



Community Links Impact Report.

SEPTEMBER 2023 – JUNE 2024



Who are we?

Community Links is a charity tackling health and social inequality in East London and beyond. Working in the communities of most need, our range of advice, youth, culture and health programmes help people of all ages to overcome challenges and to reach their full potential. From our base in Canning Town, we use our local knowledge to advocate for positive national change. This year, we're progressing from being an East London-based hub to a Communities operation, taking our deep place-based experience and extending our reach into new locations.

We are proud to be part of Catch22, a national not-for-profit business with a social mission. This innovative merger fully preserves Community Links' name, branding, founding vision and values whilst providing new opportunities to increase the scope of our work for local beneficiaries, and to increase our reach elsewhere.

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 our work.

Values We are driven by our dreams and judged by our delivery.

Foreword (By Elizabeth, Director of Communities)

This has been a year of significant transition for Community Links. Chi Kavindele, who previously served as Director of Community Links, has moved on to take up the role of Director of Local Development nationally for Catch22. I have stepped into the role of Director of Communities, with a slightly broader remit. Having served as the Chair of the Community Links Advisory Board for the past two years, I've been closely involved in our development during that time. As I now move on, it is with great pleasure that Ian Robinson, one of the founders of Community Links, has taken up the mantle, beautifully blending the old with the new in an exciting way.

As you read through this annual report, you'll see the outstanding work of Community Links. Communities (within Catch22's Young People, Families, and Communities Strategic Hub) we are embarking on a wonderful journey. We are exploring how the person-centred, place-based roots of Community Links can be adapted and applied to other areas and ways of working.

We've undertaken an extensive listening period, including user consultations and all-staff workshops, to ensure that any changes are collaborative and built from the ground up. As we move into this new phase, Communities will continue to deliver exceptional services in Newham and East London, while extending its reach even further.

Please take a moment to read through this report and discover the incredible impact we've had across all our services. From putting over £2 million back into people's pockets through our Finance, Benefit, and Debt advice services, to engaging thousands of people in arts and cultural activities in Newham, and supporting young people outside of mainstream education through Links Media College as they earn vital qualifications for their futures, our work has touched the lives of over 80,000 people in the past year. I, for one, am excited to see how we continue to grow with a new structure and strategic vision launching in the 2024/25 academic year.

Our Impact in 2023/24

Culture Within Newham

17,000 people engaged in the first year.

172 activities delivered, including film, crafts, dance, food, and gardening.

Through our Newham-based collaborations and partnerships, **292 groups and organisations connected**, **81** artists and creatives were involved, and we worked with **69** creative contractors and suppliers.

Health

Through our Community Connectors Programme **we supported 925 service users.**

300+ service users engaged in workshops and group-based activities, such as creative arts and peer-led walking workshops for domestic violence survivors. **78%** reported significant improvements in life satisfaction after engagement

48,450+ patients reached through our Bowel, Cervical and Breast Screening Projects. **86%** of Bengali respondents said discussing cervical cancer is taboo in their culture.



Youth

Links Media College students created an **anti-vaping media campaign** in partnership with Newham Council and Change, Grow, Live, which was presented to the former MP for West Ham, Lyn Brown, in January ahead of the second reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

The More than Mentors, peer mentoring programme, **trained 50 peer mentors and supported 51 mentees since September 2023.**

Community



245 graduates of the digital literacy course, **Community Clicks**, aimed at improving the digital skills and social inclusion of older citizens in Newham.

93% of participants reported feeling confident in using digital tools, compared to just 26% at the start.



Advice

Over 1,400 clients supported through free legal, debt, housing, and social welfare advice. The advice services helped optimize client income by **£2.1 million**, primarily through welfare benefits, housing support, and debt management.



What's the need?

From our base at 105 Barking Road, Newham has been the home of Community Links for nearly 50 years. Our community has seen significant investment in recent years through large scale infrastructure projects like the Silvertown tunnel and Crossrail and the creation of the Royal Docks Enterprise zone. But the benefits of this investment have been unequally distributed and Newham remains an economically vulnerable borough with persistent issues around poverty and inequality.

In 2023, Newham had the highest destitution rate of any local authority in the UK. 50% of children in the borough are living in poverty and, compared to around 24% nationally, nearly 32% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals. Around a third of jobs in Newham pay less than the London Living Wage. The borough has by far the highest rate of households – and more than 9,000 children – in temporary accommodation and the highest rate of homelessness of any local authority in England. Overcrowding is a major issue. In 2023, Newham's crime rate was 31% higher than the London average.

The number of people in the UK struggling to afford to meet their most basic physical needs has risen to 3.8 million, nearly two and a half times what it was in 2017 and including nearly triple the number of children. This is having a profound impact on people's physical and mental health and putting already overstretched services under increasing pressure. It's estimated that in England alone, 1.2 million people are waiting for mental health support, around 270,000 of them, children. Never has the need for our services been more acute, nor more chronic.

105 Barking Road

It is a privilege to call 105 Barking Road in Canning Town our home. A beautiful example of a Victorian public hall, built between 1892 and 1894, Community Links has been based here since 1991. In the late 1980s, the hall had fallen into a state of disrepair, and it took a huge community fundraising effort to restore it before we secured a long lease from the Council.

A tremendously symbolic building, with links to East London's suffragette and labour movements and a rich history of providing refuge to those displaced by war, flooding and other emergencies, this place has been a centre for social action for more than 100 years. A long list of social reformers from Sylvia Pankhurst to Keir Hardie, Daisy Parsons and George Lansbury to Bertrand Russell have all spoken here.

Today, the building is used by our Community Links team and by colleagues from across Catch22, to bring charitable services – from free advice and a foodbank to education and training opportunities – into the heart of our community. It's also a place where people come to take part in dance classes, weekly pensioners' bingo or simply to sit down in relative warmth and comfort.

In the last year alone, around 19,500 members of the community have entered 105 Barking Road. This is in addition to hundreds of phone calls from members of the public seeking to access our services or be signposted to others who can help.

In documents dating back to 1893, the vision for 105 Barking Road is described as that of a Public Hall 'built by the people, for the people'. It's a vision that remains central to this building today. Our work may be expanding beyond Newham, but it's growing from the roots up and our roots are here: in this place, in this community and in 105 Barking Road.

Governance and finance

In February 2021, Community Links established an innovative merger with our parent organisation, Catch22, a national not-for-profit business with a social mission. While Community Links remains dedicated to our local communities and to sharing lessons learned more broadly, we are pleased to embark on a journey of progressing our unique history and experience within Catch22. This year, Community Links has joined the newly created Communities operation, which has a remit that reaches beyond East London, as is evident in this report. We are excited to be an integral part of the new place-based mission of the Communities operation and look forward to reflecting this transition in full in next year's Annual Report.

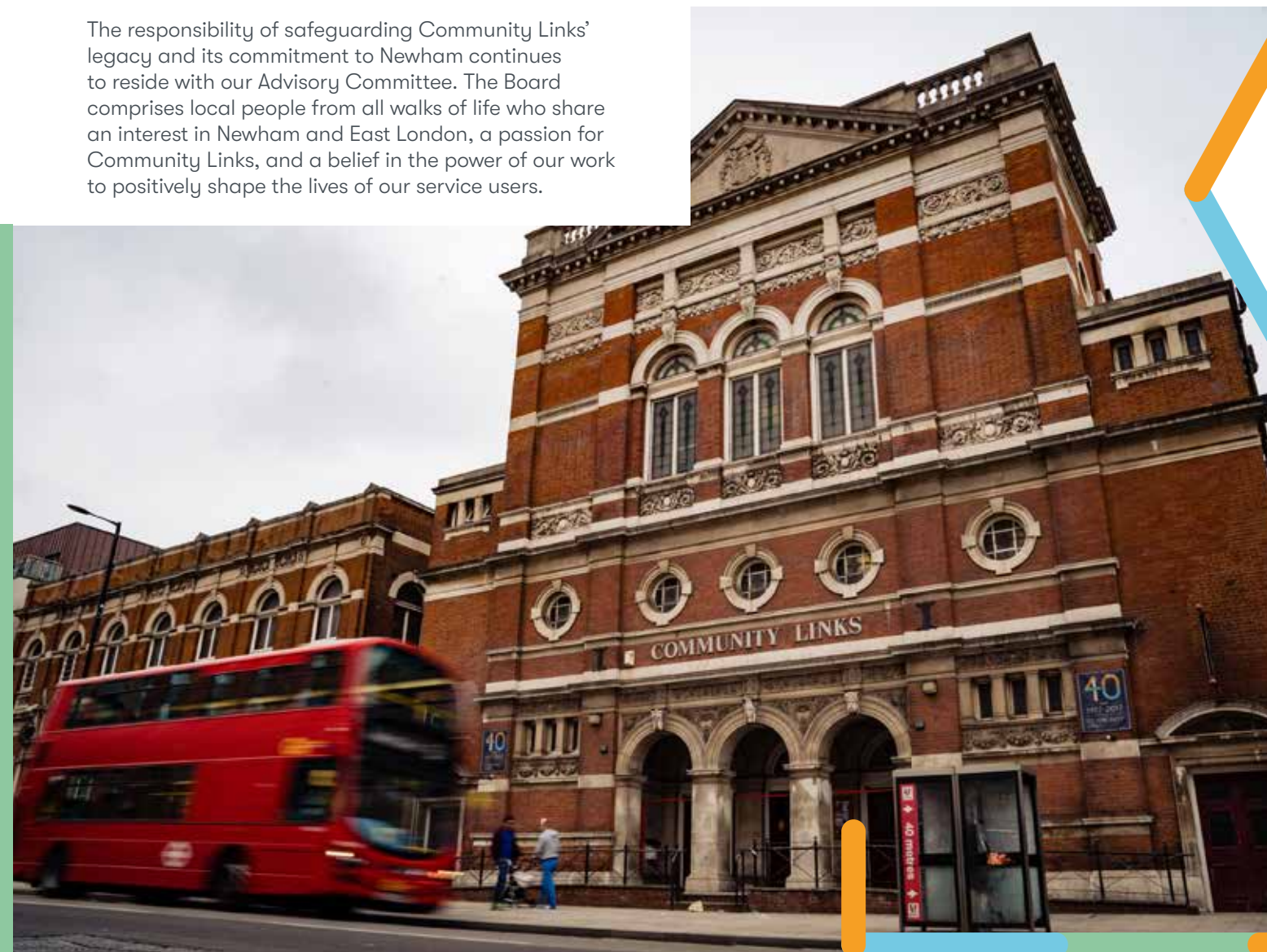
The responsibility of safeguarding Community Links' legacy and its commitment to Newham continues to reside with our Advisory Committee. The Board comprises local people from all walks of life who share an interest in Newham and East London, a passion for Community Links, and a belief in the power of our work to positively shape the lives of our service users.

Income and expenditure

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

Every pound we are given is important to us; in a carefully balanced budget to use resources to achieve the most impact.

	FY22/23	FY23/24
Total Income	2,702,276.60	3,009,828.79
Total Expenditure	-2,501,719.99	-2,801,776.85



Our work

1. Culture

We unleash community-led cultural and creative opportunities across Newham, building skills, boosting wellbeing and improving quality of life.

2. Health

We help to build healthy communities, by increasing participation in cancer screening programmes and providing support to those suffering from serious mental illness, empowering people to take more control over their own physical and mental wellbeing.

3. Youth

We support young people to realise their full potential by using our state-of-the-art recording studio, our college courses, peer-to-peer mentoring, community sports outreach, and counselling services.

4. Community

We work to tackle the key challenges holding individuals and communities back, from lack of digital skills to poverty, unresolved conflict to housing issues.

5. Advice

We provide free debt, housing, social welfare and legal advice, services which boost our holistic support-offering to all those who engage with Community Links.



1. Culture: getting creative about wellbeing

Culture Within Newham is a transformative community-led programme unleashing cultural and creative opportunities for everyone across the borough.

In many ways, Newham is resource rich. Significant investment from several sources has been injected into the borough in recent years. But its creative opportunities and cultural infrastructure are unequally divided. Resources pool in some areas of the borough and are lacking from others. Our Culture Within Newham project aims to bring the huge benefits of culture-led regeneration to those communities in the borough who have, so far, benefited least.

We know that engagement with art and active participation in cultural projects can significantly improve people's wellbeing. Culture Within Newham is creating opportunities for work and volunteering in creative roles, helping people to develop transferable skills, grow their confidence and access new social networks. We're growing from the grassroots up with all our activities generated by the wealth of culture and skills that exist in the borough. In a transient and sometimes culturally disparate area, our programme is helping residents to build community: to create a stronger sense of collective identity, increase their ownership over the creative and cultural life of the borough and feel more connected to and proud of it.

In the first year of the programme, we've engaged with nearly 17,000 people and delivered 172 activities centred around film, crafts, dance, food, gardening and much more. We have connected 292 groups and organisations, plus 81 artists and creatives and worked with 69 creative contractors or suppliers. We've built a programme structure and staff team from scratch, translating our original aims and ambitions into an evolving programme of engagement and delivery and beginning to embed CWN as the glue that can connect and strengthen the borough's cultural eco-system.

With co-creation at the heart of our project from the beginning, our Community Voices Panel of local residents has played a leading role in helping us to ensure that our programme engages, and is accessible to, people of all backgrounds and cultures and that we remain open to the fact that arts and culture mean different things to different people. We're working hard to overcome local cynicism towards initiatives that promise change in this post-Olympic borough, developing our programme with care, taking time to involve local people in developing core principles and decision-making and moving only at the speed of trust. We are in the process of setting up a Children's Board, due to launch in September 2024, to bring the voice of children and young people - such a large part of Newham's constituency - into the programme.



Branding that shouts Newham

We knew the branding for our CWN programme needed to shout about Newham's vibrant culture. So we needed residents to tell us their stories.

We began by asking local artist, Lottie McCarthy, to develop a colour palette using residents' pictures of their favourite places in the borough. Newham-based web and brand designers, Lunes Studio, then narrowed these down to five key colours - the beautifully named Albert Dock Sunrise, Sky-in-Lea Blue, East Ham Orange, Community Brick, and Plashet Moss - before we tested their style-scapes with community groups and our Community Voices Panel.

Tosin Sanni, a Royal Docks based graphic illustrator explored the shapes and images that residents most closely associate with Newham before creating symbols to represent each of the 9 different areas of the borough. These symbols were then integrated into our branding, further rooting it in local identity. Even our name - Culture Within Newham - was inspired by suggestions from our network of partners. It alludes to the fact that we make culture with everyone and in Newham, as well as culture and creativity being within each one of us.

Creating our brand in this way was a powerful process, helping us to unearth the remarkable hidden stories and cultures which make Newham such a culturally rich and inspiring place.

“Newham might not be what we’ve been taught is beautiful, it might not fit into conventions and traditional beauty standards, but it is powerfully, deeply beautiful when we take the time to look.”

Lottie McCarthy, local artist

“I’ve learnt to be more assertive and built my interpersonal skills. I’ve met people I wouldn’t meet in my day-to-day life... I’ve also seen that there are other communities in Newham and that it’s a more creative place than I thought.”

Member of our Community Voices Panel

“The arts is a really wonderful thing and everyone loves to enjoy it, but then who gets to participate? There’s always a bit of a kind of...barrier for people from places like this.”

Newham based artist

2. Health: the key to unlocking potential

Good health – physical and mental – is critical to ensuring that individuals and communities can reach their full potential. And, at Community Links, we believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to lead a healthy life. Sadly, we know that significant inequalities in the wider determinants of health – the social, environmental and economic conditions in which people live – mean this often isn't the case. Our range of health initiatives seek to identify and address health inequalities to make accessing early prevention and intervention health care a reality for all.

We aim to build healthy communities in which people are equipped to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, empowered to take more control over their own health and lifestyle and to be confident in seeking help early.



Community Connectors

Our Community Connectors programme provides holistic support to patients suffering from serious mental illness. Taking a social, community and user-focused approach, our programme is built on forging positive, deep value relationships between Connectors and service users to complement the clinical interventions of the NHS East London Foundation Trust.

In the last ten months, we have supported 925 service users. The issues facing our clients and communities are deeply interconnected and being able to refer many of these patients to our wider Community Links wrap-around support services has been hugely beneficial. Over 300 of them were additionally supported through workshop and group-based activities, from a creative arts course to a domestic violence survivors peer-led walking workshop. Others have been referred to our housing, consumer, welfare benefits, employment advice or emergency food support services. We know that difficulties or loss of control in such areas as employment and housing are contributory factors to mental illness and we saw an increasing number of service users in the Community Connectors programme – around 10% - actively looking for employment and an average of 30% needing some form of support with housing. Being able to give immediate access to professional support helps to prevent these issues from escalating.

78% of those supported by our service reported feeling significantly better in terms of life satisfaction at the end of their engagement with a Community Connector, than they did at the start of their intervention. But significant, persistent stigma around mental illness within ethnic minority populations in particular, often exacerbated by language and cultural barriers, remains a challenge for the programme. Our Connectors' knowledge of, and roots within, our local communities remain crucial to our success.

Cancer Screening

Cancer represents a significant public health challenge and national screening programmes play a pivotal role in reducing mortality rates and improving patient outcomes. Through two awareness campaigns – one in North-East London and one in Newham – we've increased understanding of breast, bowel and cervical cancer, their signs and symptoms, associated risk factors and the benefits of participation in screening programmes.

In Newham, we worked specifically with Bengali and Romanian women as participation in screening and knowledge of cancer signs and symptoms is persistently low in these communities. Our impact data shows that recognition of the key signs and symptoms of cancer increased from an average of 40% pre-campaign to 67% after, while recognition of key cancer risk factors increased from an average of 45% to 83%. We also saw a significant increase in awareness of all three national cancer screening programmes. Residents welcomed our campaign and told us they felt valued and reassured by our friendly and approachable Health Facilitators.

The fact that our Health Facilitators can communicate in the spoken languages of our target communities is vital, not only to their ability to provide clear information but to forge connections and build trust. An average of 60% of survey respondents said they ordinarily face difficulties speaking with health care providers due to a lack of translation services. This rose to 80% among the elderly. Among the Bengali community in Newham, nearly 86% of survey respondents said they wouldn't discuss cervical cancer in their culture as it's considered sensitive or taboo. It is crucial therefore for us to build close relationships with community group leaders, to tailor our messages to specific demographic needs, and to focus our campaign around friendly discussion.

In addition to these awareness campaigns, we have a team of Screening Improvement and Primary Care Network Cancer Facilitators. Their aim is to work specifically with primary care teams to improve uptake and coverage of the three national cancer screening programmes and to reduce variations in screening performance and participation. Having identified the lowest performing networks and GP practices, our team engages with the Clinical Cancer Lead in each borough. We meet to review performance reports and agree action plans for improvement, sharing learnings across the board.

Our health team also run calling projects across London to increase participation in bowel, cervical and breast cancer screening programmes. By calling patients who did not respond to initial screening invitations, we aim to encourage participation. We empower patients with knowledge and support, address any queries, concerns or misconceptions they may have and facilitate requests for appointments or replacement test kits. Our calling programmes enable us to better understand the underlying factors that are influencing participation rates among different communities, so that the reach of the screening programmes can be improved.

Over the course of our Bowel Screening Calling projects in Lambeth, Lewisham and North-East London, we called nearly 27,000 patients. Our Cervical Screening calling project, which was limited to one group GP practice, contacted around 450 patients. And our Breast Cancer Screening projects saw us engage with over 21,000 patients.

Patients who engaged with our calling interventions showed increased confidence in their ability to make informed decisions about screening and greater understanding of the reasons for and risk factors behind the screening process. They also became more likely to respond positively to future screening invitations. Without our intervention, it is highly likely that many of these patients would have remained as 'non-responders' with an increased risk of receiving a late cancer (or other abnormality) diagnosis and a negative impact on uptake and coverage of screening programmes.

Patients from ethnic minority backgrounds have been traditionally less likely to take up the offer of cancer screening due to cultural or practical barriers. Understanding the cultural diversity within specific communities is crucial for designing culturally sensitive healthcare interventions. Our multilingual, diverse team of Health Facilitators were able to understand the barriers facing patients of different ethnicities in accessing screening, or completing testing kits and they were able to approach them and the topic appropriately. The fact that the conversations could be open, sensitive and honest played a crucial role in busting myths, challenging incorrect preconceptions and encouraging a higher participation rate, improving healthcare access and outcomes for all communities.

3. Youth: laying the foundations for success

We support young people to unlock their full potential, raise their aspirations and build a sense of purpose. We want to empower them with confidence, offer them opportunities and equip them with the life skills they need to shape their own futures. We engage young people before challenges escalate and prioritise trust-based, deep value relationships with them and their families.

Links Studios and Media College

105 Barking Road is home to both our state-of-the-art production and recording studio, as well as our Media College. Here, some of London's most disadvantaged young people produce, record, perform and mix their own music tracks and pursue other creative projects in a safe, supported environment, while our college programme gives them the opportunity to gain fully recognised qualifications in Music Technology, Customer Service, English and Maths. Combining academic and vocational learning with a focus on employability and personal development through mentoring, this is the hub of our work with young people in Newham.



Mervyn, now aged 17, originally came to Community Links through our Studio. Before he became involved in the Studio, Mervyn described himself as being “a very nervous person, anti-social”. But interacting with more people, speaking more and having the opportunity to help others boosted his confidence and raised his aspirations. Mervyn subsequently enrolled at Links Media College and graduated with a level 2 music qualification. In an email, one of Mervyn’s parents said “The mere fact that Mervyn is even thinking about going to university is testament to all the help and support that you and the Community Links College are giving to him. If only his secondary school could see him now and how far he has progressed”. Mervyn says that he has been “inspired not to give up. My music journey has really made me realise that, no matter what I decide to do in life, I shouldn’t give up...Links Studios has made a huge difference. I’ve learned to help out more, look out for others more, love more and share my ideas - just confidence really. I feel amazing, the best I’ve ever felt”.

More than Mentors

Our peer mentoring programme, which has run in secondary schools and community settings across East London since 2016, aims to build young people's emotional resilience, to improve their connectedness with school and to prevent problems from escalating by addressing the early signs of mental health needs, including anxiety, depression or stress. Peer mentors, aged 12 to 20, receive training, apply their mentoring skills, with specialist supervision throughout, and develop their leadership skills.

Mentees, aged 11 to 16, meet with their mentor for up to ten sessions in a safe, supported setting, build on their strengths, develop future goals and improve their resilience, wellbeing and mental health. Since September 2023 we've trained 50 peer mentors and 51 mentees have taken part in the programme. This programme is due to end in October 2024.



4. Community: the power of together

In recent years, as communities have been hit by government austerity measures, the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, we're seeing increasing numbers of individuals and families face ever more complex and acute crises. At the same time, local authorities have fewer and fewer resources available to them, particularly for providing the kind of lower-level support that can empower people to access what they need and prevent crises from occurring. Our range of community programmes aim to tackle this need.


Community Clicks

This course is designed to improve the digital literacy and social inclusion of older citizens in Newham, a community that is being disproportionately impacted by social, economic and digital isolation. The total number of programme graduates now stands at 245 and the course continues to be heavily oversubscribed. Focusing on skills such as how to make online payments, shop online, book medical appointments, send and edit documents and connect with friends and family, graduates are provided with their own tablet device so they can apply their learning beyond the end of the course. The programme has shown demonstrable impact not only in increasing digital ability, but in boosting confidence and life satisfaction.

By the end of the course, 93% of 130 participants reported feeling confident in independently accessing, and operating within, the digital environment, compared to 26% at the start of the programme. 95% rated the programme 'very enjoyable' and a high percentage of participants reported learning skills they thought could be useful for further employment and training. Community Clicks has a 96% retention and achievement rate, the highest observed of any programmatic activity at Community Links and a testament to how meaningful the course is to participants.

Foodbank

Our foodbank, operating out of 105 Barking Road, offers short-term support and relief to some of the most vulnerable families and individuals in Newham. Between September and December 2023, we provided 3,000 bags of food to 1,220 people, supporting around 400 children. During the Christmas period, thanks to a generous donation from 3i, a corporate partner and supporter of Community Links' work, we were able to distribute more than 250 toys to 135 families attending the foodbank. This service has been temporarily paused since January 2023 as we seek to secure a more sustainable model and to determine how best to support families using the foodbank through our wider range of services.



COMMUNITY LINKS

Proud to be part of **catch 22**

5. Advice: empowerment at the core of our support

105 Barking Road acts as the hub for our Newham-based advice services. By providing free legal, debt, housing, and social welfare advice, we enable people to tackle and alleviate their difficulties, empowering them with the confidence to remedy future difficulties independently. Our aim is always to support people at the earliest possible point to prevent problems from escalating. We build deep value, trusting relationships with our clients, tailoring our approach so that they feel understood, heard and supported. We want our community to be knowledgeable and confident enough to identify and overcome the barriers they face. Lack of social capital, as well as finances, often lies behind persistent poverty and need; our advice services enable our clients to reclaim power and dignity over their own lives.

Since September 2023, we have supported more than 1,400 clients. Advice about welfare benefits continued to be the area of most need, closely followed by housing. By advising clients on how to claim the full range of benefits they are entitled to, or by helping them to tackle debt or housing issues, our advice services optimised the income of clients to the total of £2.1 million. In an area where poverty levels are some of the highest in the country and continued pressures associated with the cost-of-living show few signs of abating, this has a hugely significant impact in making individual lives more manageable and in reducing strain on other services.



Our advice service continues to sit at the heart of Community Links as an essential place-based support-offering for clients who engage with us through any one of our range of programmes. The issues facing our clients and communities are deeply interconnected. Housing, welfare benefits or debt problems are often issues for members of our community coming to our Foodbank, being referred into our Community Connectors mental health support programme or those signing up to our Community Clicks course, for example. Our advice services are also often beneficial to the families of young people attending Links Media College or Studios. We know that difficulties or loss of control in areas such as housing and welfare benefits are contributory factors to mental illness. Being able to give immediate access to professional support helps to prevent these issues from escalating.

As we grow, we aim to have advice services that can provide additional holistic support to all our community-based programmes. Access to good quality, free advice can often be the key to unlocking the vicious circles that keep our clients in need of our other services.

“For people not to feel shame coming to get help...”

Reception desk team member, upon being asked what she felt the most important outcome of her job was.

www.community-links.org