



# Community Links Autumn Impact Report.

1ST SEPTEMBER 2021 TO 31ST AUGUST 2022.



# Who are we?



**Community Links is a hub tackling health and social inequality in East London and beyond. Working alongside the community, our range of advice, youth, skills and health programmes help people of all ages to reach their full potential. From our base in Canning Town, we use our local knowledge to advocate for positive national change.**

Community Links is proud to be part of Catch22, a national not-for-profit business with a social mission.

## Foreword

### **Foreword by Elizabeth Booker, Chair, Community Links Advisory Board**

The last two years have presented an immensely challenging time for charities like Community Links. Many have been unable to survive the tumultuous months of the pandemic. So, I hope you will be able to share in the profound sense of pride I feel in reading this summary of our team's remarkable achievements, as we approach the end of our 2022 financial year.

Of course, the meaningful difference we've been able to make would not have been possible without the continued goodwill, generosity and belief of our funders, supporters and partners. To you, we are immeasurably grateful. In particular, we want to recognise your willingness to allow us to adapt our programmes and services to meet the changing needs of our community: this flexibility and resilience has enabled us to navigate a fast-changing context and ensure the continued efficacy of our work in our community's most pressing hour of need.

As well as our impact, it is this continued community need that is most evident throughout this thoughtful report. In the face of an escalating cost-of-living crisis, which looks set to stall an already patchy and faltering pandemic recovery, Community Links' mission to tackle damaging health and social inequalities has never been more important.

**Our mission** is to eradicate the health and social inequalities that can limit individual and collective potential.

**Our vision** is a society in which everyone can thrive because they have a good place to live, a purpose in life and good people around them. These 3Ps - place, purpose and people - drive and connect all of our work.

### **Our values**

We are driven by our dreams and judged by our delivery

Over the coming year, and as we maximise the potential of our working relationship with Catch22, I expect to see us deepen our roots within the Newham community and expand our reach far beyond it.



**Elizabeth Booker,**  
Chair, Community Links Advisory Board

## Newham: a borough of opportunities...

Newham, a borough in the inner East of London, and the home of Community Links for the last 45 years, is undergoing significant redevelopment and investment.

Large scale infrastructure projects, including the Silvertown tunnel and Crossrail are transforming the area's links to the rest of London and beyond. The Royal Docks Enterprise zone, representing an investment of around £8bn by 2037, is forecast to create 60,000 jobs and 25,500 new homes and is on track to become [London's first Living Wage Place](#).

Newham Council has also launched a pioneering [Community Wealth Building Strategy](#), becoming a living wage employer and encouraging others to do so, while seeking to create an inclusive, cooperative local economy.

In 2022, the London Assembly relocated to the area. In 2019, the English National Ballet made its home in the newly built Mulryan Centre. And, from next year, the newly developed East Bank area, will play host to Sadler's Wells new theatre, a new state of the art campus for UAL's London College of Fashion, a new site for the V&A, new BBC Music studios, including a home for the BBC Symphony orchestra and a new campus for UCL.

## ... and challenges

Yet Newham also faces persistent, and in some ways, worsening issues around poverty and inequality. 50% of children in the borough are judged to live in households in poverty, compared to 37% in the typical London borough. 30% of school pupils are eligible for Free School Meals. The out of work benefit rate (16.7%) is higher than average and 1 in 3 residents in work earns less than the [Living Wage](#).

The average rents in Newham represent 65% of average wages, compared to around 45% across the capital. The rate of households in temporary accommodation is by far the highest in London at 49 per 1,000, compared to 17 per 1,000 in [London overall](#). 1 in 25 people in the borough are homeless, including 1 in 12 children, the highest rate in [England](#). And infant mortality and premature mortality rates are far above the [London average](#).

## Ambition

### Summary by Chi Kavindele, Director, Community Links

Newham – our home in East London – is a borough in flux. The development of the Royal Docks and East bank areas has the potential to catalyse seismic change, bringing investment, new infrastructure, jobs and housing into an area challenged by persistent and insidious deprivation. We see our role at Community Links as being to ensure that the potential manifold benefits of this change reach the many and not just the few; that our community is equipped and ready to capitalise on these new opportunities; and that the voices of Newham residents are kept front and centre as change gathers pace.

If we have learnt anything from the COVID-19 pandemic of the last two years, it is that building resilience into our communities must be at the very heart of what we do. Newham's redevelopment has the potential to turbocharge its recovery, yet, without concerted effort, the danger is that it will deepen, rather than alleviate existing inequalities.

Through our partnerships, and with the help of our funders and supporters, we want to tackle this danger head on.

We want to equip our young people with the skills they will need to capitalise on the influx of creative sector jobs; for them to become music producers, fashion designers, participants and leaders in the cultural economy; to turn the tide of low-paid, insecure jobs that characterise much of Newham's current workforce.

We want to reframe how mental health is viewed and tackled, so that, in the light of challenges faced by the NHS, Newham residents are better able to cope and live with mental illness; that they are supported to find work, voluntary roles or the confidence to take part in arts and cultural activities, all of which can further support mental well-being.

In terms of physical health, we want to equip people with the resources to spot the early signs and symptoms of cancer, ensure they can access appropriate care and address, at root, the health inequalities that increase cancer occurrence rates.

For our older residents, we want to ensure that technological change doesn't leave them behind; that they are able to play a full part in their community, remaining connected to the networks and services that are so vital to continued physical and mental well-being.

For all ages, we want our advice services to provide a free, accessible and trustworthy means of overcoming financial, legal or housing difficulties, empowering residents to tackle issues early before problems escalate.

If we are to fulfil these ambitions, and more, 105 Barking Road – the home of Community Links for the past 32 years – must continue to grow in its role as a thriving community hub: a central point of access for our range of services. This local, established base and our Newham, East London roots, have never been more important. But if we are to maximise opportunities within our community, then we must also look beyond it.

No community is an island and there is much we can learn from, and share with, other parts of the UK, as well as other organisations. In practice, this will mean further developing our collaboration with partners and with Catch22, to ensure that the best thinking, programmes, services and support are available for the community we are so privileged to serve.



**Chi Kavindele,**  
Director, Community Links



Governance and Finance

In February 2021, Community Links merged with our parent body, Catch22, a national not-for-profit business with a social mission. Importantly, this fully preserved Community Links’ name, branding and, above all, its founding vision and values. While Community Links’ commitment to our local communities, and to sharing lessons learned further afield, also remains unchanged, the merger presents exciting new opportunities to increase the scope and scale of our work.

The role of safeguarding Community Links’ legacy, and its commitment to Newham, resides with our Advisory Board. The Board is made up of local people from all walks of life with a shared interest in Newham and East London, a passion for Community Links and a belief in the power of our work to shape the lives of service-users for the better. This year, the Advisory Board met quarterly in September, December, March and July.

For public funders, private supporters, and other voluntary organisations our model enables us to be a reliable, best possible partner, ensuring the best programmes of work, in the most cost-effective and sustainable ways. With the added value of multiplying the impact and benefits of our collaboration, through sharing the experience to help practitioners, and influence policy makers, further afield.

Income and expenditure  
(Financial Year to 31st August 2022)

Community Links remains responsible for raising its own budget which is ringfenced, meaning all funds donated go towards our work in the community.

Every pound we raise is important to us and we carefully plan how we use resources to get the most impact.

Our income is forecast to be £2.4m in the FY22, with total expenditure of £2.08m\*. The difference (gross margin) goes towards our shared support services which we receive as part of Catch22 (HR, IT, Finance, Governance, Communications, Legal, strategic income generation etc.).

During this year, we were also able to reinvest £80,000 into improved facilities for service users, volunteers and staff at 105 Barking Road.

\*Due to the timing of this report, these figures are unaudited.

Our work

Tackling health & social inequality

1

Youth & employment

We use our state-of-the-art music and media recording Studio, our employability support programme and our peer-to-peer mentoring programme to help young people realise their full potential.

2

Health

We increase bowel, breast and cervical cancer screening participation amongst those populations who are least likely to take part.

3

Advice

We provide free debt, housing, social welfare and legal advice.

4

Community

Our digital skills course, our community support programme for those suffering from serious mental illness and our emergency food support service all address some of the key challenges that can hold people back. Our art and culture programme nourishes individual and community life.

5

Policy

We apply the learning from our local work to influence positive national change.





## 1. Young People: building skills and resilience

With over a third of its residents under the age of 25, Newham has one of the youngest populations of any area in [England](#). While this is, in many ways, one of the borough's greatest strengths, its young population face significant barriers to realising their full potential.

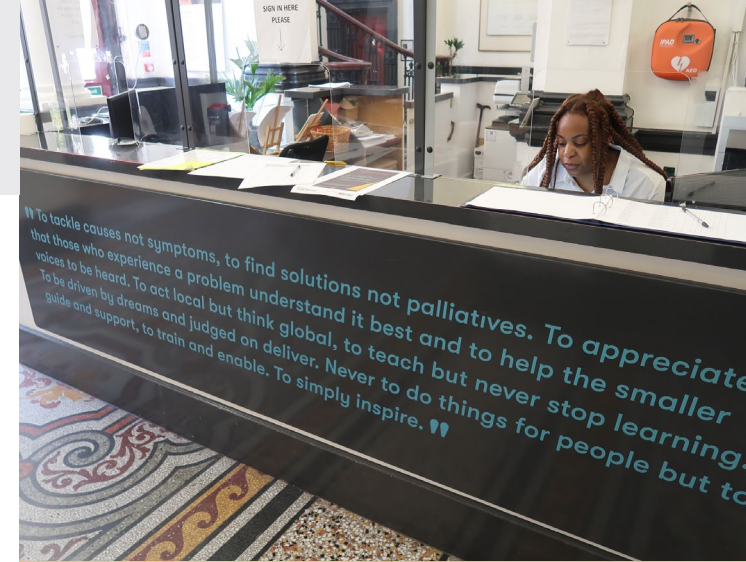
Two thirds of children in Newham live in households in poverty. **Over 10,000 children and young people** under the age of 25 in the borough are living in **temporary accommodation**.

**A higher proportion of** the borough's **16 and 17 year olds are classed as NEET** (not in education, employment or training) than the [London average](#), though **Newham pupils in education are performing better than the national average**.

Although the rate of first-time entrants into the **Youth Offending Service** from the borough has **declined over the last 6 years**, Newham remains **in the top 10 most dangerous boroughs in London**. In 2021, it had the **worst crime rates** in the capital for **drug related offences**. And the number of people in Newham involved in county lines **criminal exploitation – 3 out of 4 of them between the ages of 15 and 25** – is amongst the highest of any local authority in [London](#).

Our youth work is guided by our Early Action approach, seeking to engage with young people at the earliest opportunity before challenges escalate. At its heart, is our belief in the transformational power of trust-based Deep Value relationships.

From our mentoring programme in schools, to recording studio facility and media college, all our youth work aims to raise aspirations, unlock potential, build purpose and provide opportunity, empowering and equipping young people with the confidence and life skills to shape their own futures.



## More than Mentors

In the last 12 months, 134 young people have completed this innovative, psychologically-informed, clinically-supervised peer mentoring programme. Taking an early action approach to supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people, More than Mentors has been delivered in secondary schools and community settings across East London for the last seven years.

By addressing early markers of mental health needs, such as anxiety, depression and stress, the programme aims to build young people's emotional resilience, improve their attendance and attainment at school and prevent problems from escalating.

Since 2016, we have trained 237 young people between the ages of 11 and 20 as peer mentors. All our mentors have the opportunity to gain a National Open College Network Level 2 Award in Peer Mentoring, the chance to apply their skills under specialised supervision throughout the programmes, plus further leadership training and development opportunities.

For mentees, the programme offers up to ten sessions with a mentor in a safe and supported setting. Sessions are focused around building individual strengths and self-confidence, as well as developing future goals. For the schools and community groups that take part, our team provides a Training the Trainers programme to ensure the local sustainability of the project.

An independent evaluation carried out by the [Anna Freud Centre](#) found that, for those taking part in the More than Mentors programme, there was a significant reduction over time in mental health difficulties and perceived stress. Mentees spoke about a range of positive effects on their feelings, behaviour, school life, relationships with others, as well as how equipped they felt to manage their own emotions and problems. For Mentors, the programme helped them to learn about and test their existing strengths, as well as identify areas for self-improvement, gain new skills and knowledge and build their confidence.



“Stuff that I couldn’t speak with {an adult} about that I was really uncomfortable about, I’d speak with my mentor. Because {they are} sort of the similar age group, so it was quite easy to speak to {them} about it.” Mentee

“Peer support is an often-untapped resource to support wellbeing. We need more of it.”



Over the course of the last 12 months, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable shift in the needs of the young people accessing our programmes. For both mentors and mentees of our More than Mentors programme, personal goals have become less education or career oriented and more about reconnecting with others, relationship building and interpersonal skills.

“The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns has hit our young people hard. Its detrimental impact on their mental health shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Jason Turner, Youth Programmes Manager



## Links Studios

Since we launched our recording studios, and associated Music in the Air programme, in October 2021, more than 200 young people, aged 11-19, have accessed our music, media and creative programmes. To ensure that East London’s most disadvantaged young people can benefit from our remarkable facility, in the last 12 months, we have developed partnerships with a wide range of organisations and initiatives.

- We are proud to be a member of the **Newham Multi Agency Collective**, a new initiative established in partnership with our local NHS Trust, to connect organisations and services able to allocate support to young people on the CAMHS waiting list through a range of creative therapies and psychosocial support programmes.
- The **Social Switch** supports NEET Londoners, at risk of exposure to youth violence, through a programme of digital, social media and employability skills. So far, as part of their final social action projects, we have given 20 young people from the programme the opportunity to put their new skills into action in a working studio environment.
- Working with **Newham Music Academy**, we gave groups of young people the chance to experience the full cycle of recording a song over the course of a 3-day programme, plus the opportunity to record their music in a professional environment.
- We worked with **Tollgate Primary School** on a six-week Christmas Choir project for year 6 students with Social Emotional Mental Health needs and with **Newham Sixth Form College**, on a ten-week Introduction to Podcasting workshop series. We are now working with **Kensington Primary School** to plan a programme to support students through creative, expressive lyric writing and with **Education Links** to create a bespoke programme for young people within their Pupil Referral Unit.
- We partnered with School Band to deliver a 12-week programme of guitar and piano lessons.
- We ran lyric writing, music beat production and recording sessions for young people from the **Renaissance Foundation**, a youth organisation that supports young carers and patients with life-long or life-limiting illnesses.
- Working with **East London Dance**, we helped to record a backing track for a dance video created by young people to show how physical activity can support wellbeing.
- We worked with Newham **Headstart** to support young people with special educational needs and disabilities to access the studio and engage in creative activities

Given the changing needs of our young people post-lockdown, our evening music sessions in the Links Studio have been deliberately focused around giving young people a safe, supervised space in which they can reconnect with peers, re-learn and develop social and interpersonal skills and re-engage with support systems. Violent incidents involving 10- to 16-year olds are most likely to happen in the after school period across [London](#), so three evenings a week we offer a place to channel energy, learn new skills and explore creativity in a positive, constructive way. A programme of pastoral support and bespoke support sessions empowers each young person coming into the studio to explore their place and purpose in life, to identify key barriers and challenges and to find ways to reach their personal and creative goals.



AGED 16 – 19?  
WANT TO GAIN A MUSIC QUALIFICATION?  
WANT A JOB OR APPRENTICESHIP?  
DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START?

**WE HAVE THE RIGHT COURSE FOR YOU!**

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO ENROL CONTACT:  
LinksMediaCollege@Community-Links.org  
0207 473 2270  
Community Links : 105 Barking Rd,  
Canning Town E16 4HQ

**linksMediaCollege**

“Before I came to the Studio, I felt lonely...The Studio is important because it brings me joy and de-stresses me from my school work.”

“After I started coming here, my mental health improved and I had a let-out for my sadness and anger. I made some friends and learnt how to play the drums.”

“There is always a place for you at this studio, no matter your age or what you like doing.”

## Links Media College

The network of partnerships, developed across the borough through our Links Studios work, also created key referral pathways for the most vulnerable, disengaged and hard to reach young people to access our Links Media College. Launched in May 2022, the College offers free, part-time fully accredited qualifications in music tech, English and Maths to 16- to 19-year-olds in need of alternative education provision.

With a focus on employability and personal development, we work with each student to design a programme that fits their interests and ambitions. The College's first cohort of 8 students, including two recent arrivals from Ukraine, finished their courses at the end of August.

Though the Links Media College is in its infancy, we need only look to the East Bank programme – an impressive £1.1 billion investment in arts and creativity in East London – to see that, with relevant educational, professional and life skills, our local young people will be able to capitalise on some remarkable creative opportunities.

We often see the powerful effect of our youth programmes played out in the lives of individuals, yet their positive multiplier effect in our communities, though more difficult to quantify, is equally important. Whether its steering young people away from violence, ensuring they gain useful qualifications or improving their mental health, our work is helping to build safer, more resilient and productive communities.





## 2. Health: tackling inequalities

Good health – both physical and mental – is critical to our mission of ensuring that individuals and communities can reach their full potential. We know that health-related behaviours are shaped by cultural, social and material circumstances and that people living in more deprived areas spend, on average, a far greater part of their already shorter lives in poor health.

A baby born in Newham can expect to live in good health for around 5 years fewer than the London average. **Newham has the third highest smoking rate out of 33 London boroughs**, high levels of childhood and adult obesity and **significantly lower physical activity levels** than average rates across [England](#).

Focused on early cancer diagnosis and awareness, our health programmes recognise that people living in the most income deprived areas of England are 20% more likely to have a late cancer diagnosis, that smoking related cancers are three times higher in the most deprived populations and that socio-economic status significantly impacts access to health information, as well as practical and emotional social care and [support](#).

More than **30,000 extra cases of cancer in the UK** each year are attributable to socio-economic variation and **survival is worse for the most deprived groups**.

**Higher cancer incidence rates for the more deprived** reflect wider determinants of health. Inequalities in factors such as smoking and obesity are all linked to higher incidence [rates](#).

### Population Awareness

Diagnosing cancer in its earliest stages leads to better survival rates. Knowing that improving the public's recognition of cancer symptoms is one of many factors that can support this, in May 2022, we kicked off a 12-month campaign to reach 15,000 people across six East London boroughs with information about cancer risk factors, early diagnosis and support.

Funded by NHS North-East London Cancer Alliance, this initiative combines 96 targeted outreach visits, 60 mass engagements in parks, supermarkets and shopping centres, as well as around 50 presentations and training sessions. For the very first time, this campaign will see our health work expand into the boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Redbridge and Havering.

People from more **deprived populations are less likely to recognise signs and symptoms of cancer** than those in the least [deprived](#).

### Screening Improvement Facilitators

Cancer screening programmes save thousands of lives each year in the UK, leading to a diagnosis of around 5% of all [cancer cases](#). Yet uptake of bowel, breast and cervical cancer screening services is consistently lower amongst more deprived [populations](#). Barriers to taking part in screening programmes vary, but, across the board, provision of accurate, accessible, information is key.

Our team of Screening Improvement Facilitators support GP practices and primary care networks across 14 boroughs in West London, seeking to reduce inequalities and variation in the uptake of the three NHS adult cancer screening programmes.

In May 2022, with funding from the RMP Cancer Alliance, we recruited **three new Screening Improvement Facilitators**.







Cancer Screening

Between September 2020 and March 2023, our team is on track to contact nearly 128,000 patients across London to encourage them to take part in bowel, breast or cervical cancer screening services. Our team are trained to offer accessible information, to answer any questions and concerns and to address common misconceptions around screening tests.

Of any of the national cancer screening programmes, bowel cancer screening has the lowest [uptake](#). With funding from the North-Central London Cancer Alliance’s ‘Rising 60s’ initiative (for those about to turn 60) and the NHS North-East London Clinical Commissioning Group’s ‘Rising 60s & Rising 56’s’ campaign, over a two-year period from October 2020, we contacted nearly 32,400 patients across 8 boroughs. In West London, with funding from the RMP Cancer Alliance, we worked across 14 boroughs. Aiming to increase the uptake of bowel screening from the first time that someone becomes eligible, our team reminded patients of the importance of completing their bowel screening kit when it arrived, gave information about the signs and symptoms of bowel cancer and addressed questions and concerns.

Between October 2020 and August 2021, we took part in a pioneering initiative funded by Kingston Public Health to contact 10,000 patients from across 17 GP practices, who did not attend their last cervical screening. And, with funding from the NHS’ Breast Cancer Screening Services, by early next year, our team will have contacted nearly 38,500 people across North, South-West and West London to increase uptake of breast cancer screening.

	Areas of London	Number of patients contacted
Breast Screening (August 2021 – March 2023)	North, South-West, West	38,500
Bowel Screening (Sep 2020 – Oct 2022)	North Central, North-East, West	79,400
Cervical Screening (Oct 2020 – August 2021)	Kingston	10,000

“Back in 2010, we were working only in Newham and focusing solely on breast cancer screening. Now, our reach has expanded both geographically and in scope to include bowel and cervical cancer screening, as well as population awareness work.”

Zoraida Colorado, Health Programme Manager

“Community Links has such a wealth of experience in this area. Our team is trained in all three cancers, between us we speak 22 different languages, we have great relationships with commissioners and GP practices, built up over years, we have recognition and trust, we’re gathering more learning all the time and our reach, through Catch 22, also gives us the scope to expand this work nationally.”



What difference have we made?

For many years, Community Links has run a range of health programmes that are central to our Early Action, preventative approach. But now – perhaps more than ever before – we find ourselves working at the centre of critical health, and healthcare, inequalities. Our roots in Newham, an area with significant pockets of deprivation and populated by communities that have poorer than average access to health care, and our work across cancer screening and serious mental health issues, puts us at the very heart of the NHS’ [Core20Plus5](#) national drive to reduce key health inequalities.

With much data relating to cancer screening uptake rates held within NHS systems, it is often difficult for us to provide a complete quantitative picture of the difference made by our health programmes. While maintaining data confidentiality and security, this is something we are seeking to improve.

What does remain clear is that, with NHS services facing persistent, and in many cases increasing, budgetary and staffing constraints, as well as the ongoing strain of the havoc wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the support of organisations like Community Links is becoming more crucial than ever before. Not only did the pandemic itself disproportionately affect more deprived communities, its knock-on effect on wider health services, including cancer referrals and treatment has been greatest for those living in poorer areas.

National cancer charities, facing their own funding shortfalls in the aftermath of the pandemic, have also pulled back from supporting screening programmes, leaving more localised charities, like Community Links, to fill the gap.

Indeed, it is our grounding within the community – our knowledge of relevant cultural sensitivities, locally spoken languages, the trust and recognition we have built up over many years – that makes us uniquely well placed to bridge the access gaps to mainstream NHS services that, left unaddressed, can exacerbate damaging health inequalities.



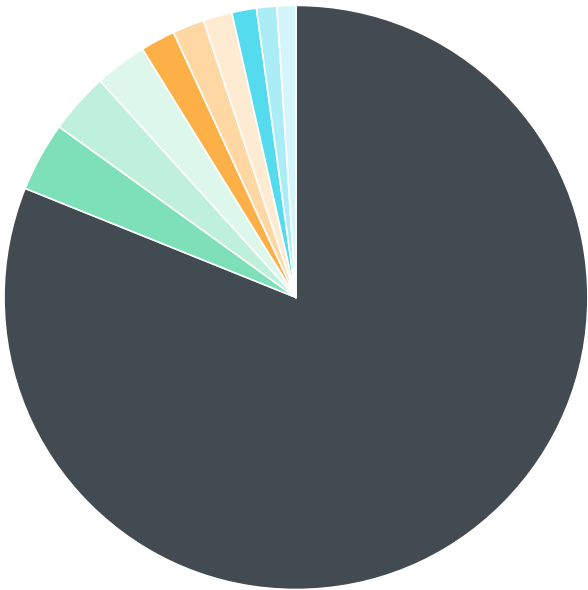
3. Advice: getting back on track

Between September 2021 and August 2022, we responded to total of 1,295 cases and enquiries.

Advice area	Number of clients (top three advice areas)
Legal advice (housing, consumer & legal)	370
Debt advice	143
Welfare benefits and form filling	148

Our youngest client was 18 years old and our oldest 86.  
**910 (70%) of our advice clients are Newham residents.**

Borough	Number of clients (top 10 Boroughs)
Newham	1,012
Redbridge	48
Waltham Forest	42
Barking and Dagenham	36
Tower Hamlets	24
Enfield	22
Hammersmith and Fulham	20
Lewisham	17
Southwark	14
Hackney	13



Newham has, for many years, been affected by pockets of deprivation, high out of work benefit rates, low wages, insecure accommodation, high rates of homelessness and poor health outcomes. In the last two years, these struggles have been compounded, first by the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns and, second, by the escalating cost of living crisis.



Our experience shows us that, when individuals face debt, housing or employment difficulties, targeted support early on can be extremely effective in avoiding an escalation of challenges.

**6.7% of Newham residents claim out of work benefits**, compared to 5% across London and just 3.9% across [England](#). In December 2020, amidst the pandemic, **Newham had the highest number of benefits claimants in London** and the largest absolute increase (at 226%) in claimants since March [2020](#).

In 2015/16 **Newham had the highest proportion of low-paid jobs of all London boroughs**, with **31% of jobs paying less** than Living Wage, compared with 19% across London as a [whole](#). A more recent reduction in this proportion is due largely to the distorting effects of the pandemic in the London labour market.

In 2020, **Newham had more than 28,000 households on the waiting list for council housing**, higher than any other [London borough](#).

We offer a free, comprehensive range of advice services covering debt, consumer and employment law, housing and welfare.

**Debt:** We help tenants of two local housing associations to restructure, reduce and resolve debt issues. This can range from advising on bankruptcy and debt relief orders, to negotiating affordable payment arrangements and dealing with rent or credit arrears. In all cases, our advisers aim to support service users to make their own informed decisions and move towards a more stable financial position.

**Consumer law:** Our advisers offer support with issues such as identity theft, insurance problems, faulty products or service disputes.

**Employment law:** This team, dealing with issues such as unfair dismissal, workplace discrimination and wage disputes has seen a particular spike in demand since the pandemic and its related furlough schemes.

**Housing:** We offer advice on a plethora of issues relating to housing, from applying for council housing, petitioning landlords to carry out repairs or assisting in cases of threatened eviction, deposit and estate agent disputes.

**Welfare:** The most recent addition to our advice offering, in March 2022, we received funding to provide an open door, welfare advice service from the Greater London Authority’s Advice in Community Settings grant programme. Leading a consortium of five local organisations, working in food banks, community centres and schools, our team is now able to deliver advice aimed at making individuals aware of their rights and able to access the full range of benefits and tax credits to which they are entitled.

**“Given that we already provide legal advice on consumer, debt, employment and housing issues, adding this welfare advice service feels like an important addition to our holistic service offering.”**

Community Links Director, Chi Kavindele

### What difference have we made?

Across our range of advice services, whenever possible, our focus is on Early Action interventions, supporting people to turn things around before issues escalate. We see the difference that building deep value relationships with our clients makes, making them feel heard, understood and far more likely to engage in the positive steps we encourage them to take. We see our services alleviating stress, rebuilding confidence and empowering and equipping individuals to remedy subsequent difficult circumstances independently.

Within the next twelve months, we would like to move our advice offering, particularly in the area of housing, towards a more comprehensive casework service. One-off, or siloed advice, often cannot meet the complex and multi-faceted needs of our service users. Instead, we need to facilitate greater coordination and collaboration with a network of other agencies, enabling us to refer out with the confidence that clients won’t be ‘dropped’.





Casestudies

In June 2022, a Newham resident approached Community Links following a prolonged period in hospital suffering with Covid. She was housebound, reliant on oxygen, unable to walk and suffering with severe asthma, depression and anxiety. She did not know what welfare benefits she was entitled to, had gone into arrears on her rent and was relying on friends and family to cover essential costs and bills. Her home was badly affected by damp and mould, compounding her breathing difficulties.

Our team was able to refer her to a Benefits Adviser, help her to apply for Personal Independence Payments and, from her energy supplier, a Warm Home Discount. Given the client's reliance on oxygen supplies, we helped her to sign up for her energy provider's Priority Services Register, as well as making an emergency grant application for gas and electricity. We were able to clarify her rent arrears, make an Emergency food bank referral and refer the client for free legal advice regarding her employment issues. Finally, we provided information on long Covid support organisations, as well as details of free English language courses.

In January 2022, our team was able to assist a Newham resident whose Universal Credit had been stopped and who was facing multiple complex physical and mental health issues. Following an assessment of the client's financial situation, including existing debts, assets and benefits, we were able to set up a Debt Relief Order, negotiate a payment plan for her priority debts and set up manageable monthly payment arrangements for utilities. We referred the client to a Benefits Adviser, leading to her Universal Credit payments being restarted and backdated. We contacted the relevant Housing Officer to initiate emergency house repairs and we advised immediate contact with the client's existing mental health teams.





## 4. Community: belonging to something bigger

We strive to break down the social and health inequalities that too often limit individuals' ability to fulfil their potential. By empowering local people with the tools they need to overcome challenges, we can strengthen communities from the ground up. And we know that the social connections, sense of belonging, support and acceptance that come from being part of a strong community are critical to mental wellbeing and resilience.

Newham's community has been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is some evidence of positive changes, including a greater sense of community solidarity built in response to the pandemic, the psychological impacts of the borough's high death and illness rates are likely to worsen the short-, medium- and long-term mental health and wellbeing of its residents. Trauma, grief and distress may all exacerbate mental ill-health and widen pre-existing inequalities in our [community](#).

With a high proportion of residents working in the kind of lower-paid, insecure roles that went unprotected as the pandemic unfolded, so too do social inequalities in the borough look set to deepen.

Post-pandemic, we believe there must be a renewed focus on how communities can reposition themselves to support mental and physical health, wellbeing and job prospects. Our community services and programmes combine the arts, mental health support, digital skills and urgent practical help for residents to boost an inclusive and sustainable pandemic-recovery for Newham.

### Community Clicks

82% of jobs require digital skills, yet **13.6 million workers in the UK do not have the essential digital skills** for [work](#).

**80% felt digital tools were a vital support in the first months of lockdown.** 37% of adults use digital tools to manage their physical health and 25% for their mental [health](#).

Earlier this year, we launched a new digital skills programme for residents in Newham aged 50 and over. With twice weekly sessions, delivered over the course of six weeks, the Community Clicks programme aims to build participants' day to day digital skills, such as making online doctor's appointments, using online banking services, online shopping and connecting with friends and family online. At the end of the course, participants are given a tablet, so that they can continue to use their newly acquired digital skills.

With a retention rate of over 90%, each week we have recorded participants' perceived confidence in using their digital skills. On average, this has increased from 24% in week 1 to 76% by week 6, indicating a significant improvement in digital literacy. Yet, beyond this, the programme has provided us with a wealth of anecdotal evidence regarding the link between digital exclusion and social isolation. By improving their basic digital literacy, participants can stay in touch with family and friends, access local services and lead fuller lives.

Oversubscribed since the beginning, the demand for this programme has remained so high that we have begun to run multiple cohorts simultaneously to avoid long waiting lists. As such, the initiative will meet its expected target numbers much earlier than anticipated and will finish 8 months ahead of schedule. Working with our partners at the Positive Transformation Group and with support from 3i and Ixion, we are now exploring how we can take the model London and, potentially nation-wide, through our wider Catch 22 networks and long-term funding.

"I wasn't very good in computers. My skills were poor. Every time I opened my iPad I was scared I might make a mistake...Attending the computer class, I met friends and it has improved my knowledge. Now I feel very confident...I can send emails with an attachment, install new apps and purchase via the internet, communicating with friends via messenger and Facebook. I am very grateful to Community Links. It has helped us seniors to improve our social life and made us feel important in the community."

Pilar Natovio

"Before this course, I have never used a tablet or laptop. My confidence was very low. I am now gaining confidence. I intend to continue using the tablet and I hope to get more experience."

Mary McGrath

"When I started this course, I didn't have any confidence at all. Now I have confidence to do Facebook messenger and send a picture to all my friends...I'm 76 years old and I am very happy to attend the class. I will recommend it."

Filomeha Oculos



## Community Connectors

In 2017, **23.9% of adults living in Newham are estimated to have been diagnosed with common mental health disorders.** At just over 64,500 people, that's the highest of any London [borough](#).

Having completed a successful pilot phase in May 2022, in June Community Links, and our partners at Aston Mansfield and Mind in Tower Hamlets and Newham, expanded the Community Connector team with ten colleagues now working within the East London NHS Foundation Trust (ELFT). This new five-year programme will see our Connectors work with multi-disciplinary teams within primary care networks across Newham to provide holistic, wraparound support to patients suffering from serious mental illness.

Taking a social, community and user-focused approach to supporting people with complex mental health needs, our interventions span housing, immigration, debt, welfare benefits, employment issues, loneliness and isolation, social activities and broader wellbeing. Our aim is to complement clinical interventions, taking a collaborative approach to supporting service users.

At the heart of the programme are deep value relationships. The relationships built between our Connectors and service-users involve the practical transfer of knowledge, creating the conditions for progress, but, beyond that, they foster the deeper qualities of constructive relationship, nourishing confidence, inspiring self-esteem, unlocking potential and transforming lives.

Since March 2022, we have **supported 140 service users, with an increasing number of referrals being made.** Over the coming months, we will be **recruiting five additional Senior Community Connectors.**

Since 2021, we have supported over 1,000 NHS patients suffering from serious mental illness. We are seeing increased awareness of and access to services that support social and economic progression, higher reported levels of positive mental, physical health and life satisfaction amongst service users and greater interconnectivity between voluntary and health sector services in Newham.

The pilot phase of our programme identified prevalent stigma around serious mental illness. In ethnic minority groups in particular, this, exacerbated by language and cultural barriers, acts as a significant deterrent to accessing support. In an environment where clinical-based services are often at capacity, our deep value approach to offering time to listen and build trust, coupled with our community roots leaves us uniquely well-placed to tackle stigma and break down barriers.

We have also been able to place our Community Connectors programme in the wider context of our Advice, Studio and College services to positive effect. In its pilot phase, we identified issues with housing and welfare benefits as the two biggest contributory factors to serious mental illness experienced by our service users. And our advice services show us that a loss of control in these areas deepens mental health concerns and emotional needs.

Therefore, by joining the dots between our services, we have been able to ensure that individuals on our Community Connectors caseload have immediate access to professional support in addressing housing and debt issues. Similarly, we have been able to make use of our Links Studio to offer young people creative music therapy, to refer them to employment and training hubs or to find alternative pathways to work and education that are sensitive to their needs.



## Community Foodbank

Originally intended as a service that could offer short-term, emergency support to individuals while we helped to address their wider challenges, our weekly walk-in foodbank is now experiencing unprecedented demand. Between September 2021 and April 2022, the number of service-users rose week-on-week as we distributed around 4,530 bags of food to nearly 2,300 individuals. As the cost-of-living crisis escalates and recovery from the pandemic stalls, we are continuing to help between 80 and 100 people each week.

Our foodbank provision also benefits from its connection to our wider range of services. Linking foodbank users to professional advice services can help them to overcome some of the challenges that first necessitated their use of emergency food parcels. Though our relationships with Morrisons and Newham Food Alliance currently enable us to provide a range of fresh produce, securing sustainable funding will be a key challenge in the coming months.

**"I would like to thank all staff at this food bank...<They> administer the distribution of food fairly and equally not showing any favouritism to anyone irrespective of their background. My only wish is if all food banks were run this way, the most needy would receive equal support and supplies...Margaret and her team are a shining example of how we should treat each other."**

Local resident and Foodbank user, June 2022



Arts: the World on Our Doorstep

In August 2021, we published a paper on ‘Arts as a Youth Intervention: how the arts can tackle youth violence and help young people and communities thrive’ and, in late 2021, we went on to win funding from Arts Council England to lead a consortium of Newham organisations as part of the World on our Doorstep programme. This initiative is designed to empower local people to access, and participate in creating, art in local spaces. In one of the most culturally diverse boroughs in the country, the programme will recognise and celebrate cultural richness, allow people to redefine what culture means to them and ensure community voice is heard.

“These projects change villages, towns and cities for the better, helping people to lead happier, healthier lives...<It’s about> that magical spark of possibility, innovation and invention that only happens when culture and creativity becomes part of our daily lives.”

Darren Henley, Chief Executive, Arts Council England

Though our role in the World on our Doorstep programme is in its early stages, the role of the arts in reversing inequalities and creating supportive environments for young people to grow professionally and personally is already at the heart of our Links Studios and Links Media College work. Through community-based arts programmes, young people can develop soft skills and an enhanced sense of personal agency that can be translated to the working world. Indeed, studies show that structured art activities lead to increases in transferable skills of up to [17%](#).

As local authority spending on services has almost halved over the last decade, the role of the arts in community settings has faded. Yet accessible, affordable art interventions can play a critical role in promoting social cohesion in communities, catalysing local regeneration and positively influencing social, behavioural and educational outcomes for young people.

Initiatives like the World on our Doorstep programme allow residents to develop a stronger sense of place, become more involved in the development of their community, and, for young people, strengthen their ability to relate to others and the world around them. Enabling purposeful participation, arts activities can tackle social exclusion and revitalise local communities by diversifying their economic base and developing strong social [capital](#).

5. Policy: affecting change at the root

From our base in East London, Community Links has a proud history of applying lessons from our local work to influence positive national change. Our mission is to deal not only with the consequences of a system that perpetuates inequality, but to tackle the system itself. If we are serious about our Early Action approach – seeking to prevent crises from occurring, rather than simply picking up the pieces – then working towards public policy change must be at the very heart of what we do.

Our policy team has three main areas of focus:

- **Making Early Action common practice**
- **Promoting better understanding of the positive impact of Deep Value relationships**
- **Sharing learning on how local communities can become Ready for Everything.**

We use learning from our programmes and advice services, as well as our own research, to enable us to make positive interventions in policy areas that range from health and mental health, to housing, welfare, youth and social infrastructure.

This year, we are **part of a major campaign to make Newham’s Royal Docks into a Living Wage Place**. Over the next 3 years, a coalition of local public, private and third sector bodies, including Community Links, **aim to increase accredited Living Wage Employers in the Royal Docks by 50%**, securing a **pay rise for over 3,000 employees**. In the longer-term, we want to see a **Real Living Wage paid as a minimum by all businesses** based in the newly developed area. Witnessing the impact of in-work poverty on our community day in day out, means the opportunity to affect far reaching policy change that **could improve the life of thousands of Newham residents** is one that we cannot ignore.



In June 2022, we published a landmark report, ‘Why don’t we invest in [early action?](#)’ setting out the key lessons learned since our Early Action Task Force was first established more than a decade ago. Set up by Community Links in 2010, the Task Force is a cross-sectoral body, including leaders from academia, the private and third sectors. Its job has been to explore how, as a society, we can get better at finding solutions, not palliatives, at preventing trouble, rather than just waiting for it to happen. Our report examined how we can make this kind of early action approach not just common sense, but common practice.

There is no doubt that the work of the Early Action Task force has had significant impact. Since it was established in 2011, the group has successfully raised the profile of Early Action, across Whitehall and beyond, seeding critical ideas and good practice through its many reports, policy roundtables and events, its wider influencing work and practitioners’ network and training. In its final report, the group makes a powerful case for greater investment in early action, as well as a series of concrete recommendations to government and others.

Prevention is now a key priority in both the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. The Big Lottery (as it then was) made Early Action one of its three priorities and several other charitable foundations followed suit. The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund, backed by the National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, has earmarked £5.3million for cross-sector initiatives led by the voluntary sector.



There is, today, a more explicit focus on long term outcomes and well-being within UK government, as well as momentum for greater integration and collaboration, particularly in relation to health and social care. Social infrastructure is more widely recognised as a priority by funds such as the governments Levelling Up Fund, as well as by local

initiatives such as Lambeth Council’s strategy to reduce health inequalities in Southwark in partnership with the voluntary sector. Certainly, over the last ten years, Community Links has built a national reputation for our work around Early Action.

Yet many of the challenges that originally led us to the creation of the Task Force remain, and still more have worsened. The biggest single challenge remains underinvestment, exacerbated by short-termism and silo working. Our government continues to find itself entangled in a recurring pattern of expensive crisis management, leading to cutbacks in preventative services and social infrastructure. Over the last decade, austerity, brought on by the financial crisis, has stripped existing early action services and social infrastructure back to bare bones. Now, the cost of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the cost-of-living crisis, make it increasingly likely that early action funds will continue to be starved of funds.

With this in mind, our Report ends with a series of recommendations for how the legacy of the Task Force might be picked up and reinvented for the decade to come.

“Taking steps to prevent problems before they occur or deteriorate, as the Early Action Task Force has argued, offers a ‘triple dividend – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more’.”





[www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org)