



# Everyday life in Homerton:

How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities.

September 2020



# About this report

This report is based on research carried out in and around the Gascoyne Estates in Homerton looking at how local social infrastructure is supporting social integration.

Between December 2019 and June 2020, Social Life and Hawkins\Brown spoke to local residents and agencies working in the area to find out how local spaces, services and groups support the local community. We hope the findings are useful to everyone working in the area.

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As part of his Good Growth by Design programme The Mayor of London has commissioned research on social infrastructure, building on the recognition that London's built environment plays an important role in enabling social integration. This included indepth research in three contrasting areas: Catford, Homerton and Surbiton.

The full report of the Inquiry will be available in early 2021 from [www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)

The Mayor's Good Growth by Design programme seeks to enhance the design of the built environment to create a city that works for all Londoners. This means that as London increases, development and growth should benefit everyone who lives here. For more about the programme go to: <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/regeneration/advice-and-guidance/about-good-growth-design>

**Social Life** was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and about understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally. [www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co)

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those in Homerton who generously gave their time to speak with us, who took part in our workshop and shared their experiences and insights.

# Contents

1. Introduction .....	3
2. Key findings .....	5
3. About the research .....	6
4. About the area .....	7
5. What we found .....	9
6. Profiles of local spaces .....	19
7. Creating successful social infrastructure.....	28

# 1. Introduction

Social infrastructure - which includes many different facilities, spaces and places - is London's social glue. When we meet our friends in a cafe, go to a class at a community centre, take part in a tenants' and residents' association or a park friends' group, go to the library for information or get help and advice from people within our community, we are using the city's social infrastructure to support and enrich our lives.

Alongside places and spaces, like GP surgeries, gyms, cafes and schools, social infrastructure is also made up of local groups and networks. Londoners support each other through friendships, families and wider networks. People in local neighbourhoods come together to respond to needs, to help each other and to get help, to share interests and have fun. They also organise into formal groups like school parents' groups, local campaigns, or action groups to improve their areas. This energy and the dynamism of communities' efforts is vital to Londoners' lives and has played out vividly in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have been looking at the role of social infrastructure in its many different forms and functions in enabling social integration. By social integration we mean the ways that public spaces, local amenities, groups or networks support relationships; how they encourage participation, allowing people to become actively engaged in their communities; and how they help tackle inequality and break down barriers.

**“Social integration is the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves. It is determined by the level of equality between people, the nature of their relationships, and their degree of participation in the communities in which they live.”**

(All of us: the Mayor's strategy for social integration, 2018)

To understand how social infrastructure supports social integration that works at the local level, we have been looking into the role of social infrastructure in and around the Gascoyne Estates in Homerton as well as in Catford and Surbiton. We chose these three areas to give a range of neighbourhoods, with different social profiles, diversity, housing types and regeneration.

In this report, we describe what we found in the area - how residents use different types of places and spaces and how these support local relationships, equality and participation. We highlight the lessons that can be learnt from this part of Hackney



as well as from our wider research. These help us understand how local groups and agencies can support social infrastructure to fulfil its potential in the future.

## How we define social infrastructure

We use the term to include a range of local spaces and facilities: **formal spaces** such as libraries, GP surgeries, schools and community centres; and **informal spaces** which range from high street businesses that provide meeting places for local people, shops and cafes, cinemas and art centres. We also include local networks and groups, online and offline.

The Mayor of London's definition of social infrastructure is:

“Social infrastructure covers a range of services and facilities that meet local and strategic needs and contribute towards a good quality of life. It includes health provision, education, community, play, youth, recreation, sports, faith, and emergency facilities.”

“Alongside more formal provision of services, there are informal networks and community support that play an important role in the lives of Londoners... Green infrastructure in all its forms is also a key component of social infrastructure.”

(GLA, Draft London Plan, 2019)

## 2. Key findings

- There is a rich **range of social infrastructure** in and around the Gascoyne Estate in Homerton that supports the local community, from the parks, green spaces and community centres through to the businesses on Well Street.
- **The physical spaces**, such as the two Gascoyne community halls or the Morningside, Kingsmeade and Gascoyne youth centres, are important centres within wider local networks or ecosystems of support. Both the relationships and networks within the community, and the local places, spaces and services, are essential in supporting local areas through ordinary and extraordinary times.
- **Referrals and signposting** between services and facilities work best where there are strong formal and informal links within the local social infrastructure ecosystem, as well as trusting relationships between users and staff. This can clearly be seen at Wentworth Children's Centre.
- In Homerton, **informal spaces**, such as the Well Street businesses and cafes, are important for supporting relationships within communities, while formal infrastructure tends to play a stronger role in supporting people from different backgrounds to spend time together and make friendships and relationships.
- There can be tensions between **different social integration goals**. For example, activities and spaces organised around shared interests and experiences can encourage participation and build up support, however they may not succeed in promoting relationships between people from different backgrounds.
- **Community spaces** rely on residents' energy, effort and networks to succeed. In practice there can be tensions between providing the range of supports and activities that meet the needs of the whole community, income generation, and keeping residents fully involved over time.
- **The COVID-19** pandemic has demonstrated the strength of these relationships in Homerton, cementing existing relationships and galvanising new ones. At the start of lockdown, established networks and groups quickly reorganised their activities, and new networks, often bringing in residents who had not been previously involved in the community, sprang into action. These new networks were particularly important in providing food for the many people who found themselves in need.

# 3. About the research

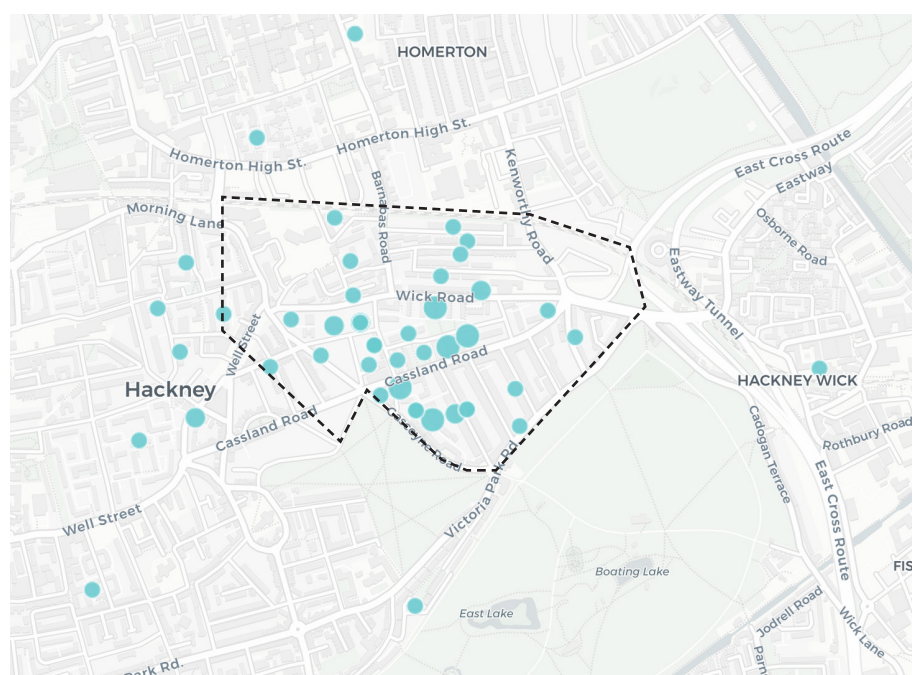
## How we went about it

- We carried out **street interviews with 76 residents**, asking them about which spaces they use, what they value locally, whether they participate in any groups or networks in the area, any barriers they face to accessing spaces, and how they perceive change locally. Respondents were over 18 and representative of the local population in terms of tenure and age, however residents of black backgrounds were slightly under-represented.
- We spoke with **eight local stakeholders**, from local groups, the council and a local school, to build a better understanding of how social infrastructure is supporting residents and some of the challenges it faces.
- In late May and early June, we spoke with six community representatives and local agencies about **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on their communities** and on the support they offer.
- We spent time and spoke with people at **four local spaces** - Wentworth Children's Centre, Frampton Park Baptist Church, Well Street businesses and Gascoyne 2 Community Hall, to gain a sense of how these spaces contribute towards social integration locally.
- We held a **workshop** in partnership with Wick Award, bringing together 21 participants, including residents, representatives of local groups and facilities, the council, and students carrying out research in the area, to explore the role of social infrastructure and how it can better be supported in the future.

**Research focus area and the postcodes of street interview respondents** (not all postcodes were given).

### Map details

- Boundary of research focus area
- Frequency of postcode locations





## 4. About the area

The Gascoyne Estates lie within Hackney Wick ward in an area referred to by some residents as south Hackney, and by others as Homerton or Hackney Wick. Gascoyne 1 Estate is a brick-built post-war estate next to Well Street Common. Gascoyne 2 Estate extends north towards Homerton station and is made up of a wide range of different blocks and buildings. Next to the estates are other housing estates and streets of low-rise Victorian terraces typical of Hackney.

Residents benefit from good access to green spaces, including Victoria Park and Well Street Common. Nearby Well Street and Homerton High Street have a range of shops, cafes and other amenities, while Mare Street with its library, cinema and the Hackney Empire theatre is slightly further away. Both estates have their own recently redeveloped or renovated community halls, Wentworth Children's Centre is located at the base of one of Gascoyne 2's blocks, and its nursery is adjacent to Gascoyne 1.

**“Plenty of green spaces. Good community spirit.  
Well Street is like a village.”**

*(Housing association long-term resident)*

Ethnic diversity has long been a feature of life locally. The estates are home to very mixed populations - at the last census in 2011,



Terraced houses off Hartlake Road

residents from black ethnic backgrounds made up 39 percent of the local population, 38 percent were from white backgrounds, while people from mixed and Asian backgrounds made up around 10 percent of the population each.<sup>1</sup> Although some groups are described as more inward-looking, few tensions were reported along ethnic or racial lines and many residents appreciate and celebrate the diversity of the area.

Deprivation is high locally, with most of the estates classified amongst the 10 percent most deprived areas in England.<sup>2</sup> Many residents are struggling, and housing costs have risen rapidly. Increasingly affluent residents have moved into the neighbouring streets, as well as privately rented homes (originally bought through the right to buy) on the estates.

“Middle class definitely stick to their own, if you’re not in their wage bracket you don’t stand a chance, you get the impression they look down on you.”

(Gascoyne 2 resident)

As in many parts of Hackney, this has increased inequality and many people we spoke to mentioned growing divisions of social class.

Fewer families are also reported to be living on the estates and we were told that growing numbers of professional young people have moved in. Alongside this, there have been many changes in the area’s businesses and new businesses moving into the area are often considered out of the price range of lower income residents. Many longstanding residents highlight a sense of loss and alienation from these changes. There are however some mixed feelings around the impacts of gentrification, some residents describe positive features, particularly improved safety and choice in the area and the borough as a whole.

“In the past a lot of people didn’t go out after 10pm, now they can. Change has been positive for a lot of people.”

(Long-term resident)

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1. Census, 2011.

2. Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019.

# 5. What we found

## How people use and value spaces locally

Green spaces were the most widely used type of formal social infrastructure. The people who took part in street interviews told us these were the spaces they valued the most.

Residents highlighted the democratic nature of parks, how they are free to use and open to all. They also spoke of the benefits to their wellbeing, how peace and access to nature is important in an area of high housing density. However the quality of green spaces are important. Poorly maintained areas, often located close to housing blocks, were perceived to be dominated by dog owners. This can be a source of tension locally.

Over half of the people we spoke to had used a local library in the past few months, with nearly equal numbers going to Homerton Library and Hackney Central Library. Around a third had used sports and exercise facilities. These are used by residents living in different housing tenures and from ethnic groups, but by fewer older residents. A third of respondents had attended faith spaces, this included a higher proportion of BAME residents. Faith spaces are highly valued for both their social and spiritual dimensions by the people who use them.

“I feel better physically when I pray in the temple. Also I like that everything is open to everyone, there is no difference between people, it doesn’t matter what skin colour you have... if someone is doing an event, everyone is invited and all the food is shared.”

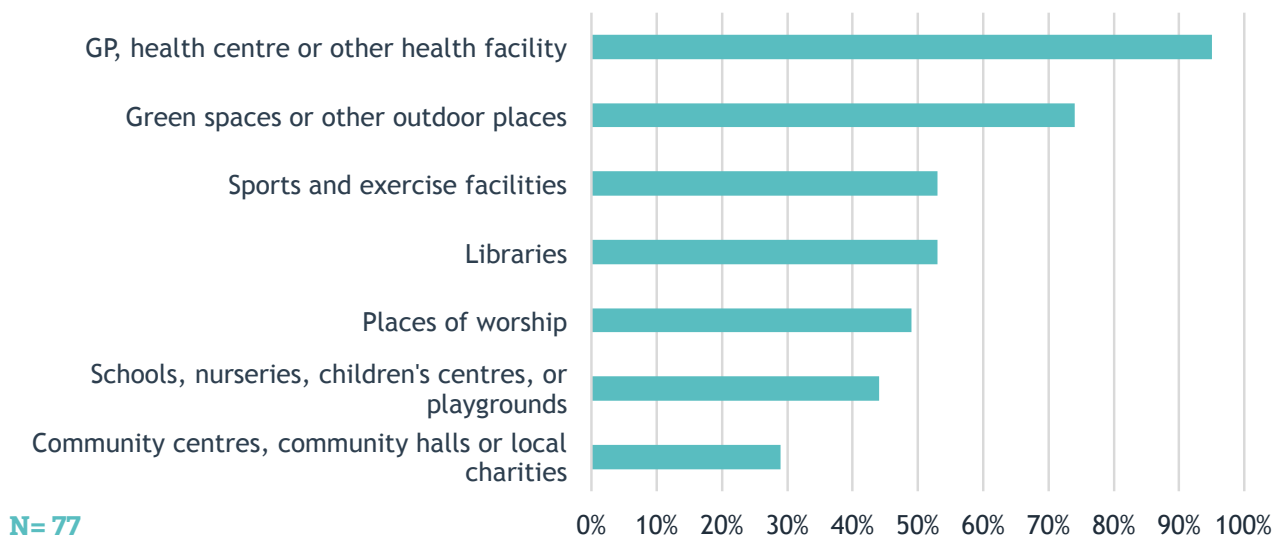
(Homerton resident)



The Wentworth Estate



## Which places have you gone to in your local area in the last few months?



After green spaces, local businesses were the spaces that were most valued by the residents we spoke to - cafes and pubs for their role as places to socialise, and shops or local markets for providing the necessities of life.



Core Arts, Wandle Street

## Use of local spaces in and around the Gascoyne Estate, Homerton

This map shows the ‘formal’ local spaces and facilities which the people interviewed reported using in the past few months. Many went to parks, libraries and GPs, while a wide range of children’s facilities and community centres or halls were used, each by small numbers of residents locally.



### Green and outdoor spaces

- 1 Well Street Common
- 2 Victoria Park
- 3 Mabley Green

### Community and charity spaces

- 4 Wally Foster Community Hall
- 5 Chatsworth Community Hall
- 6 Gascoyne 2 Community Hall
- 7 Hackney Quest
- 8 Gascoyne Community Centre
- 9 Morningside Youth Centre
- 10 Well Street Festival
- 11 Frampton Park Community Hall (now part of church)

### Children’s facilities

- 12 St John of J. children’s activities
- 13 Morningside Primary School

- 14 St Luke’s Church playground
- 15 Cardinal Pole Catholic School
- 16 Berger Primary School
- 17 Wentworth Nursery/Children’s Centre
- 18 St Dominic’s Primary School
- 19 Victoria Park Playground
- 20 Montessori on the Park

### Libraries

- 21 Homerton Library
- 22 Hackney Central Library

### Places of worship

- 23 Frampton Park Baptist Church
- 24 St Luke’s at Hackney Church
- 25 St John of Jerusalem Church
- 26 RCCG Church
- 27 St Dominic’s Church

### Sports and exercise facilities

- 28 Mabley Green recreational facilities
- 29 Victoria Park Fitness
- 30 Victoria Park Buggy Fitness
- 31 Victoria Park exercise facilities
- 32 Energie Fitness Homerton
- 33 City Academy

### Health facilities

- 34 The Lea Surgery
- 35 Latimer Health Centre
- 36 Elsdale Street Surgery
- 37 Hackney Wick Health Centre
- 38 Trowbridge Surgery

### Map details

Boundary of research focus area

Frequency of mentions

Number of respondents = 76

## Relationships

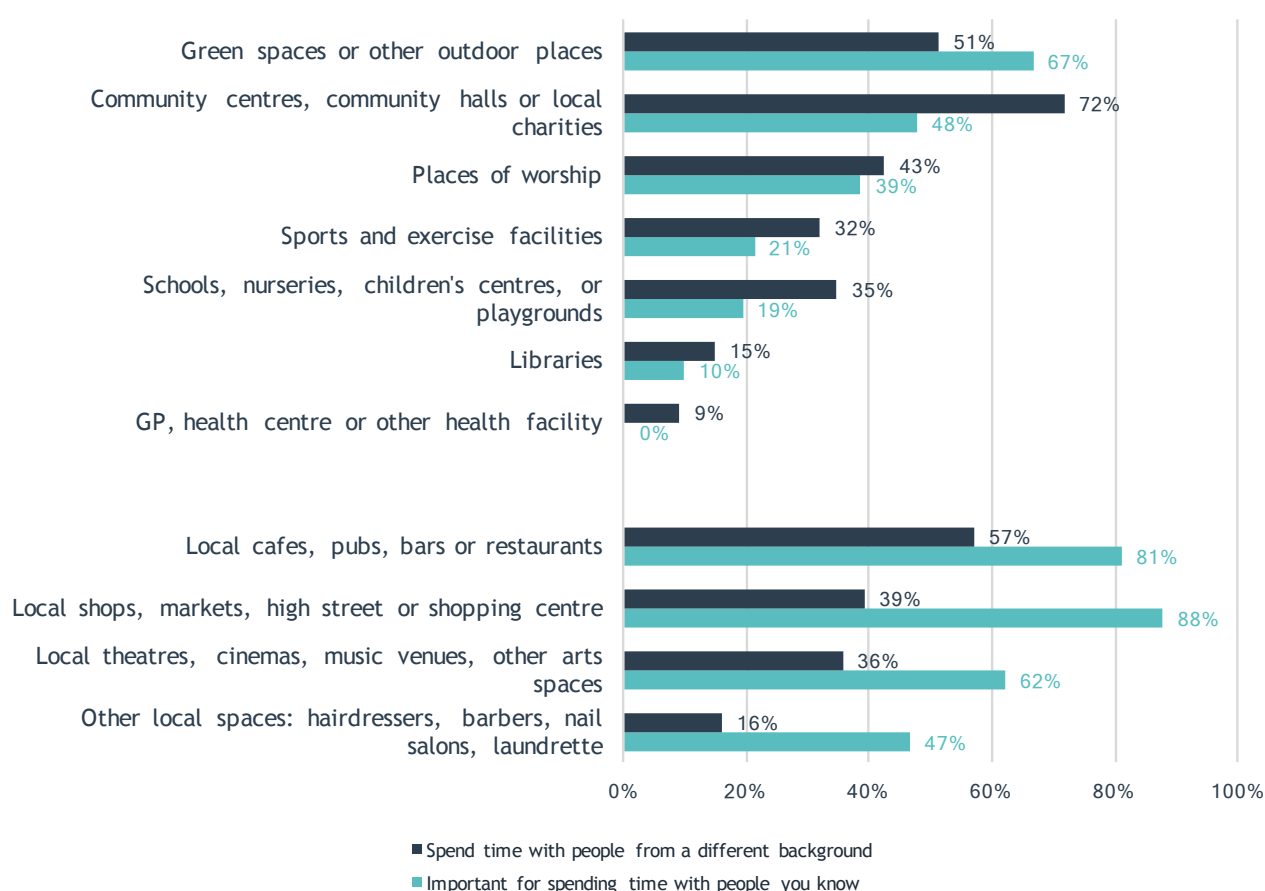
Different types of high street businesses play a strong role in supporting relationships locally. 88 percent of the people interviewed said that local shops, markets or high streets are important for spending time with people they know; 81 percent named particular food and drink establishments. Through their role as community assets tends to be less recognised, cafes were mentioned twice as frequently as pubs.

Some interviewees described local businesses as inevitable sites of social mixing, given the diversity of the area, and they were widely described as places where people spend time with others from different backgrounds. However, mixing between groups was reported mainly to be among people of different ethnic backgrounds, with many places and businesses being strongly associated with a particular social class.

**“It’s a working men’s cafe with working class people so the posh people don’t come in here.”**

(Homerton resident)

### The importance of local places for relationships



For question 'spending time with people from a different background', N=76 for formal, and N=56 for informal. For question 'spending time with people you know', N=76 for formal, and n=74 for informal.

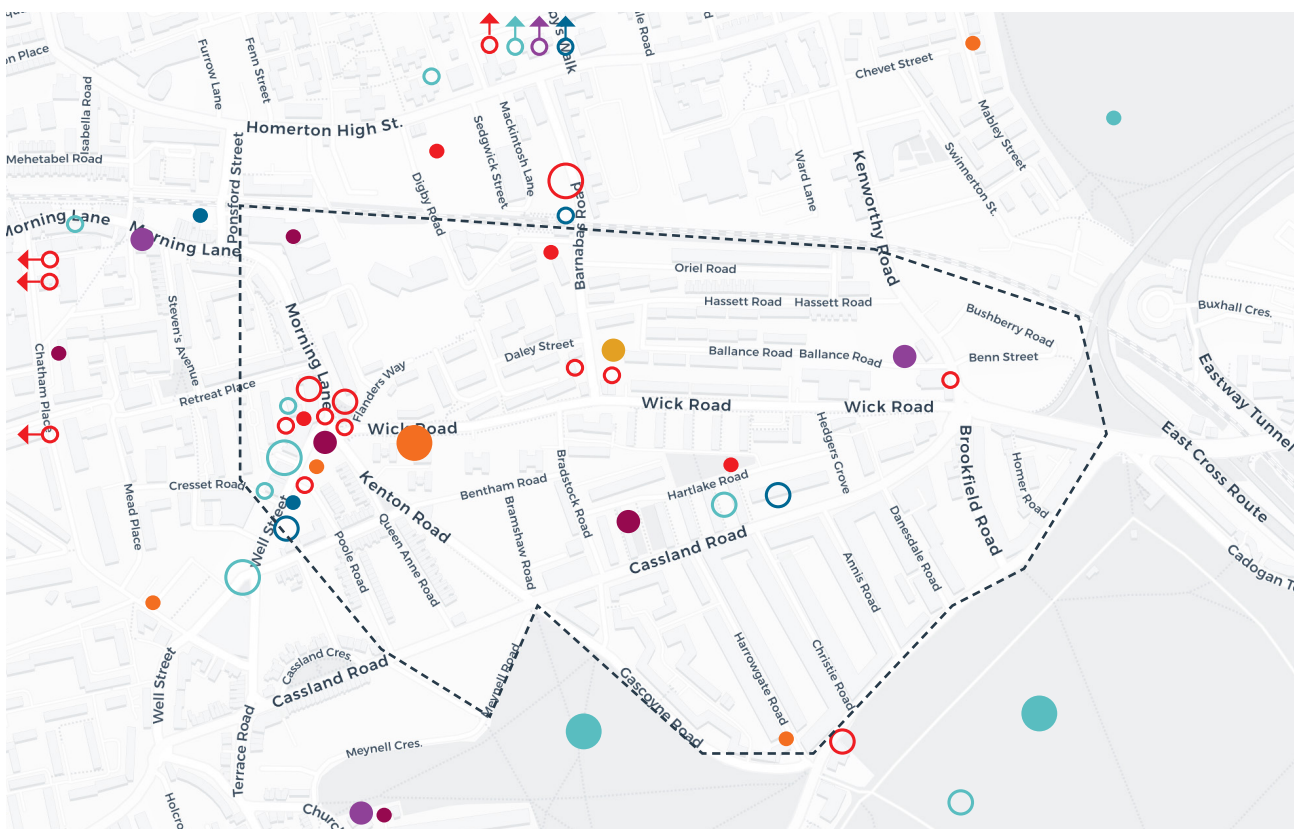


More formal types of social infrastructure tended to play a stronger role in bringing people from different backgrounds together - libraries, community centres, children's facilities and sports facilities were all considered more important for spending time with people from a different background than with friends or family. Sports and children's facilities are recognised in wider research as "equalisers" which can provide a platform for people who consider themselves to be different to come together.

This highlights the importance of statutory services, free spaces and formal provision in bridging divides in the community. However, the role of different facilities in supporting relationships varies significantly: green spaces, community centres and faith spaces tended to have a stronger role in supporting relationships, while libraries and health facilities are less important.

### Local places where people from different backgrounds meet in and around the Gascoyne Estate

This map highlights the formal and informal local spaces where people interviewed reported spending time with people from a different background to them. It highlights the important role of parks and local businesses.



#### Map details

- Boundary of research focus area
- Frequency of mentions

#### Number of respondents:

Formal social infrastructure = 76  
Informal social infrastructure = 56

#### Formal social infrastructure

- Green and outdoor spaces
- Community and charity spaces
- Children's facilities
- Libraries
- Places of worship
- Sports and exercise facilities
- Health facilities

#### Informal social infrastructure

- Bars, restaurants and cafes
- Shops, markets, high-street uses
- Art and cultural venues
- Other

## Participation

Many local spaces offer opportunities for volunteering and active participation, from organising school summer fetes to local park friends groups.

Among the people interviewed, 28 percent reported helping out, helping run or volunteering in spaces locally, mainly in community centres and faith spaces. Some spaces are particularly good at drawing people in, for instance at Frampton Park Baptist Church a third of the congregation volunteers through the church. 19 percent of residents we spoke to were involved in other local groups or clubs. Participation was often enabled by community networks - a half of those became involved through their neighbours or other community members.

Time was reported to be the key barrier to participation and use of local spaces, particularly among families with younger children. Formal voluntary roles tend to be dominated by older residents. Allowing people do short term or one-off time limited volunteering was highlighted as important in encouraging a wider range of people to participate. This could be through running a stall or providing food at an event.

Participation was shown to be an effective bridge between different groups. Nearly all the people interviewed who took part in local groups or networks had got to know people from different backgrounds as a result of their involvement.

Opportunities for spontaneous participation can also help build social networks or confidence to engage in more formal commitments. For example, Wentworth Children's Centre asks parents to help out during stay and play sessions by serving snacks and tidying the space - these moments of collaboration help build relationships among users.

### **Hackney Quest Homework Club**

This local youth organisation partnered with Well Street Cafe to recruit volunteers and provide a venue for an after-school homework club. Through the cafe, the organisation was able to recruit committed volunteers, often newer arrivals to the area keen to give back and engage with the wider community.

Participation in governance or consultation was seen to be a possible source of conflict or tension, if not properly managed or supported. Community members can be frustrated when they feel they are not being given the chance to meaningfully influence decisions. Several community spaces in the area face a difficult balancing act between ensuring spaces are inclusive, giving residents meaningful voice and being financially sustainable.

## Equality

Formal social infrastructure provides the direct services or referrals needed for residents to access support they need, including local crisis services.

In Homerton, faith spaces provide services for some of the most vulnerable community members, including food banks, night shelters and advice services. Children's facilities play a key role in identifying residents who may be vulnerable and linking them into wider networks of support. Primary schools were seen as being embedded in the local community and responsive to its needs.

Almost half of people interviewed said that they go for help and advice to GPs or health services; places of worship and community centres or local charities also played this role for a third of their users. Although libraries are often considered important in accessing information, few people interviewed said that they would use them for help or advice. This demonstrates the importance of trusting relationships in turning spaces into sources of support.

Beyond formal provision and referral routes, the networks created through social infrastructure also bolster the informal acts of support which residents depend on. For participants at the Gascoyne 2 Over 50s bingo, the relationships established with volunteers and other regulars were a source of help and advice.



Fruit and veg market besides Wentworth Children's Centre



Local businesses can play a role both in addressing or reinforcing a sense of inequality. Independent establishments on Well Street often provide material support to those in need. Several longstanding businesses extend lines of credit, or offer discounts to hard-up regulars; high degrees of trust and familiarity between customers and staff form the basis for many of these acts of support. Newer cafes also reported donating drinks or food to rough sleepers or marginalised people.

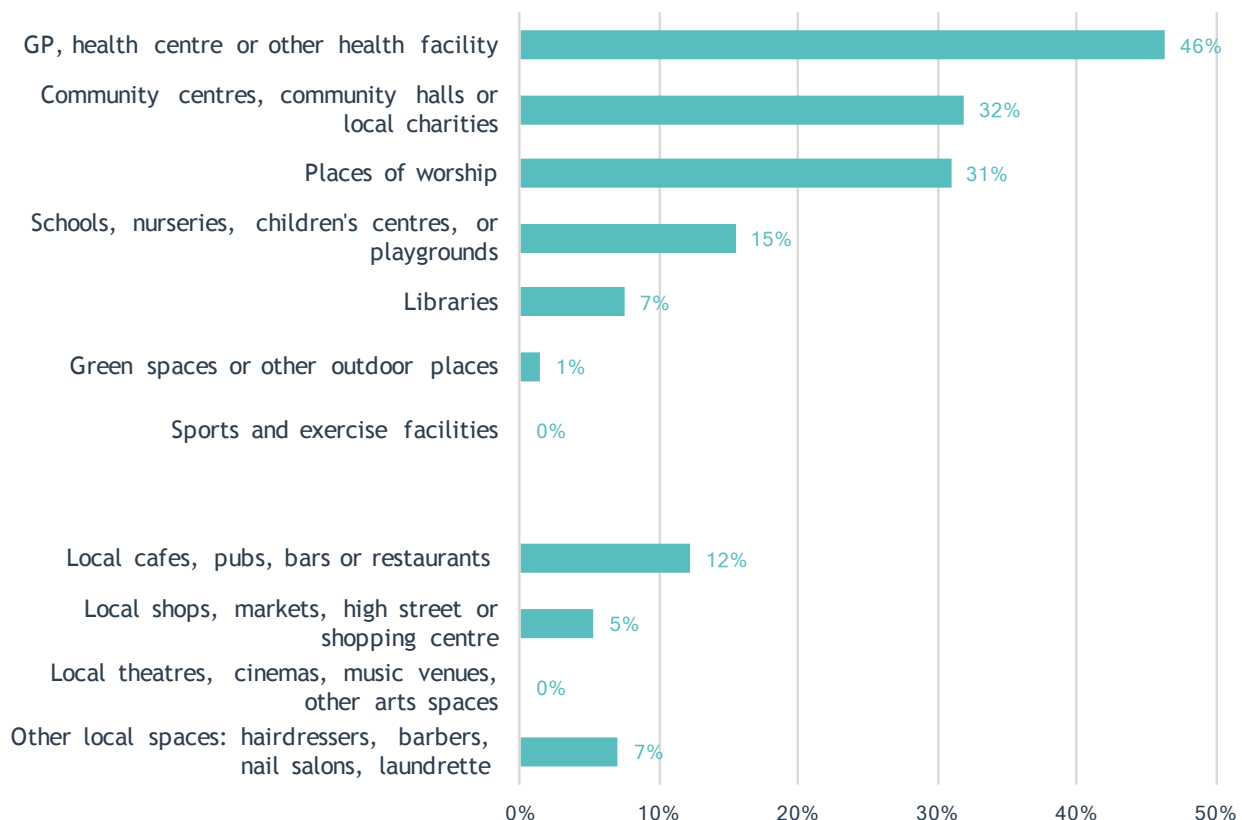
However, for many street interview respondents, the arrival of new shops, cafes, pubs or restaurants has left them feeling alienated and excluded. Not being able to afford to go to new shops and cafes contributes to a sense of inequality. However these new businesses provide others with the services, and the space to work and to socialise, that they need.

While changes in businesses were seen as the main feature of neighbourhood change, formal social infrastructure was seen as unchanging, highlighting its role as a stabilising presence, countering the pressures of local change.

**“I can’t afford new cafes, it’s a diverse area but segregated.”**

(Homerton resident)

## Where residents go for help and advice



N=76 for formal, and N=57 for informal

## Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic put a sudden unprecedented strain on the local community and on the local social infrastructure in Homerton. Community organisations responded quickly to plug the gaps in support for people who needed to self-isolate, who found themselves suddenly out of work or on reduced incomes, or who no longer had access to vital support, services or food.

Access to food was flagged as one of the immediate key issues at the start of lockdown. Local agencies including Hackney Quest, the Wickers, and the Felix Project, supported by Wick Award, began to locate vulnerable individuals and distribute food packages as well as other provisions including medicines. Hackney council was also instrumental, delivering over 1,800 food parcels a week in one week.

Established relationships were central to this response, contact lists were created and shared between schools, faith groups, charities, local TRAs and local councillors. Mutual aid groups also played a strong role, many rapidly grew in membership, and new groups were created to share information amongst residents and support the people most in need.

Pooling of resources between local residents, businesses and community spaces increased. Some community spaces rapidly adapted to enforced closure, finding new ways to connect with their users in spite of physical distance. Other spaces could not keep their activities going and had to close completely.

Local relationships were reported to have grown in strength and number, with large numbers of furloughed residents volunteering their support and participating in the local community networks. This included a number of people who were relatively new to the area. Green spaces became an even more valuable resource, allowing relationships to be maintained under social distancing rules.

However, people without good access to the internet or computers were disproportionately affected by lockdown, particularly isolated elderly residents and young people trying to complete schoolwork from home. In some cases organisations stepped in. Hackney Quest provided IT to young people, and Sanctuary Housing loaned a number of laptops to Gascoyne Estate residents.

**“It’s tended to be the older more established community that are looking out for their neighbours, whereas the newer, younger, more affluent groups have stepped up to do the cycling around and meal deliveries.”**

(Stakeholder, Homerton)

As lockdown came an end, and businesses began to reopen, government support as well as donations dwindled, and residents voiced worries about the possibility of destitution. Some in Homerton believe that the pandemic revealed pre-existing inequalities as well as the extent to which the local council and support services have lost funding over the past 10 years.

Looking forward, many local residents and stakeholders hope the pandemic will have been an opportunity to give recognition to the important role key workers play. Many drew attention to the high number of people from BAME backgrounds in these roles, and the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on BAME residents. Many hope that the new networks and relationships, particularly between organisations as well as in mutual aid groups and among volunteers, will persist beyond the lockdown and continue to provide support, share information and resources, and celebrate the local community.

“We are hoping to maintain these new links that have formed, to continue to get people to think beyond their own bubble, and to remember the power of the community. We need to remember that when things went really badly wrong, and there wasn’t the council, there wasn’t external providers – there was help locally, and it was your neighbours.”

(Local stakeholder)

## 6. Profiles of local spaces

We visited four places in the area to find out how they contribute to social integration and the lessons that can be learnt from them.

**Frampton Park Baptist Church**



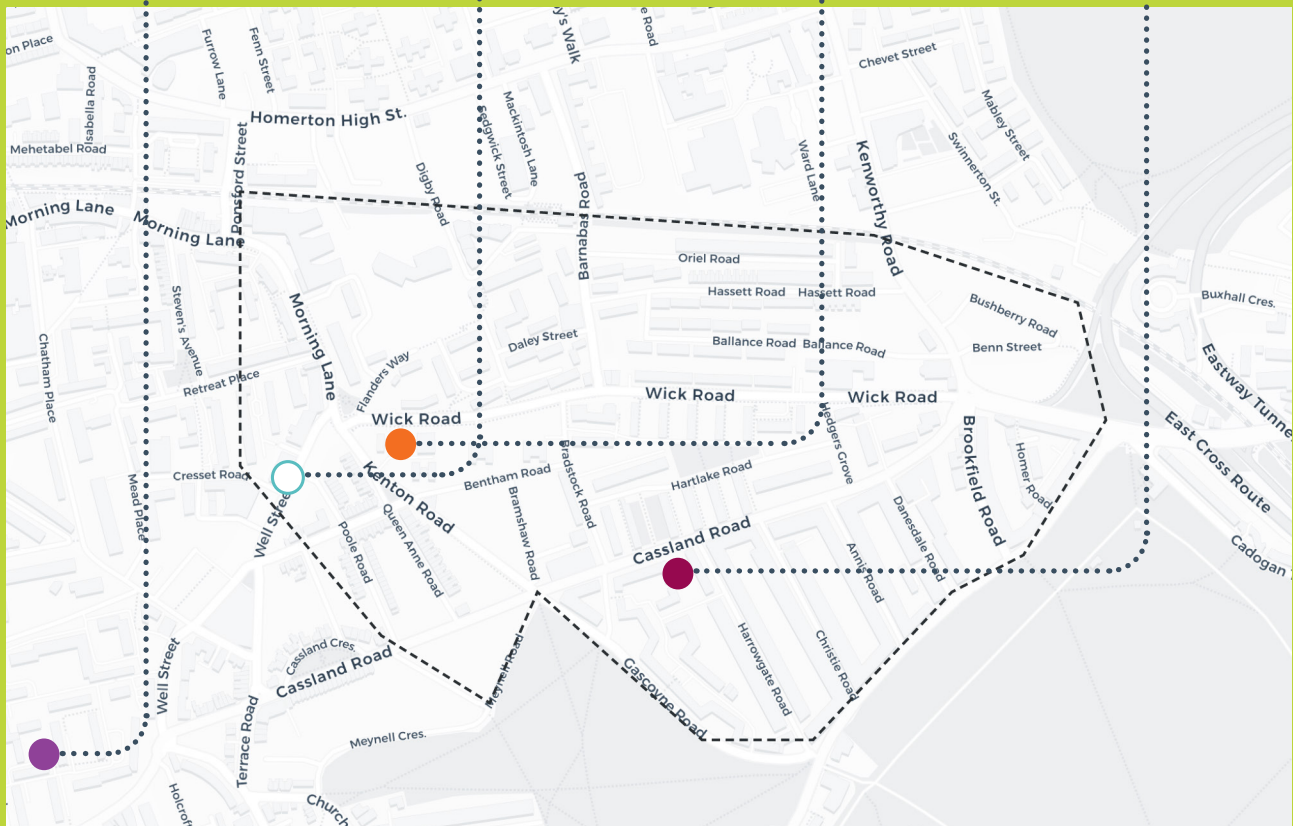
**Well Street businesses**



**Gascoyne 2 Community Hall**



**Wentworth Nursery/Children's Centre**



### Formal social infrastructure

- Community and charity spaces
- Places of worship
- Children's facilities

### Informal social infrastructure

- Shops, markets, high-street uses





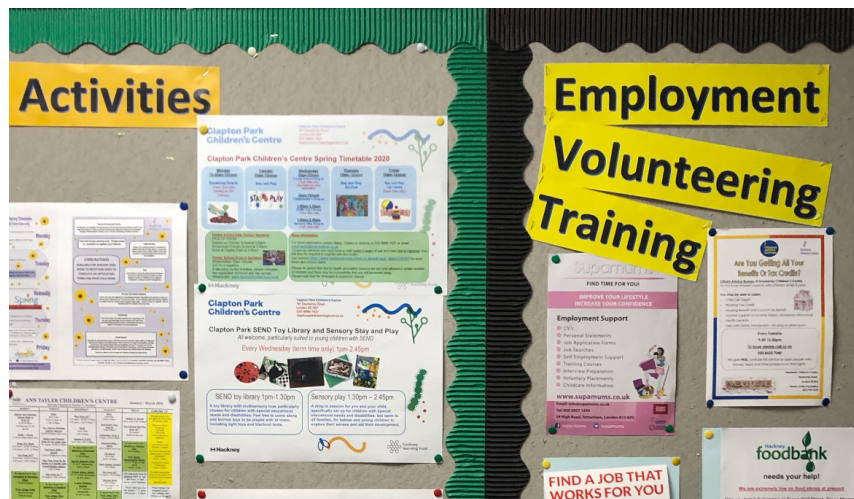
## Wentworth Children's Centre

### About

Wentworth Children's Centre was founded in 2008 as part of a wave of early years support rolled out across Hackney. It is located at the base of one of the Gascoyne 2 Estate's blocks. The centre offers regular stay and play sessions which are free and open access. It also provides other training opportunities, such as cooking courses and ESOL for parents, many delivered in partnership with other organisations. The centre receives a core grant from Hackney Council, which has protected early years services during years of public sector funding cuts. External funding supports some specialised activities.

### How does it support social integration?

Through its regular drop-in activities the centre plays an important role for some users in combatting isolation and building a local network, with some parents attending several times a week. As one regular commented, "it was the difference between me staying afloat in my son's first year or not". The centre draws in a range of users from the estates and the wider neighbourhood, providing a point of contact among parents of different



backgrounds. Through connections to many other local groups and agencies it also provides signposting and referrals. The networks and relationships it creates among parents are a source of informal advice and support.

“You come here for crowd-sourcing advice, talking to other parents and learning what they’re doing.”

(Local stakeholder)

## Lessons

Staff members ensure anyone attending a session for the first time is made to feel welcome and introduced to a regular centre user.

Staff will pro-actively signpost to relevant services, even sending texts to users to tell them about activities of which could be of interest.

During stay and play sessions parents are asked to lend a hand in tidying up or serving snacks. This informal participation provides triggers for interaction among users.

The manager’s desk is located in the reception area, enabling her to build relationships with users.





# Frampton Park Baptist Church

## About

Frampton Park Baptist Church was redeveloped into a multi-purpose community space, re-opening in 2015. The new building was funded through a developing new housing on the site. As well as faith-based activities, the church hosts an extensive programme of activities throughout the week, much of which is delivered in partnership with other local organisations, including a free community lunch and youth services with Hackney Quest, sessions for young families supported by Hackney Learning Trust. It is funded through room hire, member contributions and other fundraising activities, as well as a rental income from one flat within the residential development.

**“We are a family, we are a community, we are a church.”**

(Local stakeholder)

## How does it support social integration?

The congregation is ethnically diverse and spans a range of ages, it is described by some members as a “family”. Church members play a crucial role in the governance and management of the space and around a third of members take part in voluntary activities around the church. The church hosts a range of activities for the wider community including services to some of the most vulnerable in the area - including citizen’s advice, a free community lunch and a winter shelter for rough sleepers.



The main hall sits on the top floor of the church, and doubles as a congregational space as well a sports and activities area

### Lessons

Partnering with other local organisations is key to delivering a broad range of services and bringing in a wider range of users.

Creating different forums and groups with different levels of commitment can help build broader participation.

Building buy-in for change can be a slow process; it took around 10 years for a consensus to be built among the membership in favour of the redevelopment.





## Gascoyne 2 Community Hall

Photo courtesy of Wick Award.

### About

Gascoyne 2 Community Hall was renovated and reopened in Spring 2019 after a two-year closure. The new hall aims to be a multi-functional hub with a range of services and activities catering to the community. Regular activities include a community lunch run by the TRA, an arts and crafts club, martial arts for young people delivered by Wickers Charity, and a free yoga session hosted by Wick Award. Hackney Works, a council-run employment brokerage



Photo courtesy of Wick Award



Mural on Gascoyne 2 Community Hall

service, also sits in the new hall. The hall is cross-subsidised through private hire, rental income from Hackney Works, and hire from community groups at a discounted rate.

## How does it support social integration?

Programming has been designed to reach a wide range of audiences. Some regular events such as the Gascoyme 2 Over 50s Bingo Club and the community meal have a large and dedicated following and provide vital support, as well as encouraging volunteering. Most activities in the hall are free of charge or subsidised and reach a range of vulnerable people, and people on low incomes.

**“I’m on my own, so otherwise I wouldn’t see friends.  
It’s something to look forward to.”**

(Regular Bingo Club attender)

### Lessons

Activities can take time to build momentum in a new or renovated space, bringing in those with an established following can help build up the number of users who may get involved in other activities or services.

Ensuring the involvement of dedicated individuals, strongly committed to their local areas, is vital to the success of community spaces.

Activities which hold a strong appeal for a particular group can be important for building close relationships, mutual support networks and accessing help and advice, they can also act as routes into other activities.





## About

Well Street is a historic local high street once known for its thriving market. It hosts many independent food and retail businesses such as the Well Street Butchers, the Quality Cafe, Well Street Kitchen and The Wholemeal Shop, as well as a Tesco's. Recent rent increases have led to a rapid turnover in businesses, and new arrivals are generally perceived to be aimed at more affluent customers.

## How does it support social integration?

Longstanding businesses on the street have a loyal following and many have close relationships with their customers. Time spent at the Quality Cafe highlighted how the close relationships between customers and the owner bolster local networks of support. At other cafes there is not always the same level of shared conversation, but they offer a place for customers to work and feel less isolated. Many independent businesses we spoke to provide credit or discounts to their regulars when needed, some also provide food or drinks to rough sleepers in the area. A number are linked into local schools through contributions they provide to raffles and events.

“Ninety percent of [customers] I know by their first name and sixty percent of them I have known all my life.”

(Business owner)



### Lessons

Residents are quick to read the meaning of the look and feel of shops, cafes and social spaces, and from this make assumptions about which group they are intended for, leading some to feel included but others to feel excluded.

The community role played by businesses often depends on their owners or managers - for instance Well Street Kitchen has tried to engage with the wider community through its homework club in partnership with Hackney Quest, while the Quality Cafe is well known for the welcome provided by its owner.

Tesco's is considered to have one of the most diverse client bases and is also noted be a key 'bumping place' where community members frequently meet each another. This points to the important role of some high street chains in bridging community divides.



# 7. Creating successful social infrastructure

In this section we draw together lessons learnt from Homerton and our wider research on practical ways that social infrastructure can successfully support social integration.

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## 1. Build an understanding of the local social infrastructure ecosystem and support connections within it.

At a neighbourhood level, social infrastructure should be understood as a dynamic and complex ecosystem, a mix of spaces, facilities, groups and networks. These will vary significantly from place to place, with individual spaces and groups taking on different roles and hosting unique sets of relationships. For instance in Homerton, youth organisation Hackney Quest performs a broad role locally, providing community meals, family support services and acting as a link with many other local groups, as well as supporting young people.

A dense web of connections is vital to the health and success of the system as a whole. The neighbourhoods in and around the Gascoyne Estates benefit from a well-connected and coordinated range of groups, linked by different forums. This was seen to be different from neighbouring areas where groups are more fragmented. Wick Award, a Big Local organisation,<sup>3</sup> has brought greater coordination and communication among local communities and groups.

### Action

Mapping local social infrastructure can identify informal provision and local networks. This can help understand what is supporting the community, help channel funding and investment to where it is most effective, and help protect existing assets, formal and informal, that may be put under threat in the future. Local agencies and the council are well positioned to take this forward.

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3. Through the National Lottery Community Fund, 150 communities in England received long-term funding to create resident-led programmes which could flexibly respond to local needs. The programme is managed and supported by The Local Trust.

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## 2. Recognise, value and support the contribution of individuals.

**Individuals are key connectors within the ecosystem.** In Homerton, a small number of activists, dedicated volunteers and passionate individuals working within local groups drive many of the activities in local spaces. They push for improvements or greater community ownership of social infrastructure, share information and coordinate local action.

**Individual workers and activists are central to the way that local spaces contribute to social integration.** They create a welcoming atmosphere, facilitate interactions, build trusting relationships with users, and provide personalised signposting. At Wentworth Children's Centre, this approach is built into staff roles, and many working there have been in post a long time.

One stakeholder identified the importance of local groups being staffed by people with “skin in the game” - a sense of responsibility and investment in the area. Supporting and valuing these individuals is vital.

One local TRA chair has lived in the area all their life. They also help organise and deliver a weekly community meal, run an over 50s Club and organise an annual holiday trip for members, including running a savings circle which enables people to put money aside for the trip. They are someone people turn to for advice. They have encouraged many other local people to take part and help out in community activities.

**“[She] has given her life to the community for 20 years. For free. She is important.”**

(TRA member)

### Action

Local community organisations and agencies should acknowledge and value volunteers, staff and activists who make particular contributions to social integration and community relationships. The effort made to support local relationships should be made visible to encourage others to work in this way.

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### 3. Ensure change is carefully managed.

**Change generates challenges and opportunities for social infrastructure.** In an area of high land values such as Hackney, some local churches, including Frampton Park Baptist Church, have been able to redevelop and improve their buildings with new housing development subsidising other improvements. Other spaces have also been improved - Gascoyne 1 and Gascoyne 2 community centres have both recently been redeveloped or renovated.

**Much can be gained by creating more flexible and multi-functional spaces which allow a broader range of uses;** however, the benefits of informality and a sense of community ownership can be lost in change. Physical improvements need to be accompanied by strong, ongoing community engagement. The practical implications of higher maintenance costs and the impact of revenue generation models on community use also should be taken into account.

**Commercial change is central to resident perceptions of their local area.** While it can bring a sense of vitality and improved choice, in Hackney it was noted how new businesses leave some residents feeling excluded. There is a need to manage the pace of change and help safeguard a balance of businesses catering to different sections of the community.

#### **Action**

Venues or facilities going through change, and agencies managing change, should audit social integration in the area, assess how this could be affected by change, and put mitigating measures in place to limit any negative impacts.

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### 4. Balance inclusivity against the ability of spaces, groups or activities to effectively support individuals.

**Change Social integration suggests the need for inclusive spaces bringing together diverse groups, but this research also shows the important role of spaces and activities for particular groups.** For instance, the Gascoyne 2 Over 50s Bingo Club appeals to a small section of the community, but it has built a loyal following and acts as an important social support for its participants, many regulars are at risk of isolation.

Many informal networks are grounded in shared experiences and backgrounds and are effective because of this mutual understanding. Informal spaces - such as barbershops or cafes - can be an important resource to for individuals, often catering to people from particular backgrounds.

Agencies and community groups must balance the need for programming and support that brings together people from different backgrounds, and support for particular groups. More targeted activities can become routes into other more inclusive activities or spaces.

### **Action**

Spaces and facilities should assess how their activities support relationships between people from different backgrounds, and between people from the same background, and find an appropriate balance between these two outcomes (recognising that this will vary in different areas).

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## **5. Focus on animating and realising the potential of existing spaces.**

The softer aspects of programming, facilitation and activities, and how they are used by local groups and networks, helps them realise their social integration potential. Without these relationships, spaces on their own are unable to build social integration. In Homerton, stakeholders reported that effective activities are those which are long-term, repeated and consistent.

**“What doesn’t work are pop-up things, you’ve just got people aware and then it’s finished.”**

(Local stakeholder)

Programming, thinking about how different activities appeal to different people is very important in widening the different groups who use a space or place. For instance, Hackney Quest, in partnership with local organisation Wickers Charity, are trying to broaden the use of local sports cages, which are an important resource for young people but tend to be dominated by older boys.

Short-term projects, a lack of core funding, complicated applications and excessive monitoring requirements are all felt to undermine the capacity of groups to deliver and build momentum around social integration. People who attended the workshop talked about how the most important issue is not



always the availability of funding, but the accessibility and type of funding.

### **Action**

Community groups should develop a range of different activities for different groups in their programming. Councils can support this through support and capacity-building, bringing together local actors and creating forums for collaboration, information-sharing and accessing external funding.

# Useful information

**All of us: the Mayor's strategy for social integration, 2018**

[https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final\\_social\\_integration\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_social_integration_strategy.pdf)

**Good Growth by Design programme**

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/regeneration/advice-and-guidance/about-good-growth-design>

**New London Plan**

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/new-london-plan/what-new-london-plan>

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