



# The impact of COVID-19 on Bermondsey

December 2020



## This report

This report summarises a rapid research investigation into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the area around the Biscuit Factor development in Bermondsey. This was commissioned by Kier Construction to help understand how the pandemic has affected everyday life in Bermondsey, and what the future impact is likely to be.

The research draws on the findings of Social Life research for Grosvenor in 2018, and also the first findings of the year-long research Social Life is carrying out for Southwark Council looking at the impact of COVID-19 on key development areas in the borough.<sup>1</sup>

Seven interviews were carried out with stakeholders including representatives of a faith organisation, a school, three community organisations, a funder, a food bank and local businesses. These discussions explored:

- the impact of COVID-19 on the organisation's work
- perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on the local area
- perceptions of which groups had been most affected by the pandemic
- thoughts about the future impact.

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For more information visit [www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co)

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding Southwark: Daily life and the impact of COVID-19 across the borough. Social Life 2020.

## Key messages

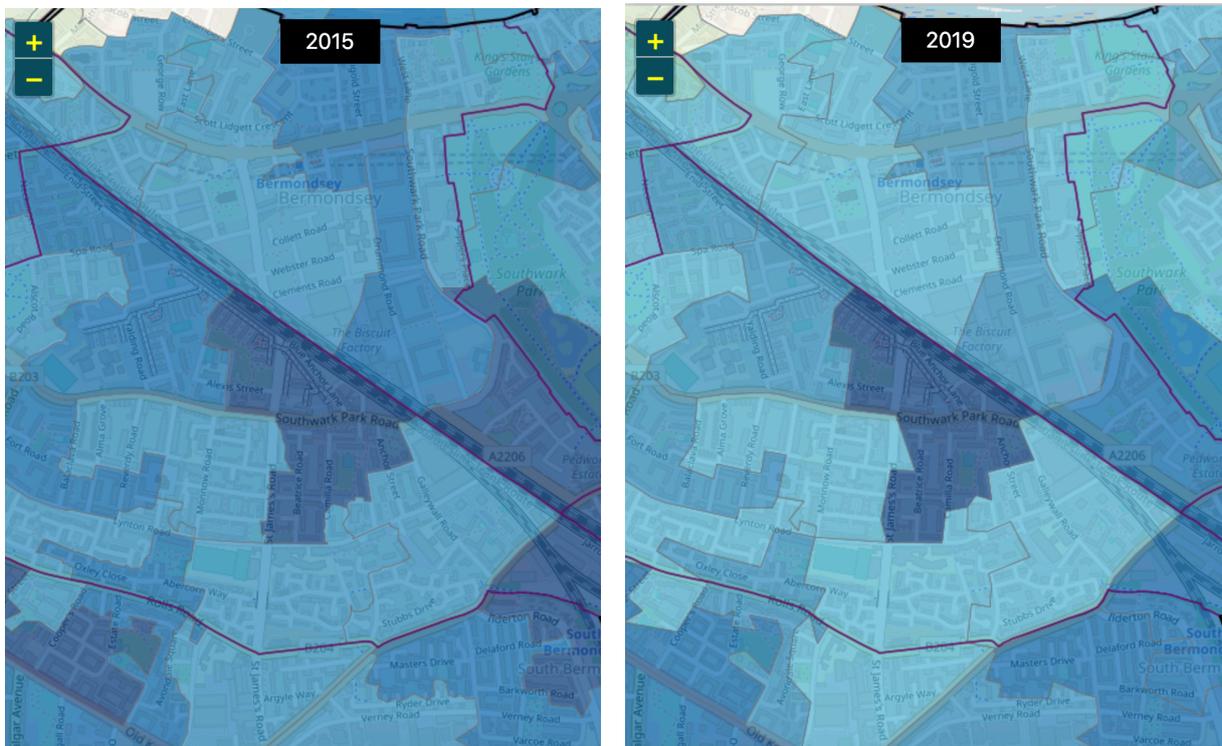
- Stakeholders interviewed described a generous, yet pragmatic, community in the area of Bermondsey around the Biscuit Factory.
- The pandemic has intensified existing patterns of disadvantage and more people in the area are reported to be experiencing extreme poverty.
- Problems with wellbeing and mental health have increased, affecting people in different living situations and age groups. This is seen as a long-term problem and likely to intensify as economic impacts of the pandemic continue into 2021.
- Young people and older people were described as the two groups that have been most harshly affected.
- Many people in Bermondsey live in crowded, sometimes overcrowded conditions. The high proportion of flats and apartments in the housing stock mean that many lack access to their own outside space. Closing places and spaces to meet and socialise has consequently had a more damaging impact on Bermondsey than on London neighbourhoods that have more parks and green spaces.
- There are some strong social networks in the area, particularly on social housing estates, and these have helped support local communities. work and agency supports.
- There are many anxieties about the future, and about the ability of agencies and community organisations to meet the needs of, and support, local residents.
- The pandemic has intensified many of the problems facing Bermondsey identified in Social Life's 2018 research, including poverty, wellbeing, lack of opportunities for many of young people and weaknesses in the local economy and labour market.
- The 2018 research identified tensions between people from different ethnic or social class backgrounds within the area; the increasing poverty and disadvantage reported by stakeholders has the potential to exacerbate these tensions in the future.



## The area

The area around the Biscuit Factory is characterised by social housing estates and more newly built apartment blocks. To the south is the Blue market and shops on Southwark Park Road, with the shops to the north on Jamaica Road providing alternative retail facilities.

Many in the area live in poverty. In 2016, 24 per cent of children under 16 in Riverside ward, and 25 per cent in South Bermondsey ward were considered to be living in low income families.<sup>2</sup> The Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that the small area south of the Blue has high levels of deprivation (shown by the darker blue area on the map below, indicating that the area falls in the 20% of most deprived small areas nationally). Other parts of the area became slightly less deprived between 2015 and 2019, this is more likely to reflect the number of small new housing developments bringing more affluent residents to the area than changes in the circumstances of longer-standing residents.



Change in Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2015 and 2018.

Source: MHCLG<sup>3</sup>

The area around the Biscuit Factory is sandwiched between the more affluent parts of Bermondsey around Bermondsey Street and Tower Bridge to the west, and the substantial change that is taking place in Rotherhithe and Canada Water to the east. This has contributed to a sense of embattlement among some longstanding residents who often feel dislocated from change; however this is not at all true of all the local communities, many are resilient and adaptable.

<sup>2</sup> HMRC, Children in Poverty for Boroughs and Wards in London, January 2019

<sup>3</sup> [www.dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/iod\\_index.html](http://www.dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/iod_index.html)

## What we were told

The people interviewed described a community that had responded generously and pragmatically to the challenges of the pandemic and changing restrictions. They described some suspicions of government and public health messaging, ranging from cynicism to COVID denial. This increased after the first lockdown,

The restrictions of the second November lockdown have been less respected. It was reported that “people were making their own decisions”. There was a sense that Bermondsey residents were tired, even exhausted, by the pandemic and could not replicate the community solidarity of the first lockdown.

We heard about the enormous efforts made to keep services and supports going, particularly when face-to-face work became constrained from March to June, and during November. This ending of face-to-face support, from provision for young people and families to older people, affected the way that agencies could work. Moving outside and sticking to social distancing rules restricts opportunities to chat informally with clients. One foodbank described how they used to run a café at the same time as people came in for food, offering the chance to speak about wider issues, and to provide a hot meal. However socially distanced working, combined with increasing numbers, is making it more difficult to establish and maintain one to one relationships with clients. Agencies described the difficulties of working on zoom and similar platforms - particularly in engaging young people and older people.

However some positives were reported. Some young people thrived with home schooling and have appreciated the break from the stress of school. During the full lockdown in the spring there was less anti-social behaviour. A youth agency and a school reported that some of the ways they have developed of working with young people since March are useful and will stay when restrictions end: a school for example described how creating different zones for class bubbles had made the school a calmer place. Some traders at the Blue and on Southwark Park Road saw an increase in local custom from people living in the area, often from people who had moved into new developments and who were unaware of local shops and market before March. The Blue BID (the Business Improvement District) helped traders get a digital presence, attracting people now working from home who wanted to shop locally.

Strong social networks among particular communities supported Bermondsey residents during the pandemic. The well-established networks on social housing estates (often involving the Tenants’ and Residents’ Associations (TRAs) are seen as important in providing support and preventing isolation. People from across the community were described as coming together to support more vulnerable people and to generate a sense of local togetherness in the first lockdown.

As in other parts of London<sup>4</sup>, food has been critical across sectors in supporting communities, galvanising volunteers, and bringing communities together. The people interviewed described a strong response from Bermondsey’s community around provision and distribution of food, ranging from the activities of the Bermondsey Community Kitchen which fed people across Southwark through different local networks, to the efforts of TRAs, and youth projects providing hot food to young people. Often this was possible because of the strong relationships that existed before the pandemic, within communities, between services and communities, and between funders, services and communities.

However the pandemic has clearly exposed the fragility of many Bermondsey residents’ lives. Several interviewees described the impact of the pandemic on people living precarious lives, where if one element of support was damaged - a social network, work, support from an agency - the structure of everyday life became difficult to sustain.

Bermondsey has been, and will be, particularly exposed to the impact of COVID-19 because of the high levels of poverty and high numbers of people living in precarious circumstances; and

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.social-life.co/blog/post/londons\\_social\\_infrastructure/](http://www.social-life.co/blog/post/londons_social_infrastructure/). Based on research from Social Life work for GLA on community infrastructure, to be published 2021. See

because of the number of people living in homes that are overcrowded or lack outside space. Housing in this part of Bermondsey includes a high proportion of flats and apartments and people at different stages of life and in different circumstances are dependent on social spaces outside the home to meet people and to keep connected. The closing of pubs, playgrounds, youth clubs, centres for older people and families and playgrounds therefore hit the area hard. This was particularly true in the March and November lockdowns.

Several interviewees commented in different ways that the medical impact of COVID-19 was dwarfed by the social impact, and the particular impact on mental health.

*“I don’t know anyone who has had COVID seriously but I know loads of people whose mental health has been affected. If you ask most people they say they would rather take their chances with the virus.”*

*(stakeholder)*

## **Priorities for the future**

Interviewees described anxieties among residents about work and money. There were concerns that people had eaten into their resources and had few emotional or financial cushions left to sustain themselves if restrictions continue for much longer. Businesses and traders similarly were described as having few reserves left, leaving them vulnerable to any further limits to trade.

Many recognised the huge cost that the local authority had borne, and generally were positive about the way that Southwark Council had supported local communities. However there were substantial concerns about the financial impact on the council after 10 years of tightening budgets, and how the council will fare in the next financial year with tighter government settlements. Tightening of council budgets will effect what is available for community organisations. There were also concerns about charitable funders, and their capacity to maintain emergency funding given the impact of the pandemic on their endowments and incomes.

*“The pandemic will pass ... it’s what that’s done to the local economy and Southwark Council that’s the threat.”*

*(stakeholder)*

A set of themes emerged that set the priorities for the short and medium term - and possibly longer, depending on how long the aftershock of the pandemic lasts.

### **Theme 1: Wellbeing and mental health**

This was identified by interviewees as impacting across ages. Interviewees described how some children and young people who were vulnerable before the pandemic struggled more, often with difficult family relationships, and also how some children and young people who coped well before March began to experience difficulties. Some older people, and some families, stayed inside for months, scared about their health. Some of the people affected are coming to the attention of agencies now, suggesting there be a long tail of mental health and wellbeing issues to address in 2021 and beyond. The economic strains that the community is likely to experience over coming months will exacerbate this.

### **Theme 2: Poverty**

One food bank reported that before COVID they were seeing 12-15 households each session, and that they are now seeing 35-50 in the same slot. This is in spite of the overall increase in the amount of food provision in the area. Agencies described how the profile of people in most need had changed throughout the pandemic. Initially, many of people with no recourse to public funds were in need as support agencies closed, however the perception is that this group have largely now returned to these former sources of support. People shielding or vulnerable because of age were also priorities at the start of the pandemic, along with the

people working in freelance or short-term contract jobs like child minders or Uber drivers who suddenly lost work. Over the next few months, increasing numbers of people lost jobs in the hospitality industry and were not entitled to furlough, and another group in need of food emerged who were waiting for Universal Credit to come through. Now more people are coming forward who have lost jobs after furlough or as employers close or shrink. Agencies report that many seem to be struggling more in last months.

A particular issue was described for families with older teenagers, the collapse of job opportunities in this group affects the teenagers harshly but also wider family budgets as the young people cannot contribute to household budgets at the time their child benefit stops.

### **Theme 3: Young people**

One school identified young people who faced most difficulties in the first lockdown as those who did not have access to IT immediately lockdown started, young people living in overcrowded homes, young people without access to outdoor space at home, young people living with a vulnerable person.

Some families stayed inside for a long time because of fears about the virus, for some local communities the safety and best interests of the family are often paramount and can come before concerns about education.

There are concerns that some young people who missed out on the curriculum will not be helped to catch up. Promised government laptops didn't arrive at schools until late in the summer term, and one-to-one catch up tuition has still not been provided by government.

### **Theme 4: Older people**

Many older people became isolated and as a group they were described as being more likely to obey the rules than younger people. In the first lockdown many didn't go out, although in second lockdown older people were described as being more often out and about.

*“Bermondsey folk are pretty pragmatic, they like to make their own risk assessments.”  
(stakeholder)*

Many people isolated in their own flats and older people's housing schemes now often do not have wardens. Many older people live on their own and do not have anyone to form a support bubble with. As with other vulnerable groups, the closing of groups and informal activities hit hard.

### **Theme 5: The local economy**

Since March, some local food businesses have kept going, some have even done well. Individuals with jobs that they can do from home, or essential workers, have continued to earn and spend locally. However, hospitality businesses and creative industries were affected by restrictions. Many who worked in these areas were not furloughed and have few opportunities to find work.

### **Theme 6: Places and spaces to meet**

There is a need for social spaces to help people reconnect during ongoing restrictions and as they end. Older estates were described as being designed with benches, playgrounds and rose gardens to help people find spaces to talk to neighbours and local friends. Interviewees voiced concerns that new developments were not taking this approach, and that open access social spaces needed to be prioritised over spaces reserved for residents such as closed gyms and pools.

## What is needed to support Bermondsey?

People interviewed suggested a range of provision to help support local communities over the next year and beyond, from youth clubs and mentoring, one-to-one support for teenagers and families, better provision for children and young people excluded from school, wellbeing and mental health support for all age groups, life skills course to help people on lower incomes cope, money management and support for people with low level addictions.

The area of Bermondsey around the Biscuit Factory has a healthy local eco-system of support and a community with many strong networks and ties between residents, and between community groups and agencies. A programme of activities that is developed closely with agencies and community organisations will have the best chance of harnessing local strengths and assets to tackle the many problems that the area faces.



# Appendix



## Appendix: findings form the 2018 research

### 2018 findings

#### Community cohesion and social integration

- There remains a supportive and close-knit community among many longstanding residents. We found high levels of neighbourliness and a strong attachment to place.
- However, relationships between people of different backgrounds and social trust are weaker, with ethnic and socio-economic divisions reported to be key features of the area.
- Crime and anti-social behaviour are a significant concern and recent high profile incidents have contributed to a feeling that the area is becoming less safe. However, police data indicates a slight drop in crime levels in recent years.

#### Health and wellbeing

- There is significant deprivation in the area and child poverty rates are well above the borough average.
- Poverty impacts on the health and wellbeing of residents and is reflected in the elevated prevalence of conditions associated with health inequalities, including diabetes and childhood obesity.
- A high incidence of non-acute mental health conditions is not being addressed by appropriate provision.
- There is also significant concern among residents about primary care infrastructure and its ability to cope with a growing population.

#### Education, skills and employment

- Educational engagement, attainment and aspirations among some young people in the area are felt to be low.
- In spite of high demand, vocational options are considered limited, while many voice concerns about youth provision locally.
- A portion of residents are in poorly paid work or insecure work and are unable to access better opportunities.
- Bermondsey is not considered to have good local employment opportunities, however good transport links and proximity to the city centre means this is not felt to be a key issue by residents.

#### Enterprise

- In spite of challenges, the majority of businesses we spoke to are optimistic and plan to stay in the area.
- Traders in The Blue face particular challenges around low footfall and crime. The Blue also currently attracts less food and groceries trade than other local shopping areas and is little known or used by new residents.
- Changing demographics in the area are considered both a challenge and an opportunity for businesses, and many residents would like to see more shops and food outlets locally.
- There are concerns around the displacement of existing businesses with rising rents and rates.

## About Social Life

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