordination** of referral pathways makes keeping track of cases and resolutions difficult. The need for partnership working is more important in this challenging environment
- **Mental health and wellbeing of front-line staff** as they deal with people in distressing situations and with their own potential personal challenges due to Covid-19. We know that those supporting others in crisis are often at risk of becoming people in crisis themselves
- **Digital exclusion** of the most vulnerable people due to 'digital by default' policies, such as the welfare benefit application process and surge in online services, accelerated by the lockdown.



Each of our programmes will be adding ambitions to their plans to ensure we begin to tackle these emerging needs and issues in the year ahead.

## Our programmes at a glance

Community Links engages with **60,000** members of the community every year across a number of programmes. Our work is divided into **six key areas**:

- Advice and guidance
- Youth
- Employment
- Health
- Community
- Learning and Policy

### Advice

We provide a comprehensive, wrap-around service delivering **debt, welfare, housing and legal advice** to people in crisis, thanks to a team of in-house front-line advisers and volunteers who rapidly pivoted to remote advice delivery during lockdown. Ordinarily we deliver workshops, walk-in sessions and a by-appointment advice desk to ensure our services are accessible to as many people as possible.

We connect people to the support they need, enable them to support each other and build capacity within the community to identify and overcome issues and **prevent them from occurring again**.

The Advice Team provides support to people through:

- Welfare Benefits advice delivered to the Advice Quality Standard
- Welfare benefits tribunal representation, with a 99% success rate
- Debt Advice from accredited qualified experts
- Housing, Consumer and Employment legal advice by pro-bono lawyers
- An emergency Food Support Service
- Connecting people to Help through Crisis, our Social Worker led programme that provides support for families in crisis and those experiencing critical and complex challenges.

This year we grew our ability to triage people impacted by the pandemic to a network of external referral partners plus internal programmes, including a new health and wellbeing support programme plus social prescribing to community activities.

## Youth and Employment

Our youth and employment services enable people to realise their potential by removing barriers to success, building confidence and improving life skills.

**More than Mentors** - a primary to secondary school transition programme that helps young people build strong peer to peer relationships, preventing them from falling through the gaps during the school transition. This improves wellbeing and prevents school exclusions, the single biggest factor towards subsequent social exclusion and risk of criminality and violence. We supported **450** young people in 2019.

**Talent Match** - supported over **400** young people in East London to help them find employment, education and training opportunities between 2014 and 2018. Some of these young people remain in contact. The programme provided one-to-one guidance enabling the young people to find a sustainable career and we are drawing upon this experience as we plan future work in this area.

**Studio & Programme** – we are converting a disused building on the campus of 105 Barking Road, into a purpose-built recording studio and arts space. This will be the base for a rich programme of music, arts and policy activities; providing high quality opportunities for creative inspiration, recording, performance and broadcast, plus wrap-around support, to achieve positive change.

**Create Your Future** - supports Black and Minority Ethnic women into sustained employment, education and training, bringing economically inactive women closer to the job market through supported job search. As of 2019 the project had:

- Recruited and engaged **1,195** participants
- Successfully supported **290** participants into education and training
- Placed **167** participants into employment
- Supported **144** participants into job search related outcomes.

In the absence of face to face delivery, the CYF team has had to come up with innovative and creative solutions in engaging participants who rely on CYF for barrier removal, confidence building, and employment and training outcomes. Methods have included forming cohort-based WhatsApp groups for messaging and video calls, and 1-1 participant reviews held over social media platforms or the phone. The team have been able to link participants to free online training, in an effort to ensure participants continue to develop skills during lockdown, thus increasing employment opportunities now and post-lockdown.

This method allowed us to successfully place 60 participants into a combination of employment, training and job search outcomes during the lockdown period.

**Digital Hub** – we ran two programmes developing digital skills in the community. We ran **ClickStart** for over 50's on building confidence using technology; and **TechKnow**, supporting younger people who struggled with using technology. **94%** of the participants felt more confident with using technology as a result.



## Health

Our health service focuses on Early Action to save lives. We see so often that ill health is the catalyst for further problems. Keeping people healthy has many social and economic benefits for the individual and for the community.

**Cancer Screening** - We deliver a telephone support programme that increases screening participation for people from demographics that are less likely to engage in the service. It is deeply rooted in our Early Action approach, the aim is to identify cancer at an early stage and to provide relevant treatment before it is too late, increasing survival rates and reducing cost to taxpayers. The service helps to create a community who are healthy, aware of the issues they face and ready to make informed decisions.

The programme covers bowel, breast and cervical screening **across 28 London boroughs**. Over the last 10 years the team from Community Links has called and, using the strength of their deep roots in the community, connected successfully with more than **200,000** patients who had not returned their bowel screening kit or had ignored their invitation for breast and cervical screening.

**Mental Health and Wellbeing** – This year Community Links began to work with mental health charity, Mind, to deliver wellbeing activities in Newham.

**Community Connectors** – We are working with the East London Foundation Trust (ELFT) on social prescribing and mental health resilience in the community. This is to ensure that our community has access to local resources, are connected into services and can be supported towards improved mental health & wellbeing outcomes.



## Community

**Asta Community Hub** – a centre in the isolated Silvertown estate beside the flightpath of London City Airport. Here we provide a local, secure environment and projects including after-school activities and a youth music and media recording studio, advice

and emergency food supplies. By the end of the year we hope to open a nursery there, supporting local parents to take up job opportunities.

[Small Grants programme](#) - each year we award **18 grants** of up to **£3,000** in the local area to support grassroots initiatives. The programme has funded brilliant initiatives over the years, from gardening projects, local history films, befriending services to cooking classes.

[Community Champions Network](#) - we strongly believe that those we support are the best people to help us design programmes and deliver services. Our Community Champions Network consists of local people who have used our services, they provide peer to peer support, communicate emerging needs in the area, input into recruitment and project design.

[#KnifeFree](#) – In 2019 we worked in partnership with the Home Office to train 18 Community Advocates on how to discuss youth violence and knife crime within their local areas in London. This led to over **450** community conversations, with **100%** of the advocates feeling more confident in talking about this difficult topic.

[Community events](#) – our Centre is very much a community asset and so, throughout the year, we see a host of events and activities led by local people as well as social enterprises. Our Silver Threads member-led organisation has activity afternoons for elderly residents, and we have other local charities using rooms for services and pop up stalls in our reception.

## [Learning and Policy](#)

Community Links has a long history of drawing ideas and lessons for change from its base in east London and translating these into inspiring policy themes to influence change locally and nationally. We amplify the voices of our communities, highlighting the problems they face and proposing evidence-based solutions.

[Policy recommendations, publications and events](#) - we are committed to making Early Action common practice. This ranges from better understanding the impact of Deep Value Relationships in effective service delivery, whereby service users build meaningful and trusted relationships for better outcomes, to learning how our local community can become Ready for Everything. Our Early Action goal is more important than ever now given the impact of Covid-19 on all our communities. Housing, mental health, welfare, inequality, employment, youth and social infrastructure are all pressing issues that we are examining currently for this approach.

[Early Action Task Force](#) – with a focus on building a society that prevents problems from occurring, rather than one that struggles with the consequences, we lead the Early Action Network. This involves over **650** practitioner groups from across the UK who receive a regular Early Action Bulletin and invitations to Early Action Insights, and an

events programme focussing on Early Action in specific sectors led by successful practitioners.

[Work with the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights](#) - in 2018 we hosted Professor Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur, to hear from our community on the issues they face and the solutions we're building to tackle the long-term challenges of poverty. Professor Alston stated: "*Community Links does a marvellous job of bringing people together and helping them to conquer the endless challenges that people with low incomes must confront in today's England*". In work collaborating and bringing together others we continue to share personal lived experience to influence positive policy change.

## Partnership

### Budget

Our 2020-21 Plan has set a careful, realistic budget which, as a baseline, will maintain our existing programmes and will just begin to achieve the new projects needed to support one of the hardest hit communities in the country. A small surplus will go towards replenishing some of the essential reserves drawn upon during the pandemic.

Successfully raising the support needed to achieve this budget depends upon two things:

- **Restricted funding** of 600k, to allow us to run specific programmes, we need **to maintain** current partnerships and support **and to add** at least two new public funding partnerships and two new private supporters.
- **Unrestricted funding**, this underpins the entire operation behind our delivery and supports innovation, research and development. We need **to maintain** all our existing individual, trust and company supporters **and to extend** unrestricted funding support from our existing 280K to a minimum of 350K per annum.

Achieving these targets will successfully achieve our budget. Going beyond these targets will enable Community Links to quickly support people who have been hardest hit by the impact of the pandemic, as and when new challenges arise.

## Forward Together

We are always grateful to hear from you over continuing, additional or new partnerships and support. Community Links has a long history of mutual working, many of our partner relationships stretch back many years. We always seek to deliver, and more.

## Thank you

Our home borough, Newham, is ranked the most affected by Covid-19 of all areas in the UK. This is not surprising given underlying conditions, inequalities, and inequity. Our commitment to support the people of east London is now more important than ever and we know we can't do this alone.

More lives than we could ever count have benefitted from your support. We hope we can continue our partnership to deliver these much-needed services in a borough devastated by the global pandemic.

We look forward to working with you on the task ahead, providing hope, support and services to those people most in need. Whilst, at the same time, continuing to share the local lessons learned for farthest benefit.

## Appendix

### About Community Links

Community Links is a social action charity, rooted in east London, providing support and opportunity to thousands of people every year. We transform lives and were founded on two principles: to find new solutions to old problems and to deliver them with the whole community.

Our Vision is for 'Ready for Everything Communities': enabling people to support each other to overcome problems, prevent them from occurring again and to help each other to thrive and achieve their goals.

From our home in Canning Town, plus Asta Community Hub in Silvertown and the Rokeby Centre in Stratford, we apply the learning from our local work to influence and achieve positive national change.

### Our home in Canning Town

We started our journey **43 years ago** on the Community Links Advice Bus. Purchased by our founders the bus was driven around East London offering advice and support services to local people.

By 1991, Community Links needed a bigger home. With the help of too many to name, we acquired the Canning Town Public Hall, a long-standing centre for social action in east London from 1893 to the present day. Sylvia Pankhurst had spoken there and during the suffragette movement it had been a key meeting place for activists.

Documents in 1893 charting the original plans for the Public Hall at 105 Barking Road state the vision for the building as "*Built by the people, for the people*" and we continue this ethos in all our work.

For over 100 years it has been a centre of social action: responding to immediate need and promoting social reform. In times of war and





flood it has served as a refuge, feeding and housing homeless people. For well over a century people have found support, shared, planned and celebrated within its walls.

History continues to be built in this amazing place, where voices are heard and impact on the local community and much further afield is being achieved.

## Our people

We take pride in being a locally representative charity with many our staff representing the community in our work:



We work with volunteers from all walks of life each year to add value, lived experience and essentially scale up our delivery. In 2019, **129** new volunteers gave their time, expertise and energy to our work.

Community Links also regularly hosts researchers and volunteers on active learning programmes to assist us in developing cutting edge policy and programme development ideas.

Our people embody the values of Community Links: *To never do things for people but to guide and support, to train and enable. To simply inspire.*

# COMMUNITY LINKS

Community Links

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