



Building resilient communities: The case for social cohesion

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Cover photo: Lewisham. Attendees at a Food Justice Day event
celebrating the diversity of the local community. (Credit: Coco
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About Protection Approaches

Protection Approaches is a London-based charity working to transform the way identity-based violence is understood, and by so doing transform the way we respond to and prevent it. Through a combination of community-led initiatives, cutting-edge research, technical advice, and policy advocacy, our work focusses on identifying and redressing the root causes of prejudice, division, and discrimination in society. We support and facilitate community-led solutions to these challenges. For a decade, our work has contributed to building social cohesion and societal resilience, rooted in an understanding that building strong, resilient, and inclusive societies requires collective action to challenge structural discrimination and inequality.

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Executive summary

Periods of acute local or national stress - such as the COVID-19 pandemic and this summer's racially motivated riots - underscore how social polarisation can intensify during crises and, at times, drive them. This erodes resilience at community, city, and national levels, weakening our collective ability to navigate challenges effectively. Yet, crises also reveal the remarkable strength of communities where trust, cohesion, and mutual support have been actively cultivated. Across London, the contribution of faith and community groups, supported in recent years by mechanisms such as the London Communities Emergencies Partnership and the Community Resilience Fund, has been vital in mitigating some of the worst impacts of stress and crisis, and catalysing community resilience. Such resilience, forged through social bonds, offers lessons on the importance of community-led social cohesion in the face of complex societal threats.

Over the past decade, national cohesion has been repeatedly tested. Economic downturns, austerity measures, and the Brexit referendum have exacerbated social and economic divides, with marginalised communities disproportionately bearing the brunt of chronic stresses and shocks. These challenges have been manipulated and appropriated by individuals and groups, including at times those in positions of political leadership, to drive exclusion, division, and grievance. When the bonds tying our communities together are weakened, society is made more vulnerable in times of crisis and more susceptible to divisive narratives and reactive politics, impairing our resilience and adaptability. Strong social cohesion, however, builds community resilience, equipping communities to confront crises with solidarity rather than fragmentation.

This report is published at a critical juncture for the future of UK communities. A new Labour government inherits both a frayed social fabric and the responsibility to repair it. The summer's riots, marked by Islamophobic and other racist violence, made explicit both the extent to which exclusionary division has taken root in parts of the country and the pressing need to confront - and redress - the roots of such social fracture. Last month, Donald Trump has been re-elected President, in no small part the result of Elon Musk's highly divisive social media campaign in support of 'X' that drew on mis-information and dis-information. Trump's victory will have direct and indirect impacts on the cohesiveness and bonds of London's and the UK's communities.

While many of the challenges ahead are not new, the new Labour government can make different choices. National and local policymakers have the opportunity to lead with principles of community resilience, social cohesion, and inclusivity, prioritising a strengthened social compact between state, citizen, and community.¹

This research was commissioned by the London Resilience Unit to explore whether, and how, social cohesion initiatives delivered by community and faith organisations contribute to societal preparedness and resilience to shocks and crises. Our findings are based on interviews conducted this summer, alongside evidence submissions from more than one hundred local organisations and community experts across the capital. Although these insights reflect the specific experiences of London, the principles derived from them offer broader applications. We hope these findings and

the recommendations that follow will inform efforts to bolster community resilience and social cohesion in communities across the UK, supporting national policies that prioritise social cohesion as essential to resilience, equity, and community safety.

Key Findings

1. **Social cohesion is a foundation of resilience:** Cohesive communities form the foundation of community resilience, countering social polarisation and division. Trust, solidarity, and mutual support foster effective crisis responses. For London and the UK to navigate complex future challenges, social cohesion must be recognised as integral to preparedness, equipping and uniting communities to respond inclusively and adaptively to unforeseen shocks.
2. **Community-led activities build social cohesion and strengthen crisis preparedness:** Community and faith groups implement a series of essential initiatives that foster social cohesion and equip communities to respond more effectively to crises. These activities help create an inclusive, resilient foundation for communities by fostering meaningful intergroup contact. Key initiatives include:
 - Providing inclusive spaces: Accessible spaces, including community centres and places of worship, provide essential venues for fostering social ties, countering isolation, and building intergroup trust. During crises, these spaces become hubs of support, strengthening resilience through community bonds.
 - Building connections and networks: Established local networks enhance communities' capacity to respond swiftly, minimise duplication, and facilitate resource-sharing. Community organisations with robust ties to other civil society groups, local authorities, and emergency services are well-positioned to respond to crises, preventing harm and bridging intergroup divides.
 - Building trust: Trust within and between communities, as well as with institutions, is indispensable for resilience. Community-led trust-building reduces misinformation, de-escalates tensions, and mitigates hate crime. As trusted intermediaries, community organisations foster inclusive responses during crises, demonstrating that resilience is strongest where mutual respect and trust are firmly rooted.
 - Supporting community ownership and decision making: Community ownership of local assets and decision-making fosters long-term sustainability and resilience. Empowered communities are better equipped to create inclusive responses to crises, linking resilience directly to self-determination and local agency
3. **Genuine social cohesion and community resilience cannot exist without addressing urgent needs and root causes of inequity and division:** Social cohesion and community resilience cannot be achieved through siloed and piecemeal approaches; they require a holistic approach that includes addressing

both the urgent needs of community members and the root causes of social division. Economic insecurity, lack of access to essential services, political instrumentalisation of identity politics and grievance, and other current challenges not only harm individuals but erode social cohesion. Historical and structural experiences of inequity, division, oppression and distrust propel contemporary dynamics and so must themselves be acknowledged and dismantled. Community groups make a direct, varied and significant contribution to fostering both community resilience and social cohesion, reducing marginalisation and establishing a foundation of trust and stability while advocating for long-term, systemic change. However, while tackling the root and systemic enablers of division and inequity may be a collective responsibility, it is a primary obligation of the state, national and local government, and statutory services.

Recommendations

1. **Prioritise social cohesion as a pillar of national resilience:** The UK Government should centre social cohesion as a top-line priority in the Cabinet Office's review of national resilience launched in July 2024, heeding lessons from this report to inform work with the devolved Governments, regional mayors and local leaders. Strong social cohesion is not and should not be seen simply as a superficial social good but as a cornerstone of safer, more equitable, and more resilient communities and a bellwether of societal health. If our capital and country are to successfully navigate the very real complex set of threats, risks and challenges to come over the next five to twenty years, cohesion and the resilience that cohesion contributes to must not be seen as optional but as the key to preparing our nation and equipping and resourcing communities to adapt and respond to the shocks that will only keep coming.
2. **Embed social cohesion as a core component of resilience planning in London and nationally:** The UK Government, the Greater London Authority, London Resilience Forum, London's local authorities and wider partners should recognise and embed social cohesion and community resilience in wider resilience planning. Evidence shows that cohesive communities respond to crises with unity, reducing social division and reinforcing community-based resilience. Recognition and consideration of social cohesion and community resilience should extend across key policy areas such as environment, planning, housing and regeneration and be reflected in strategies driving practice in those areas of work across London and nationally.
3. **Increase funding for social cohesion and community resilience initiatives:** The UK Government, Greater London Authority, London's local authorities and other funders should expand support to grassroots organisations dedicated to fostering social cohesion and community resilience. As communities face escalating economic, social, and environmental pressures, increases in funding and resource will be vital in maintaining community-driven social cohesion projects essential for resilience.

4. **Adopt long-term, flexible funding models with capacity-building support:** The UK Government, Greater London Authority and other funders should, wherever possible, transition to funding models that offer long-term, flexible support, enabling organisations to respond dynamically to evolving community needs while also feeling financially secure. These models should include provisions for capacity-building, ensuring community groups have the skills and tools they need to effectively deliver programming that builds social cohesion and community resilience.
5. **Focus funding on priority cohesion-building activities:** The UK Government, Greater London Authority, London's local authorities and other funders should direct resources toward initiatives that bolster social cohesion and community resilience through:
 - Developing or maintaining inclusive community spaces that foster interaction across diverse backgrounds.
 - Supporting network-building to encourage mutual support and efficient resource-sharing.
 - Delivering programmes that build trust between different communities and between community members and institutions helping to prevent hate-based incidents, reduce misinformation, and strengthen relations between communities and statutory bodies.
 - Empowering community-led participatory decision-making, co-design of local initiatives, and community ownership of assets to foster self-determination and enhance grassroots resilience.
 - Addressing urgent needs and root causes of division and vulnerability, such as economic insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to essential services coupled with efforts to address structural issues that harm long-term resilience and social cohesion.
 - Providing capacity building support to community-based organisations ensuring they have the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to maximise the impact of their initiatives in building social cohesion and community resilience.

In an era of complex challenges, social cohesion and community resilience must be viewed as primacy metrics of societal health and resilience. Without the bonds that unify society, communities and individuals face greater risks; so too do nations and the freedoms they enjoy. National leadership now has the opportunity to strengthen these bonds, reinforcing our collective resilience and ensuring a more inclusive, adaptable society for the future. This report offers the evidence, analysis and recommendations of how this can be done.

Introduction

The publication of this report comes at a time of national reckoning, following the most geographically widespread racist rioting the United Kingdom has seen in one hundred years.^{1,2,3} While London was not the epicentre of these events, their effects were still felt heavily in the city - both exposing the deterioration of social cohesion within the capital and evidencing the robust mobilisation of London's neighbourhoods, policy structures, civil society and public to confront and reject the violence and demonstrate solidarity. As policymakers, local authorities, community leaders, and citizens seek explanations, this report explores how prioritising social cohesion and community resilience - particularly through initiatives led by community and faith groups - can offer insights into preparing for the crises and shocks that are certain to come.

The past decade for Britain has been one of extraordinary national flux, marked economic decline, erosion of trust in domestic political institutions,⁴ with the riots being just one of several shocks communities have had to face. Indeed, social cohesion has been strained by successive major events such as the 2008 economic crash, the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as local shocks like terror attacks and the Grenfell Tower fire. Trust in institutions has shown a decline, with the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer showing only 30% of UK respondents had trust in the government.⁵ The politics of austerity and of the hostile environment have demonstrably widened the gaps between rich and poor and legitimised the othering of whole communities.

In London, steps have been taken to better coordinate emergency response across all sectors, and incorporate community voices in planning, preparedness, and response, alongside those of statutory actors. At borough level this work is facilitated via Borough Resilience Forums and at pan-London level, the London Resilience Forum (LRF) and London Resilience Partnership. Since its inception during the Afghan refugee crisis in 2021, their work has been complimented via the London Communities Emergencies Partnership (LCEP), run by London Plus and the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership. LCEP and the London Resilience Unit also administer the Community Resilience Fund intended to build "Stronger resilience by supporting community organisations to work together with their local authority emergency planning teams to best prepare for emergencies in their London boroughs."⁶

While this paper addresses challenges and responses in London, the wider context of deterioration of social cohesion is fundamental to understanding what is now needed in the capital and countrywide. Additionally neither London nor the UK can assess its preparedness to meet future shocks and trends without acknowledging the global context. The world is at its most violent and volatile since the end of the Second World War.⁷ Democratic backsliding, growth of transnational online hate-based networks, and the proliferation of conspiracy theories are altering the trajectories of democracy, freedoms, safety and cohesion across Europe and in many parts of the world. The World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risk index features societal polarisation in its top three risks, and misinformation emerging as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years, warning that "foreign and domestic actors alike will leverage misinformation and disinformation to further widen societal and political divides".⁸ Climate crises are exacerbating existing structural inequalities⁹

and a warmer world will have direct and varied impacts on London and the country.¹⁰ Already, marginalised and disadvantaged communities are paying the greatest price in the UK, while often contributing least to emissions.¹¹ As the climate catastrophe deepens and climate-driven crises become more common, the capital and its communities will need to prepare to withstand and adapt to the environmental, economic, social, and political changes such global challenges will bring.

If the UK and London are to fully prepare to meet these very real and approaching challenges, preparation will require strong social cohesion and community resilience - and thus the leadership, expertise and partnership of community organisations and their networks. When these crises hit, they will amplify existing inequalities and grievances as well as create new forms of social, spatial, and economic exclusion. As this report and others evidence, when shocks occur, mistrust and fear can escalate across different vectors. In the past decade, we have seen this increasingly catalysed by the spread of misinformation and extremist rhetoric, leading to increases in hate crime fuelled by the normalisation of hateful rhetoric against marginalised communities.¹² The past decade has seen a trend in national and international political communication and strategy where the deliberate manipulation of grievance, anxiety and identity politics has contributed to a normalisation and legitimisation exclusion, identity-based hate and violence, and sowed distrust. The country's new leadership may have little control over the internationalised crises that will keep coming but it does have a choice of what to prioritise and how to prepare. Yet, the UK is often stuck in firefighting mode. As Demos has warned, "We are stuck in a doom loop of servicing ever greater problems, without tackling the underlying causes and strengthening the social capital in neighbourhoods to prevent them. We urgently need to reset this pattern..."¹³

Understanding cohesion and resilience

This report explores how social cohesion initiatives and good practice are contributing to strengthening London's resilience. Our simple working definitions are as follows:

- 'Social Cohesion': strong and positive relationships, connectedness, and solidarity between people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and circumstances.
- 'Resilience': The capacity of a community to prepare for, withstand and adapt to shocks and chronic stresses e.g., cost-of-living crisis, terror attacks, heatwaves and fires, flood events, pandemics, international conflict.

However, it is imperative to unpack these terms and clarify our approach as there is little consensus around the language and definitions of both social cohesion and resilience.

The term social cohesion can for some be a useful catch-all while for others be too simple. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development measures social cohesion using three indicators; social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility.¹⁴ While there are many different metrics that can be used to assess social cohesion (this recent government study found 23 indicators),¹⁵ our understanding of

the concept is rooted in the view that our societies are stronger and more resilient when they are equitable, inclusive, participatory, transparent, and just. Social cohesion is not and must never be reduced to “good relations”, “tolerance” or “absence of conflict.”¹⁶ Nor should the responsibility for its cultivation ever fall upon those who are face the negative consequences of its absence. Likewise, the concept of resilience has been applied by policymakers to Black, Asian and minority ethnic families and communities in ways that are biased, stigmatising and pathologising.¹⁷ As outlined by Sims-Shouten and Gilbert, “only when individuals and communities are heard, taken seriously and their needs engaged with is it possible to truly make sense of what resilience entails and what support is required to facilitate the development of resilience in different social and cultural groups.”¹⁸ Considering this we employ “community resilience” as defined by Hope Not Hate to reflect this focus on community needs, resources and agency whilst actively addressing the racial and structural inequalities that increase vulnerabilities and enable violence.¹⁹

Real concerns regarding oversimplification and or depoliticisation of how social cohesion and resilience are understood must be acknowledged and addressed. Genuine cohesion efforts should not place the burden of expectation or responsibility upon minoritised communities to “integrate” or solely undertake the work necessary towards a more equitable and safer city and nation. Nor can genuine cohesion efforts rely only on local cohesion building activities. As antiracism charity Runnymede Trust warns “racism cannot be overcome simply by creating opportunities for proximity between communities in local spaces. It needs to be addressed directly, at its root.”^{20,21}

The deep and varied challenges that face communities inside and outside of London have been exacerbated by the national policies and worsening public political rhetoric that have deliberately taken aim at refugee, asylum and migrant communities and those who defend their rights. This trajectory of political and structural othering is driving violence and division and has contributed to a rapid unknitting of the social fabric, leading to a normalisation of anti-migrant prejudice. Any strategic approach to social cohesion and resilience therefore must actively resist and confront such othering. While encouraging solidarity between people of different identities is an important component, addressing the root and systemic causes of inequity, oppression and division must always be central.

In light of these structural challenges, while this paper will show that social cohesion efforts and initiatives to bring people together led by community and faith groups are crucial – they are not enough on their own.

Methodology

Through a call for evidence launched in May 2024, outreach was undertaken to reach thousands of community organisations, charities, faith bodies and other civil society institutions across London to share their experiences and expertise on what they felt was working to build social cohesion in the capital, how this work contributed to building resilience, and what they needed to ensure this work could be strengthened and supported.

This call highlighted several different avenues for organisations to contribute, providing accommodations to facilitate inclusive participation as needed. Our team collated and reviewed survey submissions, emails, evaluation reports and other media shared by contributing organisations and arranged and conducted semi-structured interviews. As we collected data, we analysed it to identify key findings and themes.

Our formative findings and themes formed the basis for discussion in three workshops conducted in July 2024, feeding back on the findings and themes. Participants were drawn from the faith and community sector, the public sector, emergency services and academia. Following the riots in August, we conducted additional interviews and provided an opportunity for participants to submit additional information to ensure we captured community views.

Ultimately over 100 organisations contributed by completing the survey, taking part in an interview, sharing existing resources or participating in our project workshops. Our team also conducted visits to some projects and participated in other learning and sharing activities with London Resilience and London Communities Emergencies Partnership (LCEP) partners and via other relevant networks,

What next?

National legislation, such as the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, and policies like the UK Government Resilience Framework 2022, acknowledge the importance of the voluntary, community and faith sector in emergency response. However, only recently has there been a closer examination of the role communities play in shaping understandings of risk and resilience, acting as frontline responders, and preventing crises or mitigating their worst impacts when they are unavoidable. The 2024 Khan Review indicates that more attention is required on the role of social cohesion (or its absence) in impacting the UK's democratic resilience stating "I have met countless incredible people across our country on the frontline of local communities who are passionately working hard to build and preserve social cohesion. They are however being let down in the face of poor policy, insufficient data, and the lack of strategy and supporting infrastructure."²² Similarly, the findings of independent reports published in the wake of this summer's riots by prominent civil society organisations such as Hope not Hate²³ and British Future, Belong and Together,²⁴ emphasise the importance of attending to the relationship between social cohesion and resilience when considering responses which can both address the harms caused by the riots and reduce the likelihood of future such disorder.

There is urgent opportunity - and responsibility - for the UK to move from firefighting mode, toward prevention, by prioritising the nurturing of stronger communities, and the repair and maintenance of our rich social fabric.²⁵ Grass roots community and faith groups across London (and indeed the country) have consistently demonstrated their capacity for innovative, impactful civic engagement²⁶ and informed advocacy to address failings in crisis response and community engagement.²⁷ From the volunteers who cleared up the debris and rebuilt the mosque wall in Southport, to the thousands of mutual aid groups that mobilised in the face of COVID-19, a growing body of

evidence shows communities possess the knowledge, skills, and assets to respond to challenges and as the first front-line responders, they thrive as they respond and adapt to crisis.^{28,29,30}

For the past two decades, successive governments have failed to deliver on the recommendations of reviews raising the alarm on social cohesion. This summer, a national resilience review was announced by the new government, led by a dedicated committee in the Cabinet Office,³¹ with the aim of improving societal resilience to the range of risks facing the UK. However, this review comes at a time when the bonds that tie society together have long been taken for granted. Threats to cohesion, trust, and collective responsibility lie in every policy decision where ordinary people feel excluded or left behind. The unequal experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the enabling conditions of and inadequate response to the Grenfell Tower fire,^{32,33} and the speed at which the racist and Islamophobic riots this summer spread,³⁴ represent the iceberg's tip of a reality that goes much deeper and has for too long gone unseen or ignored by those with national responsibility for ensuring the individual and collective safety and opportunities of all in London and the country.

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Pat McFadden, who is leading the review, has said that the “nation can only be as resilient as the foundational strength of its infrastructure and public services.”³⁵ Explicitly drawing upon the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire and COVID-19, this review provides an important opportunity to ensure social cohesion is seen as a metric of success of societal health, safety and security - and therefore of resilience. The evidence generated by this report - as well as others - makes the case for social cohesion to be recognised as the third foundation stone of national resilience - and thus that the cultivation of social cohesion forms a central pillar to any national or local resilience strategies.

Any national approach to resilience must not take the bonds that unite society for granted. To grasp this opportunity to re-set the state's relationship with communities, the UK's approach to resilience must tackle the root causes of inequity, while centring social cohesion and bolstering the ability, capacity and confidence of communities to adapt, respond and heal in the face of crisis. To deliver “a government of service,”³⁶ any mission of national renewal must act in the interests of all and leave no one behind. A preventative approach that centres community needs and expertise has the potential to transform the state's relationship with its citizens by forging a new social contract based on trust, participation and respect. For the first - and strongest - line of defence against future shocks and crises, including the hate and division we witnessed this summer, will always lie in the nurturing of and working with cohesive, connected and equitable communities.

Research findings

1. Social cohesion as the foundation of resilience

Cohesive communities form the foundation of community resilience, countering social polarisation and division. Trust, solidarity, and mutual support foster effective crisis responses. For London and the UK to navigate complex future challenges, social cohesion must be recognised as integral to preparedness, equipping communities to respond adaptively to unforeseen shocks. As Hope Not Hate's recent report demonstrated, community resilience is characterised by social connectedness, resource availability and agency and empowerment. They explain that "when trigger events happen in resilient communities, people are able to reject hateful actors seeking to exploit the situation."³⁷

Evidence collected through our consultation shows that more connected communities, characterised by positive relationships among diverse individuals, significantly contribute to community resilience - both in preparing for and responding to shocks such as food and energy price increases, terror attacks, heatwaves and fires, rioting, flood events, and pandemics, as well as the effects of international crises such as conflicts. 85% of groups who responded to our call for evidence believe that their work on social cohesion helped people become more prepared or able to support each other during these shocks and chronic stresses.

Community and faith groups play a crucial role in fostering these connections. 55% of groups who contributed cited the importance to their work of building connectedness, trust, or solidarity between different people. Many responses further reflected how crucial these qualities are when mobilising in response to crisis.

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By fostering strong relationships, connectedness, and solidarity among community members, our initiatives create a robust support network that can withstand and respond to crises effectively. For example, our Foodbank Seva Program not only addresses immediate food insecurity but also builds community cohesion, enabling neighbours to support each other during challenging times such as the cost-of-living crisis or pandemics. The sense of belonging and community spirit cultivated through our activities motivates individuals to contribute to the wellbeing of their neighbours and fellow community members. - Yog Foundation

Community and faith groups delivering grassroots support on an everyday basis to people are a crucial part of the social infrastructure which informs emergency response and longer-term recovery and adaptation. Somers Town Community Association, which runs a community centre in the most deprived ward in Camden,³⁸ is a key example of this kind of social infrastructure and engages in both service delivery to meet immediate needs and long-term consultation and planning around preparedness and adaptation.



We also progressed into advocacy because we see the gaps widening and understood community needs from our consistent engagement with and deep roots in the community. - Somerstown Community Association

In the face of reducing civic engagement and participation, reduced civic space,³⁹ low trust in public institutions⁴⁰ (especially among marginalised communities)⁴¹ and a widespread sense of national decline⁴² community-led organisations have a vital role to play in preparedness; building connections between people of different groups; preventing, and supporting victims of hate crime; combating misinformation and disinformation; and identifying and reducing community tensions.

While in performing these functions community and faith groups contribute to greater overall resilience to stresses and shocks, reducing disorder and other harms, the primary responsibility and power is not theirs. Indeed, a key part of the role civil society can play is in mobilising and strengthening community voices and pushing for changes in local and national policy which promote equity, accountability, and social protections. A rebalancing of public-community relations which foregrounds those voices and prioritises grass roots concerns is therefore vital to the success of these efforts - and thus must be supported and leveraged.

2. Community-led activities build social cohesion and strengthen crisis preparedness

Context matters in whether contact between individuals and groups is positive or negative. Community-led activities that are sensitive to their context, account for inequalities between groups and centre flexibility for individuals to determine if and how they engage with others, help build positive and meaningful relationships over time.⁴³ These activities contribute to and create a social infrastructure characterised by “shared spaces, physical and digital connections, and an active and engaged community.”⁴⁴ Cultivating the appropriate conditions for this takes sustained commitment to the community, and underpins both greater social cohesion and stronger crisis preparedness.

Evidence gathered through the consultation highlighted four themes of work being delivered by community and faith groups to successfully build social cohesion while also helping to ensure that communities are equipped to respond more effectively to crises, by fostering meaningful intergroup contact

Inclusive spaces

Accessible spaces, including community centres and places of worship, provide essential venues for fostering social ties, countering isolation, and building intergroup trust. During crises, these spaces become hubs of support, strengthening resilience through community bonds.

Community and faith groups provided myriad examples of spaces that provided safety and means of reaching alignment, consensus and equity, and helped chip away

at structural barriers of exclusion and isolation. The foundation of trust and safety spaces provide was seen as key to the mobilisation of communities in moments of crisis – from mutual aid networks during COVID-19, providing shelter to refugees and homeless people in cold weather, to outreach and access to encourage vaccine take-up in the face of conspiracy theories.

Discussions of place and space in relation to social cohesion have often focussed on how places and spaces are used, and the opportunities they provide for generating both ‘bridging social capital’ (building relationships between different groups) and ‘bonding social capital’ (strengthening relationships within a group)⁴⁵. Responses to our call for evidence agreed that resilient communities need a mixture of inclusive spaces which are open to all and exclusive spaces which support specific groups, enabling the provision of targeted, differentiated support. Working in concert in diverse civil society both types of places can support the cultivation of long term, trust-based relationships between different people and different groups.

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Being a consistent presence in people’s lives offers them plenty of opportunities to use our space, and eventually this brings them into contact with others It also positions us to better advocate for our community and within our community when required. - Somers Town Community Association⁴⁶

Spaces and places associated with specific communities can serve as hubs for intercultural engagement fostering a greater range and quality of relationships across the community

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we have people of many different faiths use our building as a sacred space and as a community asset...The impact on people feeling safe/wanted/seen and engaged/having agency, has been immense. we foster informal and networked friendships that can be called upon in times of emergency right across the different stakeholders and users of our geographic area. - St Giles Church, Cripplegate

When spaces or places are often most effective at building strong and positive relationships, connectedness, and solidarity between people, it is not because they force interaction for its own sake but because they offer services and activities that people genuinely want and need. By doing so, these spaces naturally bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, creating organic opportunities for connection and cohesion.

For example, Ealing Law Centre has provided free legal advice and representation in housing, immigration, and welfare benefits law to those in need since 2013.⁴⁷ Co-located within and managing the community library, the law centre uses the space to provide essential services while also making it a welcoming hub for the local community. The library, which offers activities such as homework clubs, poetry readings, youth groups, and IT workshops, attracts a wide range of people bringing them to the space for the services they value. These shared spaces create

opportunities for people of different backgrounds to meet and engage, fostering social cohesion naturally as a by-product of meeting their everyday needs.

The cohesion built through such place/space initiatives in turn supports resilience. Clube De Brasileirinhos, for example serves the Portuguese speaking communities of London and have been running as a complementary/supplementary school for 15 years. They work with adults and children from multiple Portuguese speaking backgrounds (9 different nationalities around the world), and their families, which often include people of other heritage and cultures.

Clube De Brasileirinhos have observed many new relationships between different people who use their space, resulting in proactive mutual aid between the diverse communities within their user base, in response to the stress of both domestic and international crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic the centre closed for a short time, but Clube De Brasileirinhos mobilised community members who use the centre to render food aid and provided community outreach and access for vaccinations, delivered by Portuguese speaking doctors.⁴⁸

There is added value in providing multiple services from one location, and weaving conversation and activities that contribute to resilience into and around the delivery of these services. For example, Somers Town Community Association, and the community which use their centre, have developed an approach which consciously weaves resilience through an ongoing range of activities, as well as being prepared to respond to emergencies. In 2018 during a period of extreme cold weather, the Community Association mobilised to advocate for the opening of a night shelter catering for unhoused Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus (LGBTQIA+) people in the area, who were struggling to safely access other provision. They were able to work successfully with the community to make this happen, providing vital support to multiple marginalised community members. During the COVID-19 pandemic Somers Town Community Association brought the community together to run and use a community pop-up vaccination centre which vaccinated over 3,000 people.

After major incidents occur the fall-out can have significant and varied implications for community relations. Community and faith groups can be proactive in creating spaces where communities can air out their grievances, fears, and concerns about one another, as well as statutory stakeholders, on their own terms, rather than having to take a 'seat' at the table set by the authorities.

For example, Restorative Justice For All (RJ4ALL) has initiated 'Speak Up' sessions, giving community members from Rotherhithe the space to be able to air fears and concerns and connect them with local elected representatives and other officials.⁴⁹ In response to a Police-involved shooting on a local estate in early 2024 the next 'Speak Up' session was given to reflecting on the incident, with participants sharing their thoughts and concerns about safety, security, and communications with the authorities. Feedback indicates that the 'Speak Up' events give opportunities to foster connections between residents and other stakeholders to address pressing

issues affecting the community, which have been exacerbated by both the cost-of-living crisis and escalating national and local social conflict, better equipping them to proactively address divisions in future.

The spaces and places where people come together, including community centres, green spaces and businesses form a valuable part of the social infrastructure ecosystem of a community.⁵⁰ Community organisations such as the Yog Foundation (Bromley)⁵¹ and Sister Midnight⁵² (Lewisham) are working to identify and access new spaces in innovative ways including community fundraising, negotiation with councils to utilise vacant assets, and outreach and relationship building with the wider community. The work of the John Smith House Consortium in Barking and Dagenham,⁵³ which now represents the interests of eleven different civil society groups, working out of a former council building, provides an inspiring example of collaboration to revive a community space and make unified efforts for greater collective impact on key local issues. Initiatives such as Blue Market Bermondsey⁵⁴ and the Wards Corner Community Plan⁵⁵ are practical examples of community driven approaches to regeneration which promote positive, inclusive change with the identity of an area and community at its heart, and community cohesion as a core concern.

Ongoing changes in London can threaten this infrastructure, especially that which serves some of the most marginalised communities.⁵⁶ For example, in some parts of London local authority-run community spaces are closing at a faster rate than they open,⁵⁷ putting more of a burden on the voluntary sector to find and maintain new spaces. Regeneration projects provide opportunities for inclusive development which creates social value, and some of the community and faith groups whom we engaged with have undertaken (or are undertaking) ambitious, creative endeavours to secure assets for the long term, futureproofing against shocks and working to secure spaces for their community.⁵⁸ By including consideration of social cohesion and resilience across a range of policy areas, particularly the regeneration and economic development of the city – and ensuring community participation and consultation in decision-making and planning – a consistent and coordinated approach to preserving, protection and nurturing community spaces could be achieved.

Building connections and networks

Established local networks enhance communities' capacity to respond swiftly, minimise duplication, and facilitate resource-sharing. Community organisations who have developed robust ties to other civil society groups, local authorities, and emergency services, as well as members of their local community, are well-positioned to respond to crises, preventing harm and bridging intergroup divides.

Organisations that are proactive in creatively building and maintaining networks and collectives have a strong understanding of what is happening in their communities, who is doing what, and how. As a result, they can then work together to minimise duplication, avoid conflict, and communicate clearly and quickly in responding to crisis. This supports coordinated support and engagement with and advocacy to statutory actors.

Community and faith groups who contributed evidence to this report underlined the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the unique relationships and understanding that community and faith groups can build and how this contributes to their role in crisis preparedness, response and resilience.

For example, Gasworks Dock Partnership based in Newham have engaged over 16,000 volunteers, thousands of school children, and many other stakeholders in the transformation of Cody Dock. They told us how their engagement with volunteers helped community response to COVID-19

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Within weeks of the first COVID lockdown we were able to pivot our entire operation to support our local authorities by training over 900 volunteers in telephone befriending and provide the supervisor necessary to support them working with very complex cases and approximately 10,000 of the most vulnerable residents in our community. - Cody Dock/Gasworks Dock Partnership

When an emergency hits a community and effective responses are mobilised, what appears to be spontaneous is often underpinned by years of relationship building.⁵⁹ Key individuals and groups play a crucial connecting role by identifying where and how support can be provided, while simultaneously building trust within and between various organisations.

There are individuals and groups within London's communities who are physically, socially and emotionally isolated and excluded for a range of structural reasons. Several organisations who responded to our call for evidence (InCommon, Befriend, Globe Community Project, Real) highlighted the role that civil society can play in connecting these people to others, addressing isolation and loneliness, building resources for individual and collective resilience, and advocating for structural changes e.g. to make venues disability accessible or push for effective data gathering, and usage. In emergencies this work helps to ensure that vulnerable or sheltered people are known, connected and supported through person centred emergency preparedness and response. Indeed, Demos' research supports this, highlighting that “one of the most profound implications of social capital is its mitigating effects on poor mental health and wellbeing”. They flag that during the COVID-19 pandemic, those neighbourhoods with strong social capital saw people rallying to help neighbours through mutual aid – “but what was less visible was the crushing isolation of others, left alone with no human contact”.⁶⁰

For example, Shpresa is the largest charity supporting the Albanian-speaking community in the UK, serving more than 3,000 people annually, predominantly trafficked women, refugees, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In addition to their core support for Albanian speakers, Shpresa support many other migrant communities including Portuguese and Somali speaking groups.

Shpresa's community events have created strong social networks, enabling members to share resources, knowledge, and emotional support. These networks, fostered

through activities like communal meals that promote cultural exchange, have proven vital during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and local emergencies including fires and floods. These connections between different communities as well as between community and faith groups, enhance their ability to mobilise effectively, access and manage resources, and present a united front when advocating for community needs with statutory authorities.⁶¹

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We can identify the most appropriate representatives to attend meetings with the local authorities or blue light actors but also make the state come to us rather than selecting one person to sit on a panel (as a token representative) The civil society infrastructure in our borough is the strongest I've seen. -

BD_Collective

In our data gathering we engaged with eleven groups focussed on maintaining civil society infrastructure, including a seven member ‘Church Unity Movement’ and a network of cooperatives, in addition to more orthodox voluntary sector Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs). The kind of work that these groups undertake to foster and facilitate civil society networks, provides the ‘hidden wiring’, which keeps others going, ensuring that organisations collaborate effectively and that resources are mobilised where they are most needed.

As part of their COVID-19 response work, Local Infrastructure Organisation Lewisham Local developed a Food Giving Group Network connecting 40 plus food aid providers to provide peer support, guidance and learning to set up COVID-safe delivery services for neighbourhoods across Lewisham.

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The network has been invaluable in supporting residents through COVID and the cost-of-living crisis, which has continued to add pressures. Most recently, we now are supporting Lewisham Council on the delivery of a food justice action plan by setting up a Food Justice Alliance, building on the learning and relationships from our COVID-19 work to tackle food injustice in a collaborative way. -

Lewisham Local⁶²

Borough-wide networks like Barnet for All and BD_Collective have worked for several years to implement new methods of organising and communicating, both in person and via social media, enabling them to proactively address shared concerns and coordinate effectively in times of crisis, improving civil society representation in emergency preparedness for and the coordination and efficacy of responses in times of crisis such as the August 2024 Dagenham fire.⁶³

Ongoing violence in the Middle East⁶⁴ was cited by several groups in our call to evidence as both a challenge affecting people within their communities and the relationships and connections between people of different identities. Faith and interfaith organisations emphasised the importance of their ongoing work to foster connection and exchange.

Faiths Forum for London supported five interfaith iftars during Ramadan in 2024 (March-April).⁶⁵ Over 500 people participated in these bridge-building events, bringing

together Muslims, Jews, and local neighbours for a shared break-the-fast meal. For most of the participants, these iftars marked their first interfaith encounter since the 7th of October attacks on Israel, and the beginning of the ongoing Israeli military assault on Gaza. These iftars were held at a time when relationships between Muslim and Jewish communities were under heightened strain. Faiths Forum for London's networks across religious communities meant that it was possible to find willing hosts and the events themselves both supported cohesion and community resilience:

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We know that this has impacted channels of support and intergroup resilience because many of the attendees have continued to connect with one another as part of Faiths Forum for London's network. They have also returned to act as champions for the promotion of dialogue and the alleviation of tensions within their own communities. - Faiths Forum for London

Networking and knowledge sharing is not cost-free and requires hard work to ensure convening continues and is meaningful. This is a role that can be taken by local authorities or commissioned through civil society organisations themselves. Furthermore, established relationships and networks are not always intersectional in their approach and traditional models of engagement for cohesion may reinforce exclusivity. Support to Local Infrastructure Organisations can help bridge some of the current gaps and facilitate more equitable engagement between a range of community and faith groups within one locality.

Horton and Penny emphasise the opportunity for communities in London to champion “bottom-up regeneration” which would entail “difficult and slow work, with profound challenges in creating inclusive structures and building consensus, winning institutional recognition and legitimacy, and acquiring and maintaining resources”.⁶⁶ More mechanisms which support the sharing of learning and tools would be welcome in contributing to this process. For example, the work of Islington Council and SPACE 4 in running COOPERATE Islington is notable as a borough-wide programme of awareness raising and support around cooperative ways of working and ‘Community Wealth Building’ principles which ultimately resulted in six new cooperatives registering in the borough.⁶⁷

Networks and collectives of community and faith groups can do more together if supported to connect, share, and plan in creative ways, identifying the key actors, resources, vulnerabilities and needs in their areas and building the capacity to respond to emergencies in a flexible, connected manner.

Building trust

Our consultation with community and faith groups underscored the crucial role of trust in building social cohesion and, in turn, supporting effective, inclusive preparedness and response to shocks and emergencies. Specifically, we noted three types of trust cited by consultation participants: within communities, between different communities, and between communities and statutory authorities.

Many of the organisations who provided evidence highlighted the severity of the challenges that their communities are facing, and the multiple pressing needs that they work to address which have a direct relationship to social cohesion and resilience. Chronic stresses affect quality of life, and many people across the city are struggling to meet their basic needs. Meeting those needs can help establish a reciprocal, trust-based relationship and a foundation for other forms of activity which build cohesion and help in preparedness for and mitigation of harms in times of emergency.

A timely response to needs as they present themselves in times of chronic stress or sudden crisis can support community groups to establish themselves as trustworthy and legitimate in the eyes of community members and give them more confidence in accessing other broader community building initiatives. St Peters Church Brockley initiated emergency responses to urgent community needs during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and noted the long-term legacy within their community.

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Our food bank and social supermarket were started at the beginning of lockdown in the spring of 2020, when several people knocked on the door saying they didn't have food to eat. The community garden has grown out of that, and together these groups are probably doing the most to bring the more middle-class residents of Brockley together with those from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds. - Love Brockley

The Yog Foundation noted that their Foodbank Seva programme, funded and staffed by the local Hindu Community across Bexley, Bromley, and other parts of South-East London, experienced a strong surge of demand during the pandemic from a range of other community members who may previously have been reluctant to engage. This has created opportunities for a wider range of sharing and peer support with different groups.

Many of those who provided evidence spoke about a deficit of trust in statutory services, and public institutions within communities and how this impacts social cohesion and community resilience. In some instances, a community organisation may be the only institution a person has a degree of confidence in; the place they can turn to for support. In moments of crisis particularly when misinformation and disinformation are widespread the role of community-led organisations in providing credible, timely information is very important.

Building such trust requires trustworthiness, exhibited through clear, consistent communication and accountability when things go wrong, or circumstances change. Understanding what concerns, fears and messages are present in the community, and their source, can support positive engagement by community and faith groups, to address gaps in trust during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Because our staff reflect and represent our community, and understand all the fears and divisions, they are better equipped to challenge them, to myth-bust and to encourage people to join in collective activities that are beneficial for them. In this instance we were able to mobilise quickly and ultimately become a vaccination centre used by 3000 people. - Somers Town Community Association⁶⁸

Moments of crisis and emergency, and their fallout, often see marginalised groups targeted or scapegoated, and immediate needs for protection and support arise. For instance, East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) communities experienced a surge in hate crime during the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled by political and racist rhetoric blaming China for the virus.⁶⁹ Similarly, since the October 7th attacks on Israel and the subsequent Israeli military assault on Gaza, Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK have faced a significant rise in hate incidents.^{70,71}

Again, it is trusted community and faith groups which are often best able to offer the support that victims of hate most need and that often integrates advice and guidance around hate crime reporting and the criminal justice process alongside individual and group interventions that provide psycho-social support.

This summer, Hopscotch Women,⁷² who provide culturally sensitive support to women and girls and specialise with working with refugees, produced hate crime awareness leaflets, videos and audio clips translated into relevant community languages, when the communities they work with felt especially targeted during the riots. Hopscotch undertook check-in calls to their members to check on their wellbeing and provide accurate information, advice on personal safety and signposting to other support. They also received a high volume of incoming inquiries and became aware that their resources had been widely shared beyond their network. They ultimately provided advice and resources to two other community-based organisations to further extend the available support. This demonstrates how work in this area can give systematically marginalised groups a firm basis of confidence from which to engage with others while also facilitating sharing, connectedness, and trust-building within and between groups.

The development of the UK-wide ‘On Your Side’⁷³ support and reporting service for all people who identify as East or Southeast Asian (ESEA), was launched in response to increased experiences of hate during the pandemic. This demographic of people is in of itself incredibly diverse culturally, linguistically, and socially, with a complex history of inter-communal relations⁷⁴. On Your Side is thus a partnership project involving several different community groups working in concert to raise awareness and understanding of hate crime amongst all parts of the ESEA community and provide casework support to people who have experienced a hate crime or incident.

On Your Side has served to better connect community groups representing and serving different groups within the ESEA community. In London specifically the On Your Side service and End Violence and Racism (EVR) have begun organising community events bringing together ESEA groups to engage in cultural activities,

promote their small businesses and engage in activities around hate crime prevention and response, mental health, and wellbeing. These events have provided an important space for people of different identities within the broader ESEA community, including LGBTQIA+ people to share their experiences, learn from and support one another while also building trust both among community members and in the support service.

Such trust building is necessary to help ensure that services can reassure communities at moments of tension such as high-profile cases of hate crime against ESEA community members and helps prepare ESEA communities for any future uptick in hate.

Community and faith groups who we engaged with underlined the emotional component of trust-building work. Stress, shock and trauma result in ongoing pain and grief which demands ongoing, consistent presence and genuine care from community and faith groups. Staff and volunteers modelling these qualities in their work can build long term trust across their community.



You have to be able to sit with the very real pain of others, even if you can't feel it yourself, with the hope of trying to understand, to empathise & to build a connection, if you want to do that work. We have found that this is the only way to build real trust with community groups & to let them know we care about them deeply – listening & empathising. – Faith and Belief Forum

Community ownership and decision making

Community ownership of local assets and decision-making fosters long-term sustainability and resilience. This might take the form of community members actively taking control of a piece of land or implementing structures and methods to meaningfully involve more of the community in decision making and action around the use and maintenance of a space or asset, or the running of a key service.

Empowered communities are better equipped to create inclusive and joined up responses to crises, linking resilience directly to self-determination and local agency.



The messaging and the engagement should be about co-production. We cannot tell people what to do. Communities must be on board with you to give them a bit of ownership. Co-production can boost confidence. - Real

Community power in decision-making, collaboration, and meeting community needs can have positive impacts on health and wellbeing of communities, social cohesion, prevention, and long-term economic value.⁷⁵ Responses to our call for evidence underlined the importance of communities feeling invested in local places, groups, and activities, and being meaningfully involved in decision making about how they are managed and run to cohesion building initiatives. The influence such initiatives will have on preparedness for and resilience to shocks is key. They highlighted how commitment to common interest e.g. a heritage site or concern e.g., food justice, and

active involvement in making decisions, allocating resources, and running activities helps bond different community members, building shared identity and trust, and creates important capacity that can be pivoted to address crucial needs in a time of crisis.

For example, the Romanian and Eastern European Hub⁷⁶ was started in 2019 by a small contingent of Romanians in Barnet, initially as a project of Local Infrastructure Organisation CB Plus. RO-EE HUB has been very successful in helping meet the needs of the Romanian community; connecting people to essential services and delivering targeted skills training to help the community build its own long term-resilience. As the co-founding members developed their experience and their vision of what they wanted the organisation to be, they initiated a transition toward RO-EE HUB becoming a charity in 2022, independent of the Local Infrastructure Organisation. This has enabled the organisation to maintain grassroots approach led by and for Eastern European people.

Public participation for a ‘common cause’, though not a guarantor of cohesion in of itself, is a key part of any mixture of approaches to building and sustaining cohesive communities. Recent research indicates that social cohesion creates a conducive environment for volunteering to emerge and that volunteering itself facilitates feelings of social cohesion.

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Our volunteer groups are a real mix of people. We have very low income, people who volunteer because they can afford not to work. Refugees, immigrants, people who have been in prison, have physical and mental health problems, have a history of addiction. I have worked and volunteered in a lot of places but never have I seen such a true mix of people. The peer support is incredible too. I see how they support each other in all sorts of different ways e.g., going to appointments with each other, meeting up outside of sessions, meeting on Christmas Day, advising each other on benefits, services etc. -
Hammersmith Community Gardens Association

As Beelmann and Lutterbach note, interventions that promote individual skills development as well as intergroup contact, have the most promising effects on preventing prejudice and discrimination.⁷⁷ Community and faith groups who responded to our call for evidence indicated the value of activities which build self-care and communication skills to relationship building across cultural divides. In organising around a shared interest or asset community members can practice constructive responses to the inevitable conflicts that emerge in stressed, resource deprived environments where neighbours have a mix of shared and competing concerns, interests and needs.

Several groups who responded to our call for evidence indicated the value of adopting a cooperative model of organising. For example, the initiators of Co-operation Town Camden designed their initiative to respond to an immediate need, but also to centre specific principles and processes intended to facilitate community agency, decision making and skills development. This meant that the community

not only saved hundreds of thousands of pounds but saw a blossoming of new community organising.⁷⁸ This reflects the findings of Feinberg et. al that “[trust and social cohesion] are not preconditions, but rather emerge from the collective action occurring in such convivial spaces. This combination of openness, experimentation in the face of disruptions, and freely accessible knowledge can help local communities to better face possible socio-economic change.”⁷⁹

The term ‘community ownership’ often refers to a shared sense of commitment and responsibility within a community, but it can also be strengthened through the formal, legal ownership of a physical space or building. The security and authority this affords can give community groups more opportunities for cultivating connection, development skills, and facilitating mutual aid and solidarity. For example, the site of the Antwerp Arms pub in Tottenham has been home to a public house since at least 1851. Taking advantage of the 2011 Localism Act, the Bruce Castle Village Association (BCVA) applied for the pub to be listed as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) when it was threatened with conversion to flats in 2013.⁸⁰

This led to the community buying the pub via shares and a Social Investment Business (SIB) Capital Assets grant in March 2015. The pub continues to run as a successful business and, since 2017, has run a free community kitchen every Tuesday.⁸¹ The community has an ongoing say in the management of the pub as an asset, and in its enjoyment and use. This has proved crucial in ensuring that the pub can be of maximum benefit to all in the area in times of need or crisis, whilst fostering community building through regular cultural events.

3. Genuine social cohesion and community resilience cannot exist without addressing urgent needs and root causes of division

Relationships are the lifeblood of any society’s resilience and social fabric. As Demos outlines, “stronger relationships, within families, within communities and across society are at the centre of delivering a better future”.⁸² However, social cohesion and community resilience cannot be achieved through siloed and piecemeal approaches; they require a holistic approach that includes addressing both the urgent needs of community members and the root causes of social division. Economic insecurity, lack of access to essential services, and other immediate challenges not only harm individuals but erode social cohesion and trust.

Structural exclusion, direct negative experience of accessing service and fear of increased visibility, scrutiny and targeting can undermine the trust of some community members in programming that can support cohesion building.

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Our consistent experience is that people who are the poorest and most marginalised - such as those who are visa overstayers and cannot access much of UK life - are the hardest to help with wrap-around services because of entrenched wariness and fear and they have bunkered themselves into their coping mechanisms, however limited those may be. - Highway Vineyard Church

No matter what initiatives community groups are implementing we cannot ignore economic inequality or narratives of scapegoating and division whether in domestic or international politics, media, or online. These factors have real material effects for many people, and this can fundamentally alter their ability to access spaces, as well as their feelings of confidence, trust and security.

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Brexit and the ‘hostile environment’ have placed great stress on members of our community. They are unsure how to apply for settlement and permanent residency. People don’t feel accepted anymore. They feel “Why us? We have been living here for so long...what do we do now? What am I entitled to? “We still have mothers who are scared to go to hospital because they are afraid of migrant charges. - Clube dos Brasileirinhos

For some especially marginalised and targeted communities, it is important that they have access to closed, safer spaces, both face to face and online, for intra-community engagement, where a group have shared experience of some forms of oppression or trauma, but also include members of many identities.

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We run regular support sessions for LGBTQI+ people. Often, they are attending in secret as their lives may be at risk if their identity is discovered or disclosed... we want to create a safe space and a family so that when they do find us, they have a better, safer experience and can feel a part of something longer term. - Naz and Matt Foundation

If marginalised community members do not feel safe, secure and confident in their local environment, facilitating their engagement in activities that might be seen as superfluous can be very difficult, especially given, as noted in our findings above, the trust deficit between many communities and the authorities.

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We have to acknowledge the reality of the background. There is the cost-of-living crisis, and all the inequalities in modern Britain. What is important to understand is that when asking people to engage there needs to be something “in it for me” to even engage. Life is hard! the context in which we live is hard so what are we offering as community organisations? There needs to be something tangible. - Workshop participant

Community groups that provide support for these pressing needs can thereby establish a strong, trust-based foundation for fostering community resilience and social cohesion. Resilience cannot be project based but is woven throughout organisations’ work in a way that acknowledges the relationship between chronic stresses, structural inequalities, and sudden shocks. This entails, by necessity, acknowledging the limits of their power and the bigger shifts that are needed to fully address that relationship.

Whether at moments of shock or in response to long-term trends, where social cohesion breaks down, different groups of people - disproportionately those who have historically faced exclusion, marginalisation, and been minoritised - will be less

likely to be included in or served by systems, structures and decisions. The inherently identity-based nature of these processes and experiences mean impacts are felt hardest by those who are ‘othered’ because of their real or perceived race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, culture, age, health or disability, political or faith-based belief, asylum or migration status, or nationality. For example, supporting Latina/x business owners displaced by regeneration, Latin Elephant have become well acquainted with the pervasive, far-reaching effects of unequal change that marginalises the interests of working class immigrant communities.

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It is imperative to obtain changes in policy that protect the most vulnerable. It is important for the relevant authorities to take the responsibility of protecting all Londoners and not only the affluent people. - Latin Elephant

True social cohesion is thus integral to dismantling structural violence and preventing hate-based incidents and hate crime, violent extremism and terrorism. Whole-of-society preparedness⁸³ requires active citizens and well-equipped community leaders ready to navigate uncertainty and complexity as well as strong, well-trained voluntary capabilities.

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Our society urgently needs better ways to replenish the glue holding us together to tackle social division, polarisation, and social injustices. - Grow Social Capital

Nonetheless, community groups must never bear sole or primary responsibility for challenging and changing the systems that have brought us to this point. While their work is an essential part of the response, on its own it would never be enough to transform the underlying conditions that undermine cohesion and resilience that are themselves structural, held by those with power, and often benefit from maintaining oppression and inequity. Community groups can have a key role in advocating for long-term, systemic change, coordinated, however so does the state, and an equitable balance of responsibility and costs should not further pressure communities who bear the brunt of structural inequality.

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People are busy. They're living their lives...trying to survive...to get by...and then to tell them that they need to be part of how the society they live in reproduces itself, speaks to the transfer of risk from the state to individuals and communities who are being asked to do work that historically the state would have done. That feels like a real tangible blocker to mobilising people. - Workshop Participant

Our work on identity-based violence shows that the deep historical, structural, political, socio-economic cleavages that oppress minoritized and marginalised groups require deep, long-term, structural, political, socio-economic solutions. Constant and consistent effort is required in all societies from local grassroots to political leaderships to win, defend, and advance the fundamental rights and freedoms of all.

For this reason, the prioritisation of social cohesion needs to be embedded in a

cross-departmental and inclusive understanding of resilience that addresses the root causes of inequity and vulnerability. The conversations we have had this summer with over one hundred London-based community and faith organisations support this analysis. Indeed, all of the organisations we spoke to for this work are operating in a period of deep economic challenge, driving overstretch, overwork, and – for many, fiscal precarity. This reality is for the most part made more difficult by a dominant funding structure that continues to place emphasis on project-based funding and is wary of thematic or agenda setting work. When asked what they needed to do more work on social cohesion and resilience, 58% of groups who responded to our call for evidence cited more, and more flexible funding, by far the most popular type of response. It is imperative that institutions engage directly with community experience and are driven by grassroots expertise of what is needed, what works, and under what terms community cohesion and resilience is able to thrive, and this is joined up with national efforts to strengthen resilience through inclusive empowerment and resourcing of communities.

Conclusions

In recent years we have witnessed multiple shocks and crises - from increases of hate crime across the UK targeting marginalised communities following the Brexit referendum, the terror attacks in London and Manchester, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Grenfell fire, and this summer's racist riots. Deliberate policy choices were made that hit the most marginalised and vulnerable the hardest, and moved further away from consultative decision-making. Normalisation of public and political narratives that seek to explain grievance and anxiety through divisive, identity politics have undermined cohesion and exacerbated polarisation in London, the UK, Europe and worldwide. The impact of the past decade has shown us that the unravelling of our social fabric happens quickly, and by few hands, but stitching it back together takes time and requires the buy-in of many.

When political, economic, social, environmental, health or other crises hit, societies become more vulnerable; as the examples set out in this report evidence, when social cohesion is strong, hyperlocal and community-level resilience to harmful shocks and crises are more effective. Community and faith groups play a crucial role in fostering these connections. The contributions played by community-led networks, organisations, and expertise span a spectrum from urgent service provision to securing structural or process change; they help people feel more safe but they also make demonstrable contributions to individual and community resilience.

The evidence generated by this report demonstrates that the most effective ways in which the nation's communities are building cohesion and strengthening resilience do not just bring people together as an end in itself. Instead, the most impactful cohesion initiatives form a crucial part of the social infrastructure ecosystem of a community which informs emergency response and longer-term recovery and adaptation. These initiatives involve delivering often multiple forms of grassroots support on an everyday basis, with many organisations specifically supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised in their community. Chronic stresses affect quality of life, and many people are struggling to meet their basic needs. Meeting those needs can help establish a reciprocal, trust-based relationship and a foundation for other forms of activity which build cohesion and help in preparedness for and mitigation of harms in times of emergency. By mobilising and advocating for community needs, hundreds of organisations simultaneously contribute to addressing the systemic inequalities and economic precarity that work to undermine resilience nationwide. When spaces or places are often most effective at building strong and positive relationships, connectedness, and solidarity between people, it is not because they force interaction for its own sake, but because they are the hub of services and activities that people genuinely want and need. Community ownership of local assets and involvement in decision-making about how they are maintained and run, further fosters long-term sustainability of efforts, providing a focal point for the "difficult and slow work" outlined by Horton and Penny⁸⁴, championing bottom-up initiatives that centre community needs and secure buy-in. By doing so, these spaces and initiatives naturally bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, creating organic opportunities for connection, trust, participation and agency.

When an emergency hits a community and an effective response is mobilised, therefore, what appears to be spontaneous is often underpinned by years of these multiple, localised forms of relationship-building and organic networks of grassroots support. Key individuals and groups play a crucial connecting role by identifying where and how support can be provided, while simultaneously building trust within and between various organisations. Accessible spaces, including community centres and places of worship, provide essential venues for fostering social ties, countering isolation, and building intergroup trust. During crises, these spaces become hubs of support, strengthening resilience through community bonds. These spaces play a multifaceted role, creating proactive spaces for dialogue to help create shared understandings in the wake of major incidents. This is particularly crucial in healing divides in the context of breakdown in trust between communities and statutory authorities, such as the police.

While in performing these functions community and faith groups contribute to greater overall resilience to stresses and shocks, reducing disorder and other harms, the primary responsibility and power is not theirs. The organisations we consulted play a key role in mobilising and strengthening community voices and pushing for changes in local and national policy which promote equity, accountability, and social protections. These community-led initiatives cannot tackle the underlying structural problems that undermine resilience on their own - a rebalancing of public-community relations which prioritises grassroots expertise and addresses structural inequalities is vital in informing an inclusive and equitable approach to cohesion and resilience that builds a collective future. The following recommendations draw upon the rich evidence-based gathered and outline concrete actions for the UK Government, the Greater London Authority, London Resilience Forum, London's local authorities and wider partners.

Recommendations

Prioritise social cohesion as a pillar of national resilience

The UK Government should centre social cohesion as a top-line priority in the Cabinet Office's review of national resilience launched in July 2024, heeding lessons from this report to inform work with the devolved Governments, regional mayors and local leaders. Strong social cohesion is not and should not be seen simply as a superficial social good but as a cornerstone of safer, more equitable, and more resilient communities and a bellwether of societal health. If our capital and country are to successfully navigate the very real complex set of threats, risks and challenges over the next five to twenty years, cohesion, and the resilience that cohesion contributes to, must not be seen as optional - but as the key to preparing our nation and equipping and resourcing communities to adapt and respond to the shocks that will only keep coming.

Embed social cohesion as a core component of resilience planning in London and nationally

The UK Government, the Greater London Authority, London Resilience Forum, London's local authorities and wider partners should recognise and embed social cohesion and community resilience in resilience planning. Evidence shows that cohesive communities respond to crises with unity, reducing social division and reinforcing community-based resilience. Building and sustaining cohesion must be integral to resilience planning. This recognition and consideration of social cohesion and community resilience should extend across key policy areas such as environment, planning, housing and regeneration and be reflected in strategies driving practice in those areas of work across London and nationally.

Increase funding for social cohesion and community resilience initiatives

The UK Government, Greater London Authority and London's local authorities should expand funding to support grassroots organisations dedicated to fostering social cohesion and community resilience. As communities face escalating economic, social, and environmental pressures, increases in funding and resource will enable community-driven social cohesion projects vital for resilience. The London Community Foundation's (LCF) analysis of the varied negative impacts felt by 181 organisations and voluntary sector groups in the wake of this summer's riots demonstrated that community capital and resources play an integral role in local mobilisation to confront and respond constructively to harmful shocks, helping to fill gaps in national-level response and ensure those more likely to be excluded by national-level services are supported. Without their services, LCF warned people will 'become even more marginalised, and our city will become more unequal and polarised than ever.'⁸⁵

The recently announced Community Recovery Fund⁸⁶ is a welcome mechanism implemented at national government level which recognises the need for tailored local responses – to the riots and the related need for longer term cohesion work which can address some of the ongoing dynamics the riots reflect. Several

philanthropic funders have also mobilised to render emergency funding to grassroots organisations where and when it mattered. Building upon the findings of the Civic Power Fund, Migration Exchange, and the Funders for Race Equality Alliance that “systems change work needs deep, long term investment and care in the most affected communities”,⁸⁷ the first step toward this work is in sustained commitment to funding on an ongoing basis, not just in times of crisis when mass attention is on the issues.

Adopt long-term, flexible funding models with capacity-building support

The UK Government, Greater London Authority and other funders should wherever possible transition to funding models that offer long-term, flexible support, enabling organisations to respond dynamically to evolving community needs. Include provisions for capacity-building, ensuring community groups have the skills and tools they need to effectively deliver programming that builds social cohesion and community resilience.

Smaller, often informal community and faith groups, or groups led by those from marginalised communities often find it harder to access the resources they need while are often those able to reach some of the most marginalised or ignored communities. They frequently encounter challenges in securing available funds due to funders’ risk aversion or their own lack of expertise in navigating complex application processes. “There is a need to grow the Black voluntary sector and yet often the funding or other support is not available. We come up against other, non-equity-led initiatives, and lose out on funding.... Funders need to have better understanding of the Black Experience in order to address our needs” -Coco Collective.

The work of community groups often requires flexibility. Building relationships, trust and responding to crises cannot easily be packaged by community groups in a single project but instead requires organisations to listen to the community members they work with and adapt, over time to their needs. A move by funders in national and local governments, as well as foundations towards more flexible funding models allowing organisations to use funds towards cohesion and resilience building but without rigid project plans would likely have far more impact while also allowing organisations to use the same amount of funds more efficiently.

“

funding enabled (us to allocate) coordinator time to support and provide capacity building (and) network building. We also distribute small grants which massively supported the development of our Food Giving Group Network. Smaller groups can’t survive without funding and have less capacity to engage with networks if they’re not well-resourced. Organisations need core funding to have a strong foundation to be able to do wider work.
-Lewisham Local

Focus funding on priority cohesion-building activities

The work of community and faith groups in building positive and meaningful connections across communities is vitally important to ensuring that our communities are resilient to the shocks and emergencies that will undoubtedly mark the next decade and beyond. If we are to be prepared for those emergencies this work delivered by community and faith groups should be recognised for its importance and resourced commensurately. The UK Government, Greater London Authority, London's local authorities and other funders should direct resources toward initiatives that bolster social cohesion and community resilience through:

- Developing or maintaining inclusive community spaces that foster interaction across diverse backgrounds.
- Supporting network-building to encourage mutual support and efficient resource-sharing.
- Delivering programmes that build trust between different communities and between community members and institutions helping to prevent hate-based incidents, reduce misinformation, and strengthen relations between communities and statutory bodies.
- Empowering community-led decision-making, co-design of local initiatives, and community ownership of assets to foster self-determination and enhance grassroots resilience.
- Addressing urgent needs and root causes of division and vulnerability, such as economic insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to essential services coupled with efforts to address structural issues that harm long-term resilience and social cohesion.
- Providing capacity building support to community-based organisations ensuring they have the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to maximise the impact of their initiatives in building social cohesion and community resilience.



Case studies

Cooperation Town

Camden

cooperation.town

In December 2019 Cooperation Town started its first community food co-op in Camden, north London. The project set out to address food poverty in their area via a cooperative model that involves everyone as members, avoiding top-down or paternalistic methods of service delivery. Their model addresses the root causes of food poverty, inequality and social exclusion by building community power from below, promoting transformative social change, supporting members to develop the confidence to lead and recognising the “wealth of experience already existing within our communities.” Cooperation Town members overwhelmingly come from working class communities, in particular families in low or no-income households, people in precarious or no employment, people living in social housing or insecure rented housing, people from global majority and migrant communities and people living with disabilities.

Impact

Over the five years since, the movement grew to over 30 community food co-ops around the country, organised by hundreds of members who met weekly to source and distribute affordable food. It is approximated that member households save up to 40% on their food shopping through their co-op. In Camden alone, where there are 12 co-ops, Cooperation Town members make collective savings of approximately £330K a year, making a big difference to their material wellbeing, security and capacity to withstand economic shocks.

In addition, Cooperation Town attest to a much broader range of changes within their community:

“In Gospel Oak (Camden NW5), where our hub is based, we can see a clear change in the way neighbours and community organisations relate and cooperate. The Gospel Oak Living Room (running since Jan 2023) is a partnership between Cooperation Town, three local Tenant and Resident Associations and a local church. This level of local collaboration was unheard of in the neighbourhood (which was known locally for lack of cohesion). Other initiatives, such as the community laundrette, Cooperation Choir and the Menopause Cafe, were initiated by Cooperation Town members, who, through their involvement in food co-ops, developed the skill and confidence to start other local projects. Anecdotally, we can see that new social bonds, friendships and social collaborations emerge through participating in co-op food organising e.g., checking in on elderly neighbours, lending household items between neighbours, exchanging recipes, applying for local funding.”

Here we can observe the importance of networking, relationship-building and collaboration to the success of Cooperation Town⁸⁸. Moreover the ownership and decision-making power that members have over the process has resulted in the development of confidence and skills to further build social infrastructure locally.



Cooperation Town members at the Surma Centre in Camden pack boxes for their weekly distribution (Credit: Cooperation Town)

The Romanian and Eastern European Hub

Brent (support offered London wide)

ro-eehub.org.uk

Ro-EE Hub was started in 2020 initially as a project of Local Infrastructure Organisation Community Barnet. Community Barnet recognised the need for a resource for recent immigrants from Romania and other parts of Eastern Europe, and began a programme intended to build community capacity and help them navigate the challenges faced due to Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other strains and crises.

The project has developed and changed in line with the needs of the local community. Its services have been broadened out to a wider range of people, necessitating changes in its outlook, service provision and work to facilitate networking and community organising locally.

As the co-founding members developed their experience and their vision of what they wanted the organisation to be, they initiated a transition toward independence from Community Barnet. Ro-EE Hub became a charity in 2022. This has enabled the organisation to maintain a grassroots approach led by and for Eastern European people.

They focus on providing services that are linguistically and culturally inclusive, accounting for the different experiences and histories of people moving from countries with authoritarian regimes, historical or current situations of violence and conflicts. They also work to build trust between the local authorities and their communities by acting as a conduit for communication and access to services.

Ro-EE Hub operates a befriending service in addition to advice and guidance, linking to statutory and voluntary services and social events, providing support and social infrastructure for a changing, emerging community.

Impact:

Ro-EE Hub has been very successful in helping meet the needs of the Romanian community; connecting people to essential services and delivering targeted skills training to help the community build its own long term-resilience.

The capacity and knowledge of Ro-EE Hub, informed by the lived experience of its staff and volunteers, has led them to take on a broader range of challenges, including providing vital support to refugees from Ukraine displaced by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Ro-EE Hub is currently the official first point of contact for Ukrainian refugees in Harrow. Its strategic development and service delivery remain community-led and driven.



24th August 2022: Celebrations at a Ukrainian Independence day event organised by Harrow Council and The Romanian and Eastern European Hub (Ro-EE Hub) for Ukrainian guests in Harrow (Credit: Ro-EE Hub)

BD_Collective

Barking and Dagenham

bdcollective.co.uk

Formed in 2019, BD_Collective is a ‘network of networks’ committed to making Barking and Dagenham a better place to live. Community organisations, set out to facilitate a new form of network that could collectively explore new ways to cooperate rather than compete for a decreasing pool of available resources, shifting the emphasis from individual organisations to collective endeavour and from traditional public systems commissioning to shared accountability.

The Collective has experimented with a range of tools for consensus based decision-making and collaboration and encourages members to start networks ‘big and small, thematic or geographic’ in addition to establishing protocols for sharing accurate information, whether about funding opportunities or local emergencies, swiftly. BDGiving, a place based giving entity, has been established alongside BD_Collective and together they have strengthened the social infrastructure of Barking and Dagenham.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave an opportunity for the social sector to lead a coordinated approach, with BD_collective aiming to cultivate a civil society response from bottom up that is not centralised around the local authority but based on effective, networked information and resource sharing to identify and meet needs.

BD collective, in partnership with University College London, as part of the Localities programme in 2022-24 developed a prototype mechanism for resident led activities. This has led to 22 new groups of residents developing grassroots initiatives around health and social isolation. One group of people with learning difficulties and long-term mental health issues developed a QR code system to identify ‘safe spaces’ in their area which has achieved 35,000 unique downloads.

Impact

BD_Collective members have observed tangible changes in the civil society landscape in their borough, with impacts on, among many other aspects of how they work together and with statutory authorities, emergency response:

“[Referring to the August 2024 Dagenham fire] rather than trying to prise the door open it’s there already and we are acting. The difference now is we have been involved since the beginning and will be able to bring different people in. We can coordinate response by communicating updates via WhatsApp to our various groups and networks. This avoids replication and wastage of resources. We can identify the most appropriate representatives to attend meetings with the local authorities or blue light actors but also make the state come to us rather than selecting one person to sit on a panel (as a token representative) The civil society infrastructure in our borough is the strongest I’ve seen.”



BD_Collective members at the event “Together We Lead” in June 2023 (Credit: BD_Collective)

RJ4ALL: Speak Up Community Circles

Southwark

rj4all.org

RJ4ALL uses the principles and tools of restorative justice to strengthen community bonds through a variety of programmes.

By involving community members in these efforts, RJ4ALL fosters social engagement and builds stronger intercommunity relationships, contributing to social cohesion across the community. These initiatives encourage community members to examine and address relationship dynamics and intercommunal disputes. RJ4ALL's offerings include youth clubs, wellbeing circles, discussion groups, and online courses, as well as training programs in restorative justice practices.

RJ4ALL runs 'Speak Up Community Circles' every 3 - 4 months. These open public sessions take the form of a dynamic circle where community members can highlight the issues that matter to them, allowing all parties to speak in a spirit of respect. This aims to amplify the voice and participation of local people in decision-making processes. Topics selected based on community concerns have included policing, mental health, poverty relief and violence.

The 'Speak Up' sessions have facilitated members to be able to air fears and concerns and connect them with local elected representatives and police officers. They have supported the initiation of specific restorative justice processes as a means of addressing specific community-police disputes in the area. As an example, in response to a police-involved shooting on a local estate in early 2024 the following Speak Up session was given over to reflecting on the incident, with participants airing their thoughts and concerns about safety, security, and communications with the authorities.

Impact

Feedback indicates that the 'Speak Up' events help foster connections between residents and other stakeholders, which can help them address pressing issues affecting the community in Bermondsey, better equipping them to proactively address divisions in future. They build cohesion by supporting community members with tools to address specific conflicts that they are experiencing. This supports resilience by mitigating the most divisive impacts of shocks and stresses afflicting the community.



**Participants at a Restorative Justice for All “ Speak Up” Session in Bermondsey
(Credit: RJ4ALL)**

Latin America House

Camden

casalatina.org.uk

Latin American House (LAH) is an organisation serving the Latin American and broader Spanish and Portuguese-speaking communities in London and the local community in Kilburn. Recognising the challenges faced by these communities, they create inclusive spaces where individuals from different backgrounds, beliefs, and circumstances can come together, share experiences, and support one another.

LAH deliver a range of community and cultural projects, welfare advice services, and immigration advice (with support from the law firm Seraphus), adult education and well-being programmes (delivered in partnership with external providers such as WM College) and projects for children and young people.

LAH also regularly conduct workshops on topics such as emergency preparedness, financial literacy, and health awareness designed to equip community members with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate crises effectively. They also provide assistance to individuals to support access to essential resources, including government aid, healthcare services, and legal support. LAH provides a space for community bonding and a safe space for leisure for users to socialise; tackling isolation and loneliness faced by the users due to language barriers and lack of other tailored spaces for community entertainment.

Over time, LAH have observed a steady increase in community participation in their activities, enhanced engagement, and intergroup collaboration. Community members are more actively involved in LAH activities, from volunteering to participating in focus groups and feedback sessions. This increased engagement demonstrates a stronger sense of ownership and connectedness within the community.

Impact

Feedback from Latin America House training participants indicates a higher level of confidence in handling emergencies. Surveys show that attendees feel better prepared to support themselves and their neighbours during crises. During the cost-of-living crisis, LAH intervention helped many users secure financial assistance and benefits, mitigating the impact of economic shocks and achieving a high success rate in connecting users with needed resources. Here we can observe the positive impact of LAH interventions on resilience.

Through their various programmes and partnerships, LAH have built social cohesion via strong community support networks. These have proven invaluable during crises, facilitating rapid dissemination of information and mobilisation of resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, LAH observed a significant increase in mutual aid activities among their users. Community members organised to deliver food, provide emotional support, and share critical information, demonstrating enhanced preparedness and solidarity.



LAH community members, staff and volunteers ‘behind the scenes’ of a photoshoot for a community hate crime awareness resource (Credit: Jared Arteaga Solano)

Gasworks Dock Partnership - Cody Dock

Newham

codydock.org.uk

Cody Dock, on the River Lea, was an active dock from the 1870s to the 1960s, acting as home to several different industries, most pivotally a gasworks. After the closure of the gasworks the dock fell into disuse and was used as a dumping ground, laying derelict but was also home to a high level of biodiversity. In 2009 it was taken over by the Gasworks Dock Partnership (GDP) with the aim to foster greater community cohesion and civic pride through this collaborative restoration of Cody Dock and celebration of the area's waterways, rich industrial, social, and environmental heritage.

Gasworks Dock Partnership has continued to manage Cody Dock for the last 15 years, registering as a charity in 2011. Over a three year period between 2015-2018 the partnership engaged thousands of volunteers to clear and restore the numerous river pathways around the dock. By opening up the Southern part of the land along the River Lea, GDP contributed to the goals of the larger 'Lea River Park' project connecting Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to the Royal Docks and the River Thames, which is led by the London Legacy Development Corporation as part of the legacy of the 2012 London Olympics.

Subsequently the Gasworks Dock Partnership has created new heritage and arts venues, environmental learning and creative workspaces, and accessible public facilities, in the process engaging over 16,000 volunteers across a number of ongoing active projects. The dock provides spaces for tenants to live and work via the provision of dockside moorings and creative studio spaces. Tenants make annual pledges to commit time or services to helping with supporting the wider local community.

Within weeks of the first national COVID-19 'lockdown' GDP was able to pivot its operation to support local authorities by training over 900 volunteers in telephone befriending and provided the supervision necessary to support them working with very complex cases and approximately 10,000 of the most vulnerable residents in the community.

Impact

Gasworks Dock Partnership reports improvements in health, learning, increased sense of community and improved perceptions of where they live among residents with whom they have engaged. The long-term project of creating an accessible public space, with a range of different ways and opportunities for different parts of the community, including small creative businesses and corporate volunteers from nearby Canary Wharf, has facilitated sustainable local connections and networks, contributing to social cohesion. The responsiveness and flexibility of the GDP volunteer infrastructure and community during the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the resilience that arose from this greater cohesion.



Community volunteers maintain the dock (credit: Gasworks Dock Partnership)

Coco Collective- Ital Community Gardens

Lewisham

capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective

Coco Collective-Ital Community Gardens is a Lewisham borough Afro diaspora led community food growing project. It aims to address structural barriers to access and participation by curating a safe place for marginalised people to get back to the soil, in the process alleviating pressure from food poverty and other stresses.

The project uses part of a previously abandoned vacant allotment owned by the local council and works to cultivate a regenerative system, drawing on permaculture principles. The collective operate two open volunteer sessions every week, one with a focus on mental health, as well as occasional childrens' gardening sessions and larger community events including meals, film showings and other cultural activities.

The garden functions as an intervention and wellbeing tool for attendees, including those referred by statutory services via social prescribing, providing a valuable space for volunteers to step away from the stress and trauma of everyday life, share their troubles and learn new knowledge and skills in a culturally specific way that speaks to their identity, with people from other areas, generations, and backgrounds.

Ital is committed to growing culturally diverse foods and healing plants. The longer-term plan for this work is to use a dedicated plot to produce food for donation to food banks and trading produce to support community work by generating income

“As Black people in the UK we are so estranged from the countryside... from green spaces... to be with the ground and have that personal connection... a way to connect and retouch the stories of the past (and) to build a more sustainable and self-sufficient future... It's about getting back to our roots.”

Impact:

Volunteers and statutory agencies who Coco Collective liaise with report strong mental health benefits from participation in Ital Gardens activities. The Gardens have volunteers coming from far afield to participate and there is an observed improvement in community connections and self-sufficiency for preparedness.

The collective has worked to foster cohesion through meaningful intergenerational relationships, foregrounding the knowledge and experience of elders whilst also supporting young people to take on leadership roles. The following quote from a volunteer speaks to the value of connecting across generations.

“we can build and create and grow these things together. It is powerful having the older generation come along with the younger generation. It's skills share. That is real community, being with one another and helping each other to grow in a literal sense and in a metaphorical sense.”



Gardening Open Days at Ital Communnity Gardens - a drop in session for the community to learn how to grow their own food and enjoy access to a growing space that they not may ordinarily have (Credit: Coco Collective-Ital Community Gardens)

Shpresa

Barking and Dagenham,
Haringey, Newham,
Croydon, Redbridge

shpresaprogramme.org

Shpresa is the largest charity supporting the Albanian-speaking community (ASC) in the UK, serving more than 3,000 people annually, predominantly trafficked women, refugees, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), all of whom face discrimination and marginalisation.

Shpresa's community faces many challenges, from learning to live in a new country, navigating unfamiliar systems, whilst dealing with the impacts of experiences of war, persecution, loss, trauma arising from pre-migration and from precarious migration journeys, and once arrived, poverty, linguistic & cultural barriers, racism and abuse.

In addition to their core support for the Albanian Speaking Community Shpresa have supported other migrant communities including Portuguese speaking and Somali speaking groups, sharing community knowledge, resources and connections. Most recently they supported arrivals from Ukraine to access local services via their Refugee for Refugee project.

Shpresa also promote social cohesion by organising and hosting 'cultural mosaic' sessions, where people from various refugee communities have come together in their centre to host multicultural activities and build better links. This work is in line with the key Shpresa principle of 'sharing the model' – pooling learning and experience with other marginalised refugee community organisations for the benefit of their own communities.

Community events bring people together, creating strong social networks and a sense of belonging. These gatherings enable residents to share resources, knowledge, and emotional support during difficult times. Based on community input Shpresa initiated a campaign for free bus fare for asylum seekers, partnering with London Citizens, which has opened up new possibilities for joint communal organising and advocacy.

Impact

Shpresa community events have cultivated social cohesion, creating strong community-level networks and a shared sense of belonging among Albanian speakers and between that group and others. These gatherings have enabled residents to share resources, knowledge, and emotional support during difficult times. By sharing meals, community members build trust and cooperation, which are vital in times of crisis. Community members have lent one another emotional and material support on an ongoing basis, to navigate the difficulties of adjustment and integration for migrant communities, the long-term effects of conflict and displacement and the impacts of other strains produced by the cost-of-living crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and one-off local fires and floods. These activities not only provide immediate relief and support but also cultivate long-term resilience by reinforcing the social fabric of the communities that Shpresa works with.



Young people at the ‘Breaking the Chains’ Youth Project hosted by Shpresa at Forest Gate Youth Centre. This partnership project with MiCLU, the Migrant and Refugee Children’s Legal Unit at Islington Law Centre, supports young Albanian Asylum Seekers (Credit: Shpresa)

Lewisham Local: COVID-19 Response Hub and Good Food Lewisham Network

Lewisham

lewishamlocal.com

Lewisham Local is a Local Infrastructure Organisation dedicated to boosting and strengthening the voluntary sector in the borough, raising awareness, and responding to emerging community needs, and connecting individuals, community groups, businesses and statutory organisations.

At the start of the Covid-19 crisis, Lewisham Local partnered with Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, Lewisham Council, Lewisham Food Bank and Voluntary Services Lewisham to set up the coordinated response hub. As part of the response, Lewisham Local supported the development of the Food Giving Network connecting 40 plus food aid providers to provide peer support, guidance and learning to set up and sustain COVID-19 'safefood' services for neighbourhoods across Lewisham. Part of the strength of the response was supporting community-based groups, many of which were faith based, others mutual aid and some traditional food banks, to continue to work in their communities and support their residents.

Lewisham Local was successful in a bid to host the Good Food Lewisham network from 2022, a network working to address wider issues within the food system (beyond food aid) which is funded by Public Health Lewisham. The network supports the food giving group network established during the COVID-19 pandemic but provides a wider network for people who are passionate about food to come together and build community while addressing issues such as food justice, cost-of-living crisis, food growing, climate and food waste.

Work and network building from COVID-19 helped Lewisham Local better respond to the cost-of-living crisis e.g., informing the development of a borough-wide Warm Welcomes programme. Lewisham Local worked with Lewisham Council on an emergency resilience programme to organise and prepare for future crises as well as supporting on the delivery of a food justice action plan by setting up a Food Justice Alliance, building on the learning and relationships from COVID-19 to tackle food injustice in a collaborative way.

Impact

The response hub engendered greater collaboration and agility of participation of community based organisations engaged in the partnerships, manifest in staff redeployment and mobilisation of volunteer networks to meet needs, outside of organisational silos. This opened up new possibilities for further cooperation. Furthermore the development of a single point of entry into an open access system for referrals increased ease of access for many people in severe need, resulting in food needs being more effectively met at crucial times. Finally the partnership generated a wide range of volunteer opportunities and received surplus of applications from potential volunteers, highlighting its visibility, reach and trust within the community⁸⁹.

Lewisham Local used its role as a trusted partner across public and community sectors to facilitate a partnership which engaged newer communities, received positive feedback from residents and gained new local information and expertise in managing complex processes at scale. This set the stage for more effective crisis response and for more expansive collaboration as evidenced in the Good Food Network and Food Justice Alliance.



Coordinators from Lewisham's Food Giving Network on a recent visit to the Felix Project to discuss winter planning (Credit: Lewisham Local)

Somers Town Community Association

Camden

somerstown.org.uk

Somers Town is one of the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods nationally and the second most ethnically diverse area in the borough. STCA started as a traditional community centre and ran a nursery. Over time STCA has progressed into working more in consultation with the community; continuing to offer basic amenities and services and giving a space for community members to just be. STCA also moved into advocacy as a means to address increasing inequality

The centre's location puts STCA in a unique position where they can bridge the gap between different parts of the community and between the community and private sector businesses, heritage institutions and public bodies.

Accessing the Mayor's Future Neighbourhoods 2030 fund STCA implemented a wide range of activities which holistically address community needs, all rooted in a circular economy approach using "the players on the field" drawing upon the resources and expertise of the stakeholders around them, including a job hub, a community kitchen, healthier lifestyle activities, community gardening and more.

"We value the trust of the community and can only succeed with it... We provide a space for being to just be, nursing a cup of coffee all day. Being a consistent presence in people's lives offers them plenty of opportunities to use our space, and eventually this brings them into contact with others. It also means that we understand how to frame ideas and activities in a way which gives them a sense of security to participate. It also positions us to better advocate for our community and within our community when required."

In 2018 during a period of extreme cold weather, STCA mobilised to advocate for the opening of a night shelter, particularly catering for unhoused LGBTQI+ people in the area, who were struggling to safely access other provision, and were successful in working with the community to make this happen, providing vital support to multiple marginalised community members.

During the COVID-19 pandemic STCA successfully brought the community together to run and use a community pop-up vaccination centre which vaccinated over 3,000 people.

Impact

Somers Town Community Association maintains a community space that many different elements of the local community trust, identify with and feel invested in. Through consistent presence and service they build relationships, identify and address urgent needs and create opportunities for community engagement. Through actively involving the community in the process of planning and decision-making about what a more resilient Somers Town could be, STCA has created a stronger sense of ownership over the process of achieving it.



Somers Town community members participate in a “Make and Learn” skills session at the Oussulston Street centre (Credit: Somers Town Community Association)

Bromley Borough Rotary Emergency Volunteer Programme

Bromley, Bexley

rotary-ribi.org

Bromley has eight Rotary clubs, one of which operates online to be accessible for a broader range of people across the borough. Bromley Borough Rotary run a wide range of activities focussed on community service and social connections. As part of their community service, they cooperate with sister clubs in Bexley, Kent Medway and East Sussex to operate a volunteer call-out system for emergencies.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic the Bromley volunteer coordinator created a tiered call out system with lead Rotarians in each of 10 geographical areas, which enable rapid targeting of volunteers across Southeast London and the broader Southeast of England, based on geographical need. Lead Resilience Rotarians across the country in each club attend local resilience meetings to stay connected to needs across their boroughs and learn from other resilience.

Bromley Rotary have partnered with the local authority six years ago to train more than fifty volunteers in skills for emergency preparedness and response, including a rest centre. These volunteers participate in emergency preparedness exercises and, via one such exercise (in Biggin Hill), identified a need for Dementia Awareness training among statutory services.

Bromley Rotary has several years' experience supporting people with Dementia across the borough, and their friends, families, and carers to have more social contact and connection. This gave them relevant insight and expertise to help meet this training need and they have now provided training for the Bromley Resilience, Housing and Adult Social Services Teams, are currently rolling it out for the Fire Service and may also extend this provision to the police.

This experience has also fed back into the identification of new needs and opportunities i.e., providing english language training for new arrivals from Ukraine to support integration into and understanding of the wider community.

Impact

Rotary Bromley has a better equipped and engaged cadre of community volunteers ready and willing to take part in preparedness exercises and training, who have regularly stepped in to support others during moments of crisis.

Due to community level social cohesion expertise feeding back into inter-agency resilience dialogue blue light services and other statutory providers working on resilience have received training and changed emergency preparedness and resilience practice to more effectively support people in their community with dementia.

Faiths Forum for London: Interfaith Iftars

London-wide

faithsforum.com

Faiths Forum has been running Interfaith Iftars since its founding and was involved in the inception of the Big Iftar in 2012. The project aimed to build and maintain bridges and facilitate community conversations in the face of heightened tensions in London and the UK following the October 7th attacks in Israel and subsequent escalation of violence in Gaza. Faiths Forum for London supported five interfaith iftars in partnership with four synagogues (two in London and two outside London) and another at the Central Mosque of Brent in partnership with the Together Coalition. The Iftar at Brent Mosque also coincided with the anniversary of the Christchurch terror attack and served as a memorial to that tragedy with New Zealand's High Commissioner to the UK in attendance.

Over 500 people participated in these pivotal bridge-building events, bringing together Jews, Muslims, and local neighbours for a shared break-the-fast meal. For the majority of participants, these iftars marked their first interfaith encounter since October 7th. At each event, Imams and Rabbis articulated prayers of peace and hope. In English, Hebrew, and Arabic, they prayed together for the safe return of hostages, the opening of humanitarian corridors, and wisdom invested in leaders to implement a ceasefire.

Impact

The type of work performed by Interfaith Iftars following October 7th helps illustrate the integral role which social cohesion plays in resilience. In 2023 these events helped different faith communities to not just come together for cultural exchange but created a shared space for those communities to support each other in response to the shock of a terror attack and subsequent international conflict.

The work also helps to strengthen the resilience of communities in London beyond the specific crisis to which they directly responded. The Iftar at the Central Mosque of Brent took place on the anniversary of the Christchurch terror attack, which allowed attendees from various faith communities to come together in recognising how such violent acts of terror impact and harm all communities and the importance of standing together against them.

By situating the response to specific events within the context of a longer-term dialogue that centres mutual safety and trust Faiths Forum for London helps sustain connections that can continue outside of these one-off events and are resilient to strains and shocks.

Clube dos Brasileirinhos

Brent

clubebra.com

Clube Dos Brasileirinhos serves the Portuguese-speaking communities of London. They have been operating as a complementary/supplementary school for 15 years and more recently as a cultural heritage centre. While they initially focused on the Brazilian community, CDB now works with adults and children from any Portuguese-speaking background (encompassing nine different nationalities worldwide), as well as their families, which often include people from other heritages and cultures.

Their core work helps children develop bilingual competence, which supports their connection to their heritage and culture, fosters intercultural understanding, and has positive effects both academically and in terms of future employment prospects.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the centre closed for a short time, but CDB implemented online activities, mobilised volunteers to provide food aid, and offered community outreach and access to vaccinations. “People were scared, not sure what was true, and suffering from sickness and loss. We made ourselves available in different places to talk to them, and we mobilised Portuguese-speaking doctors to guide them, with support.”

Impact

By supporting children to learn and speak Portuguese, Clube Dos Brasileirinhos fosters both their sense of identity and belonging to their heritage, while also giving them the means and opportunity to learn about the lives and experiences of others, thereby developing strong bonds that would not otherwise exist.

Furthermore, the involvement of parents in the process enables them to reflect on and talk about their identities, lives, and experiences—both with their children and with each other—creating stronger intercultural and intergenerational bonds across the various communities that access their space and services.

CDB have observed that this great cohesion results in a great deal of proactive mutual aid between the diverse communities within their user base, in response to the stress of crises “People know how much they can count on us in difficult times. It’s not just driven by us. People will step in to help each other because they know each other via our work. When someone gets evicted, for example, others might step in to offer a place to stay or lend money to cover essentials.

Ealing Law Centre & Hanwell Community Library

Ealing

ealinglawcentre.org.uk

hanwellcommunitylibrary.org.uk

Ealing Law Centre (ELC) took over responsibility for running a public library, where community organisations have been able to host training, annual art exhibitions, community poetry sessions, and events for all sections of the community. Currently, the local MP hosts some of their surgeries in the library. Over 17,000 people a year pass through their doors, including some of the most marginalised such as homeless migrants, and digitally excluded members of the community. ELC consults with the community on programming, events and services the library should host and creates a range of volunteering opportunities for community members.

After Brexit, ELC worked with West London Equality Centre and other law centres to provide advice, representation, training workshops for partner organisations as well as providing second tier advice about the EU Settled Status Scheme. They also drew upon their wide, diverse range of relationships with other community-driven volunteer groups to deliver training and share information through all the networks including Ealing Food Bank, Ealing Advice Service, Ealing and Hounslow Community Voluntary Service.

With this approach ELC were able to empower grassroots organisations to identify when support was needed and to enable them to signpost community members effectively to the legal services that they required.

Impact

By extending their focus beyond legal work and engaging more of the local community who have a diverse range of urgent needs Ealing Law Centre builds trust with people who might not otherwise access their support. Through offering much needed support around key issues such as housing and migration ELC aid the community to sustain itself through stresses and shocks.

By promoting other services, and hosting community events on key topics, they are able to bring together the community to explore and reflect on their context and how they can respond to the challenges they face, building cohesion.

Maintaining Hanwell Library as an inclusive, accessible space open year-round ELC are able to share their learning and share key skills, to develop confidence in others to help them navigate complex systems and meet their needs as well as build a sense of ownership and influence over the space and the activities that take place.

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Contributing organisations

- 198 Community Arts
- All Saints Hatcham Community Centre Junior Football Academy
- Antwerp Arms Association Ltd
- Art4Space
- Balham and Tooting Community Association (BATCA)
- Barnet u3a
- BD_Collective
- BEfriend
- Betknowmore UK
- Bow Creek Moorings Cooperative
- Brent Indian - Community Centre (BI-CC)
- Brentford FC Community Sports Trust
- Brighter Living
- Brockley Society
- Chabad Lubavitch of Islington
- Civil Society Consulting CIC
- Clube dos Brasileirinhos
- Grow Social Capital
- Coco Collective/Ital Community Gardens
- Community Regen
- Community Security Trust (CST)
- Cooperation Town
- Dagenham Christians Together
- Dialogue Society
- Ealing Law Centre/Hanwell Community Library
- East London Parent Power
- End Violence and Racism Against ESEA Communities
- Environment Agency
- European Network on Religion and Belief
- Exposure
- Faith and Belief Forum
- Faiths Forum for London
- Friends of Margravine Cemetery
- Gasworks Dock Partnership/Cody Dock
- Girl Guiding Greater London Kent
- Globe Community Project
- Groundwork
- Habitat for Humanity GB Homes
- Hackney Chinese Community Services / East & Southeast Asian Community Centre
- Hammersmith Community Gardens Association
- Havering Volunteer Centre
- HeartStrong Womens Heart Group Ltd
- Highway Vineyard Church
- Hope Church Vauxhall
- Hopscotch Women's Centre
- Hounslow Borough Respiratory Support Group
- ILAYS
- InCommon
- Inclusion Barnet
- Islamic Relief
- Kagyu Samye Dzong Tibetan Buddhist Centre
- Kindred Studios
- Latin American House
- Latin Elephant
- Lewisham Local
- Little Village
- London Boroughs Faith Network
- London Plus
- Love Brockley, from St. Peter's Brockley
- Manorfield Charitable Foundation
- Maqam Centre
- MindFood CIO
- ML Community Enterprise
- Muslim Welfare House
- Natural England
- Neighbours in Poplar and South Poplar
- New Ground Cohousing Community
- NHS England Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response team
- On Your Side
- Outlandish Co-Operative
- Real (formerly known as Real Disabled People's Organisation/DPO)
- Restorative Justice for All International Institute
- Romanian and Eastern European Hub
- Rural Urban Synthesis Society
- Salaam Peace
- SharedCity CIC
- Shpresa Programme
- Siblings Together
- Sister Midnight
- Somers Town Community Association
- South Poplar and Limehouse Action for Secure Housing (SPLASH)
- Southern African Children and Families Welfare Association [SACFWA]
- SouthWestFest
- St Giles Cripplegate Church
- St James the Less Church, Pimlico
- Star Support
- Street Trees for Living
- Sutton Mental Health Foundation
- Talawa Theatre Company
- Thrive LDN

Contributing organisations

- The Bear Church / The Deptford Ragged Trust
- The Belong Network
- The Elfrida Society
- The Faith & Belief Forum
- The Naz and Matt Foundation
- Transform Bromley Borough
- Transition Tooting
- Uxbridge Choral Society
- Volunteer Centre Sutton
- Wandsworth Mediation Service
- Woolwich Works
- Yog Foundation
- You Make It
- Young Barnet Foundation
- Your Bike Project

