



Community Links Autumn Report.

OCTOBER 2021



COMMUNITY
LINKS



Foreword



We are immensely proud of the real impact Community Links has had in Newham and beyond over the last 12 months. Faced with one of the most challenging environments in recently history our response has been immediate, extensive, and sustained. All this hard work has only been possible through the goodwill and generosity of our many funders and supporters from across the country. Put simply, none of our achievements would have been possible without you - so thank you sincerely. Whether you are a regular giver, marathon runner, corporate sponsor, volunteer or commission a service, it all matters and it all helps us to make a meaningful difference for the community we are privileged to serve.

It is within this context that I am proud to present our impact and delivery over the last year, celebrating our achievements and recognising the need for our services in Newham and beyond.

Newham, our home borough, has been intensely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the peak of the crisis, we recorded the second highest death rate in the UK as well as the highest number of people on the Government Furlough Scheme (with so many on zero-hours contracts and insecure work). Our services were under unprecedented pressure from the start of the first lockdown, with people facing great concern, anxiety and uncertainty on the pandemic, household incomes, social isolation, and hardship. The pre-existing challenges within Newham worsened and compounded with the impact of lockdown on jobs, health, mental wellbeing, education, and housing.

Thanks to the support of our funders, we have had much needed stability to meet this growing and changing demand in our community. With your support we have responded with purpose, delivering our front-line services to support people needing to make impossible choices. We have also been able to strengthen our services, boosting capacity where needed to meet growing demand. Finally, we have been able to innovate, testing new ideas as needs evolve with the crisis.

We have also continued our ethos of taking our learning on a local level for national benefit, ensuring our work does not just sit within Newham but is translated into positive, meaningful change more widely.

This year, we are expected to positively touch the lives of over 90,000 people. This far exceeds any figure Community Links has ever reached in the past. It is testimony to the extent of the challenges with which we are faced, and the robustness of our response with your support.

Chi Kavindele, Director, Community Links

Community Links 2020-21 Highlights

Links Studios Launch

In August 2021 we were thrilled to launch Links Studios, a recording studio for young people aged 11- 19, who are based in the Newham community. The studio was formally opened by Ronnie Wood from the Rolling Stones and we were joined by many familiar faces at the launch event, which felt even more poignant after 18 months of not being able to spend time together in person.

Links Studios activities will be delivered by a qualified Level 3 Sound Technician and supported by a Youth Development Coordinator, young people will have access to song writing workshops, music production courses, video and photography workshops, sound engineering workshops, and courses to develop social media skills. Alongside this, Links Studios is supporting young people to move into sustainable creative and digital employment pathways.

Building on our strong presence in Newham, young people will be recruited through local organisations such as schools, detached outreach and referrals from statutory services. Links Studios will use music as a hook, to help young people express themselves and explore important key themes such as, heritage, diversity, gangs, criminality, and child sexual exploitation as well as be a positive diversionary activity from issues such as knife crime.

Watch this space for news and stories from Links Studios throughout the next year!

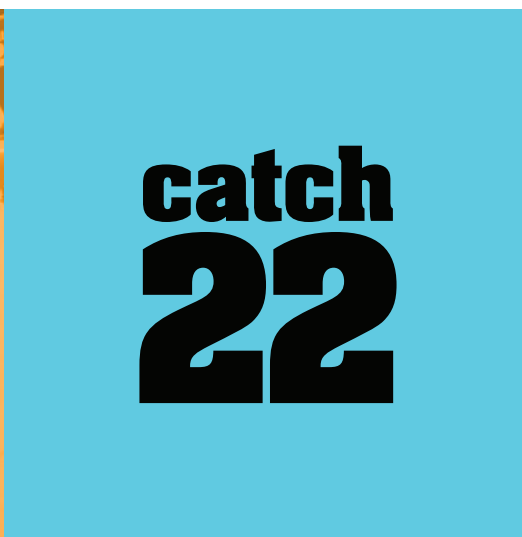


Merger with Catch22

In February 2021, Community Links merged with Catch22. The two organisations have shared back office and corporate services since early 2017 when Community Links joined the Catch22 Group. The merger is the next step in their relationship, after both boards decided to strengthen the partnership and merge fully.

Benefits of the merger will be recognised in three broad areas: Sustainability, Scope and Scale. Although not solely about cost saving, it will come as no surprise that the Covid 19 pandemic has accelerated the speed of integration given pressure on existing funds and the increased need for Community Links' work – demand for some services over summer 2020 increased by up to 400%.

Community Link's name, branding and logo established over 40 years ago will continue, as will its commitment to the community in Newham and East London. We remain solely responsible for raising our own budget, which is ringfenced, meaning all funds donated go towards our work in the community.





Advice

Our advice services provide comprehensive, wrap-around support with debt, housing, social welfare, and legal advice as well as emergency food provisions. Our team have seen a spike in demand, which was a result of pre-existing issues in Newham such as poverty, homelessness rates, unemployment, and poor living conditions as well the compounding impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns.

In the last year, our advice team supported a total of 3,841 people.

We continued to run advice services and support people through the second and third lockdown, with the support of over 20 volunteers and students on placement. We have successfully transformed our advice service to a hybrid delivery model, offering both remote and face-to-face advice.

The advice team have assisted over 1,080 clients with welfare benefits, housing and debt advice. We have supported clients in financial difficulty to restructure their debt payments and write off large amounts of debt, which they would have no ability to pay back. Providing all of our debt clients with the opportunity to benefit from financial capability guidance. Alongside this we have ensured that those with the worst housing conditions are able to better their home environment and prevent eviction by accessing an experienced housing solicitor.

Our community and well-being programme, in partnership with Mind, supported 2,150 people. We are provided telephone befriending, peer to peer support group sessions and activities for those facing loneliness or mental health challenges.

Ahmed contacted us in September, being terribly worried about the level of arrears he was amassing, including with his: rent, council tax, electricity and gas supplier, water charges, phone contract, debit card overdraft, and various other non-priority creditors. In addition, he was struggling to find employment, having lost his job during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

Ahmed is 50 years old and lives alone in an housing association studio flat, which was in a bad state of disrepair. Although he can rely on support from his family, they do not live close by.

We referred Ahmed to our reception team, so that he could be given some food vouchers and also referred him to our Wednesday, evening drop-in Foodbank service.

A benefit check was carried out by one of our corporate volunteers, via telephone, which showed Ahmed was entitled to an estimated £8,350 of additional benefits, per year. After we heard that he kept his apartment cold, in order to try to reduce spending on heating, we signposted him to the Warm Home Discount Scheme. Further, we negotiated reduced payments to his gas and electricity account, to an affordable amount.

After negotiation with the client's housing officer, we managed to get the deductions from his benefit (paid towards rent arrears) reduced by 50%; a much more sustainable payment arrangement.

Through our relationship with Catch22's employability team, we hope to boost Ahmed's confidence, assist him to bring his CV up-to-date and help him back into the job market.

Ahmed is extremely grateful for the holistic help that we have provided and feels much more confident about his future.

*names have been changed to protect client's identity

Our impact in 2020-2021

Community

Our work in and around the community of Newham continues to have a large impact. Below offers an overview of the support we have provided over the last 12 months.

Covid-19 Helpline

The Helpline, initially started as a 6-week pilot in July 2020 in partnership with Newham Council and One Newham, has gone on to successfully support over 12,000 Newham residents. From Aug 2020 to Aug 2021, the helpline has:

- 8450 residents supported via phone; a further 4122 supported through emails
- Supported 2262 isolation support payment applications
- 980 calls provided with IAG by internal colleagues at Community Links
- Supported 1791 residents with vaccine bookings
- Referred 590 residents to Covid-19 test sites

Community Links successfully won the tender for a 10-month programme in November 2020; with the Helpline due to end in September 2021, Community Links successfully pitched for a 6 month extension to support residents through the winter – a proposal which Newham Council agreed to and that has been awarded, alongside additional funds.

Delivery of the programme has continued throughout the year despite lockdowns, with a hybrid model of staff attending the office and operating the helpline remotely.

12,000 Newham residents supported through the Covid-19 helpline.

ELFT Community Connectors

Over the last 12 months the team have supported 530 patients, with numbers expected to grow significantly as the impact of the pandemic/ lockdowns are only starting to filter through with regards to mental health.

Initially designed as a 1 year pilot to Apr 2021, we have successfully extended the programme alongside additional funding to Mar 2022. The programme employs six community connectors who sit within a cluster of primary care networks within the East London Foundation Trust, and provide holistic wrap around support to patients suffering from serious mental illnesses. The programme adapted to deliver interventions entirely remotely during lockdowns so delivery was not impacted at any point.


Emergency Food Support Service (Food Bank)

The service has seen unprecedented demand over the last 12 months, we have supported 2,804 people and operated throughout the lockdown periods, ensuring the most vulnerable were offered support during a significantly difficult period.

Approximately 60% of attendees told us they were also collecting food for children at home.

Small Grants programme

In partnership with Clarion Futures, Community Links has awarded 18 grants of up to £3,000 to local community groups. The grants help support grassroot initiatives that add value to the community, enhances cohesion and health, whilst reducing isolation.



Aadya contacted the helpline hoping to speak to someone in Bengali. This case was handed over to a colleague who speaks Bengali, and the colleague was able to assist the resident in filling out an application for the Self-Isolation Support Payment. The colleague talked Aadya through the process of sending documents while ensuring data protection when handling personal documents and filled out the form with the resident over the phone, explaining the process throughout. Aadya contacted us again at a later stage to say she was happy with the outcome.

*names have been changed to protect clients identity



COMMUNITY LINKS Proud to be part of catch 22

Health

Our health services continue to be central to our focus on Early Action. We have long seen, the precursor to further problems can be ill health. Keeping people healthy has many social and economic benefits for the individual and for the community.

In the last year, our Health team interacted with 79,621 people.

In Southwark, our team encouraged 2,946 patients to get their COVID vaccine.

We booked appointments for an average of 13% of these patients but more importantly, we passed on life saving information which will allow them to make an informed decision about participating in the programme.

Our health team contacted 37,802 women who were invited for breast screening support in 2021

The health programme supported the recovery of the breast screening service in London by contacting women who were invited for a mammogram.

Our team also aided the recovery of the bowel screening programme by contacting 27,838 patients who were invited to screening for the first time at their 60th birthday.

11,035 women from Kingston were called to attend their cervical screening smear test.

We managed to book an appointment for 30% of them.

Health team interacted with 79,621 people.

Youth

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

Our More than Mentors programme is 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. The programme has been working intensively online as young people have encountered numerous emotional and educational challenges during the lockdowns.

In the last 12 months, our More than Mentors programme reached 379 young people.

Our team continued to deliver in schools throughout lockdown two and three, facilitating a space for young people to reconnect with peers, to share and talk about their coping strategies.

More than Mentors had a 100% success rate supporting 16 young people from 10 different families to re-engage with school at the end of lockdown three. They were given access to remote learning and support with returning to school as part of the vulnerable learners programme.

The programme team developed and delivered a virtual youth worker led programme of peer mentoring, supporting a cohort of year 6 students with similar vulnerabilities in the lead up to their secondary school transition.

More than Mentors had a 100% success rate supporting young people and families re-engaged with school.

There was a breakdown in the parent-school relationship, which resulted in Brad not attending school – and recent history of physical abuse by Brad towards his parents resulted in police and social care involvement. Brad had been referred to CAMHs and referral for a SEN diagnosis was made but had been lost in the system for several months, impacted by Covid.

Members of the More than Mentors team made a home visit made to build a relationship with the parent, and the team and parent were in regular weekly communication. The team would listen to the challenges the family were facing and offered support and solutions, but the biggest role the team played was to act as intermediary / advocate for the parent and with permission shared with the schools SLT their fears, anxieties, and concerns where they felt the school had let the child and family down. The team played a key role in helping to identify who the child's SEN referral was sitting with and supported in restarting the referral process. Through regular meetings with the school the team was able to ensure all actions had been followed up and could relay progress and developments to the family.

As the project ended, the parent expressed how pleased she was with the support the family had received from Community Links, having someone to listen, support and to advocate on their behalf Brad returned to school and the SEN diagnosis was completed before the end of the school year.

*names have been changed to protect clients identity

Thank you

Behind everything reported in this document is the enduring support of our funders. We are immeasurably grateful. Our front-line services are built upon income sources restricted to the project concerned. But frequently these do not cover all their essential costs, let alone contribute to the support, coordination, or governance around them, or enable us to respond to new needs or with new innovations or to share the lessons for wider benefit.

We hope you will be equally pleased at all the impact of your support and its crucial part. It enables us to continue delivering and developing programmes of support, rooted in the community, for those in need, and to maintain the platform for that experience to be shared for the widest possible impact. It catalysed our work during Covid-19 and is doing the same for our ambition post-Covid-19.

Thank you





www.community-links.org

