



Social infrastructure in times of crisis

How local spaces, facilities and groups supported community resilience in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic

March 2021

About this report

This report explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community resilience. It is a more detailed presentation of the research that informed the GLA's Good Growth by Design inquiry exploring how social infrastructure supports social integration. This research was conducted by Social Life and Hawkins\Brown and resulted in the Connective Social Infrastructure report and associated evidence base.

The report was written by Lucia Caistor, Jonah Rudlin and Nicola Bacon.

Connective Social Infrastructure

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 in-depth research in three contrasting areas: Catford, Homerton and Surbiton. The full report of the Inquiry is available here: [Connective Social Infrastructure: How London's social spaces and networks help us live well together, 2021](#)

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. More information about the programme is available here: [Good Growth by Design programme](#)

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

Hawkins\Brown is an internationally renowned practice of architects, urban designers, interior designers and researchers. People are at the heart of everything we do, from our design approach to the way our studio runs. We bring a wealth of experience designing and delivering innovative and socially sustainable places and spaces, with research underpinning our creative process and all our outputs. www.hawkinsbrown.com

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those in Homerton, Catford, Surbiton and in the four case studies who generously gave their time to speak with us when the demands on their time were intense.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Key findings	3
3. The response to the crisis	5
4. Social infrastructure supporting social integration.....	15
5. The future of social infrastructure.....	21
6. Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis	23

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a stark impact on London's communities and social infrastructure has been at the epicentre of the city's response: addressing new and urgent needs, galvanising an impressive community response, and rapidly developing new creative ways of working and collaborating.

The pandemic has challenged the resilience of London's social infrastructure; the adaptability, flexibility and imagination shown by different organisations in response has been unprecedented. For many organisations, however, the impact has also been harsh and deepened concerns about a difficult future.

“A resilient community is one that has a collectively held belief in its ability to adapt and thrive in spite of adversity.”

(House of Commons Library (2020) Overcrowded Housing (England) Briefing paper 1013.)

Between May and June 2020, Social Life and Hawkins\Brown spoke to local residents and agencies working across London to explore the impact of the pandemic on their services and their local communities. These agencies had been interviewed earlier in the winter of 2019-20 as part of the wider GLA Good Growth by Design Inquiry.

This is a snapshot of the experience of crisis. It demonstrates how social infrastructure supports community resilience in London neighbourhoods, and how social infrastructure becomes resilient when faced with shocks. It aims to provide some insights into the future of social infrastructure in light of the pandemic and also lessons that can be learned from this shared experience.

How we define social infrastructure

Social infrastructure - which includes a rich variety of 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.

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. We refer to the ‘social infrastructure ecosystem’ to describe the ways in which different agencies and spaces are working together within an interconnected network of support.

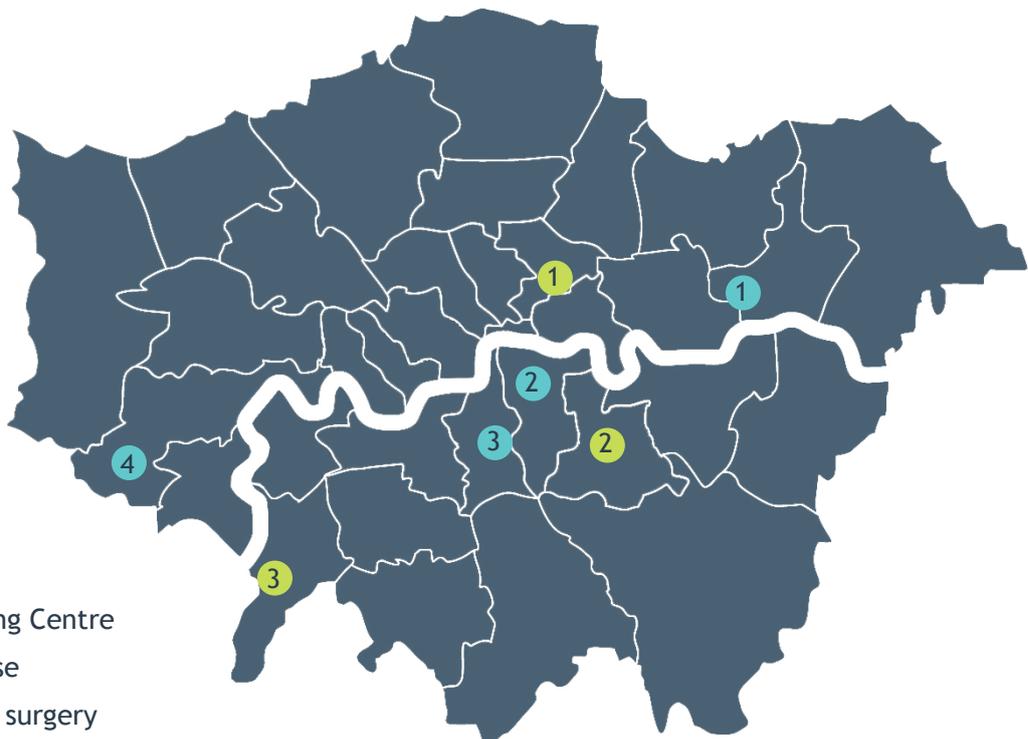
This builds on the Mayor of London’s definition of social infrastructure: “Social infrastructure covers a range of services and facilities that meet local and strategic needs and contribute towards a good quality of life. It includes health provision, education, community, play, youth, early years, recreation, sports, faith, criminal justice 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.” (The London Plan 2021, GLA)

About the research

In late May and early June 2020, we spoke with 22 community representatives and local agencies about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on their communities and on the support they offer. This included six interviews in Homerton, eight in Catford and eight in Surbiton. We also spoke with four agencies that were used as case studies in the wider Inquiry: Barking Learning Centre, Pembroke House, Brockwell Park surgery and Reach Academy Feltham.

Neighbourhoods

- 1 Homerton
- 2 Catford
- 3 Surbiton



Case studies

- 1 Barking Learning Centre
- 2 Pembroke House
- 3 Brockwell Park surgery
- 4 Reach Academy Feltham

2. Key findings

Social infrastructure has a crucial role to play in times of crisis, nurturing local relationships and providing support to communities. It has been at the epicentre of London's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and this intense period gives insights into how social infrastructure supports the resilience of local communities and neighbourhoods:

- **The experience of the first lockdown brought the effectiveness of community-led solutions to local challenges into view.** More organic grassroots initiatives often found it easier to flex and react quickly than larger institutions. A Borough's ability to adapt can be undermined by their formal structures and overstretched services.
- **The cumulative impact of austerity and neglect hindered the ability of both community spaces and council-run spaces to respond to the first lockdown.** Many community facilities are in financially precarious situations and the crisis, and its aftermath, threatens business models, activities and income streams.
- **The lockdown catalysed new ways of working, bringing dormant or underused resources back into use, and rapidly galvanising hyper-local networks in order to pool resources.** Groups of residents organised at the scale of the street, larger spaces hosted smaller organisations such as food banks, individual residents became couriers and befrienders, and micro-public spaces like doorsteps emerged as places of one-to-one support.
- **Food insecurity was the driving force of most new networks that emerged in the first lockdown.** Local food solidarity networks created a platform for people to participate, create new relationships and build community resilience. Many new networks formed around food with different organisations coordinating to pick up supplies, store food, or distribute it to those most in need. There is also a renewed appreciation of the social value of high street and local independent businesses, many of which were highly involved in providing support.
- **Online communication ensured that connections with local residents were maintained whilst facilities are closed.** However, the dependence on digital communication left certain groups severely disadvantaged, including

people who are not used to operating online and people with poor equipment or limited access to Wi-Fi and data.

- Stakeholders report overwhelmingly that the COVID-19 crisis brought different communities together and that pre-existing relationships were crucial in responding effectively, building on trust that was already in place. At moments of crisis, many residents become involved in their local communities in new ways.
- National and international crises amplify existing inequalities and create new forms of social, spatial and economic exclusion. Crises see inequalities surge and spaces of exclusion increase. There are significant differences between the way that people from different social class and ethnicities have been affected by COVID-19 and by the experience of lockdown and restrictions.



Ken's Cafe, Catford. Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

3. The response to the crisis

This section describes how social infrastructure in the three neighbourhoods reacted and reconfigured their services, finding new creative ways of operating to meet community needs. It also draws on the case studies from other London boroughs.

In all the three neighbourhoods - Catford, Homerton and Surbiton - there was a strong collaboration between different sectors during the crisis. This networked response was appreciated across sectors and areas. Local government, community organisations, informal groups and local businesses rapidly came together to support those that were most affected by the situation. This involved coordinating huge numbers of local volunteers, providing supplies of food and medicine to those in need, and finding ways to maintain relationships in spite of the physical distance.

“The partnership working and what we’ve been doing with food has shown how we can work so collaboratively and there’s a desire for that to continue.”

(Stakeholder, Catford)

Across the neighbourhoods, delivery of frontline support was primarily carried out by charities and new informal groups, with the council playing more of a coordinating role.

“The voluntary sector responded really, really well in Lewisham.”

(Councillor, Lewisham)

Smaller local organisations were able to be more agile than larger institutions and local authorities, which tended to be rigid and to struggle with quick response. Local groups reported that this at times held them back, for example sharing contacts with local organisations and informal resident-led groups who could provide immediate support. In Homerton, collaboration between different organisations at the beginning of the crisis focused on sharing contacts for vulnerable people. This raised potential safeguarding issues and tensions with data protection protocols.



Food hub at Pembroke House by Rachel Elizabeth Photography

Response from community organisations and the voluntary sector

Community organisations radically adapted their ways of working and collaborations to respond to the crisis. Many became hubs overnight, supporting a range of needs and groups within one space. Local organisations with grant funding were more financially resilient than those which relied on renting out their spaces for income generation.

Local religious institutions also played an important role and worked closely with other community groups. In Homerton faith groups drew on their institutional experience, mature networks of volunteers, and well-developed contact lists of vulnerable groups.

Local insight: St. Mary's Church, Homerton

The church, together with youth social enterprise the Wickers was able to very quickly develop a food distribution system collaborating with the food charity the Felix Trust. This was supported by funding through the pre-established relationship with the Wick Award. Sikh Gurdwaras, with rich experience in preparing large-scale charitable meals, were also active in Homerton, as well as in Barking and Dagenham, in providing food packages.

Response from informal resident-led groups

Across the three areas, the resident-led response was substantial and triggered a culture of volunteering to emerge. In many cases individual residents were the catalysts that galvanised the local community and many flourished in their new role as informal community leaders. They activated relationships with their neighbours, with local communities of interest and local facilities to capitalise on dormant and existing capacity. Early in lockdown, this local response, alongside voluntary sector supports, gave time for formal services to put structures in place.

Response from statutory agencies

Councils' abilities to cope with the pandemic is perceived to have been undermined by underfunding, boroughs were seen as having few resources and little flexibility to absorb the shock of the crisis, especially in the first weeks. Rapid redeployment of council staff and volunteers to new roles was crucial in speeding up the response. In Homerton for example, many of Hackney Council's

housing staff were redeployed as food delivery drivers. Libraries were forced to close, with staff redeployed and longstanding volunteers having to shield.

Primary schools leveraged their relationships with families and many local organisations took food supplies to schools for distribution. Pembroke House in Southwark, report that the biggest referrer of vulnerable residents for food packages was Surrey Square Primary School.

Response from local businesses

The high street and local independent businesses were severely affected by the pandemic. Most local shops closed, with increased reliance on the essential shops that did stay open.

Despite having lost income suddenly, many local businesses offered their facilities to support local activities. As they were unable to operate as normal, many used their surplus time, space and supplies to support local emergency food initiatives. This created new relationships between different organisations. For instance, Catford's barbers and hairdressers, important meeting places for the Caribbean community, had to close in late March. The owner of Progress Barbers, whilst struggling to pay the rent, set up an informal foodbank, using the Fair Share distributors of waste food.

Residents often supported their local independent businesses with a renewed appreciation of their social value. The Press Room cafe in Surbiton saw a collapse in their main customer base - people picking up their coffee in the morning before heading into central London. However, in lockdown people working from home started coming to pick up takeaway coffees at other times of the day.

“Local people have been very helpful, where they can shop local, they have done it.”

(Stakeholder, Surbiton)

The closure of pubs and cafes brought into view the important social role they can play. In all three areas, the loss of pubs was seen having a big social impact.

“Pubs are places that people come because they want to connect with someone...How do we continue to offer that listening service to people from a distance?”

(Publican, Surbiton)



Press Room Cafe, Surbiton. Photograph courtesy of the Press Room Cafe.

The role of online social infrastructure

Online platforms became a key space for rapidly organising responses, sharing information about the crisis and signposting. They were valuable in maintaining connections between residents, services and informal groups.

Local insight

Pembroke House, in collaboration with the Walworth Group, developed an online community facing-front door to allow residents to self-identify as vulnerable. This enabled them to create a unified contact list for local services, and to work with organisations providing support and food packages.

Longstanding relationships played an integral role in providing support. Existing WhatsApp and Facebook groups people were repurposed to share information and offer help. In Surbiton a WhatsApp group used by parents of a local youth football group responded to COVID-related appeals early in the crisis. New online groups also formed alongside existing ones. WhatsApp became the key digital infrastructure for Mutual Aid Groups, with neighbourhood-scale groups sharing resources and capacity, and street level sub-groups ensuring the most vulnerable or isolated individuals were not missed. Some of these groups expanded beyond emergency crisis support into daily conversation and sharing, or focused on wellbeing or community gardening.

“People will often write on the group; ‘thought I’d do a bit of gardening, if anyone wants to help me and fancies a socially distanced chat come along.’”

(Stakeholder, Homerton)

Online platforms enabled many organisations to continue to run some of their key activities, but many reported this as a temporary fix rather than a substitute for personal contact. People described “Zoom fatigue” and increased wariness of online meetings.

“For a business that’s so much about socialising and talking to people, to do what we do which is bringing people together is not the same online.”

(Stakeholder, Surbiton)

People with limited access to the internet, good IT equipment or who are not digitally literate were severely disadvantaged in accessing support and information. They were also excluded from the new online meeting places. This was particularly noticeable in Catford and Homerton with high digital exclusion, particularly affecting older and younger people. In Catford, community centres voiced fears that the people who accessed advice on jobs, housing and finances in the past could become particularly excluded.

Local insights

The Irish Community Centre in Catford have checked in by phone with some of the Gypsy Roma community as this group often do not have online access.

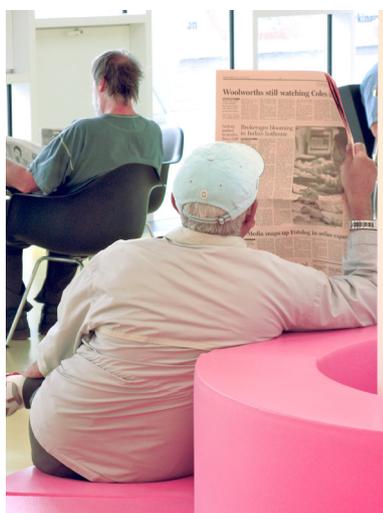
In Homerton on the Gascoyne 1 Estate, Sanctuary Housing loaned a number of laptops for residents and children without computer access at home.

At Reach Academy Feltham, a survey carried out earlier in the year had identified 12 families that did not have adequate broadband access to complete schoolwork online, and so computers and internet dongles were provided.

Getting information

During the pandemic, places that people would turn to for help or advice shifted. The research conducted before the first lockdown indicated that GPs and faith spaces were particularly valued as sources of help and advice. During the lockdown, local institutions and groups used a range of formal and informal methods to provide information on support available locally: online platforms including formal websites, social media and WhatsApp, plus distributing leaflets and making phone calls were widely used. In some areas local newspapers played an important role, like The Good Life local newspaper in Surbiton, delivered to 11,500 individual houses. People were also encouraged to tell their neighbours about support on offer.

Those interviewed reported that communication locally between resident groups, community organisations, and the local council has been effective. However communication from national government was often perceived to be contradictory and confusing, with changes to guidance being made with little warning.



Barking Learning Centre by Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, photograph by Timothy Soar

Local insight

In Homerton, there was an effort to ensure different forms of communication were tailored to different groups. For example, Hackney Council coordinated with the Jewish organisation Bikur Cholim to provide government guidance to the Hasidic communities in Stamford Hill through their community networks.

Using and adapting physical infrastructure and outdoor spaces

In all three neighbourhoods, some spaces rapidly adapted to 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 stop all activity for a lengthy period, this included sports facilities.

Many of the community spaces that were forced to close focused on outreach and relocated their services into new spaces in the community. The street became an effective scale at which to organise hyper-local support and doorsteps and the entrances to cafes offering take-aways quickly became micro-public spaces.



A public performance at the Lamb Pub, Surbiton. Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority



Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

Outdoor spaces were one of the few forms of social infrastructure that remained open to the public, and were vital for sustaining relationships during lockdown. Green spaces and other outdoor spaces like allotments and community gardens became one of the most used meeting places and the most popular place for spending time with friends and neighbours. In Homerton, Victoria Park has been a valuable resource for maintaining relationships whilst maintaining social distance. Private gardens have also been used, such as the large front gardens on the Trowbridge Estate.

However people shielding could not benefit from these assets. People living in flats and apartment blocks were disadvantaged as many communal outdoor areas and playgrounds closed. This affected some communities in Catford and Homerton, exacerbating existing inequalities between those with enough inside and outside space at home, and those living in more crowded conditions.

Local insights

The Street Champs in Surbiton are a network of residents that have become foodbank collectors. They have set up collection points outside their homes and then take donations to the food banks. This was started by a local councillor and “this huge operation just sprang up” and was adopted by the council as an initiative. There are 130 Street Champs stations locally as a result. They are organised around existing WhatsApp groups for instance, of the Scouts.

Corbett Community Centre & Library in Catford have been spending more time speaking to their library users on the street as they could not have conversations in the library. Residents can arrange a half an hour slot for a doorstep chat, the volunteers would take a fold-up chair and sit and chat at a two-meter distance.

Closing hard infrastructure adversely impacted the small organisations and micro-businesses that were hosted within them. Many transferred their activities online but others were unable to adapt. In Catford food related micro-businesses in Catford Mews tried to move to online deliveries but did not have access to a commercial kitchen. ‘Meanwhile’ uses were explored in order to set up a kitchen for these micro-businesses in a former 99p store in the Catford Shopping Centre.

Conversely, there was a surge in the informal co-location of services, transforming spaces into hubs of local support. To comply with social-distancing guidelines, many organisations closed their doors to the public, but spaces were co-opted by essential

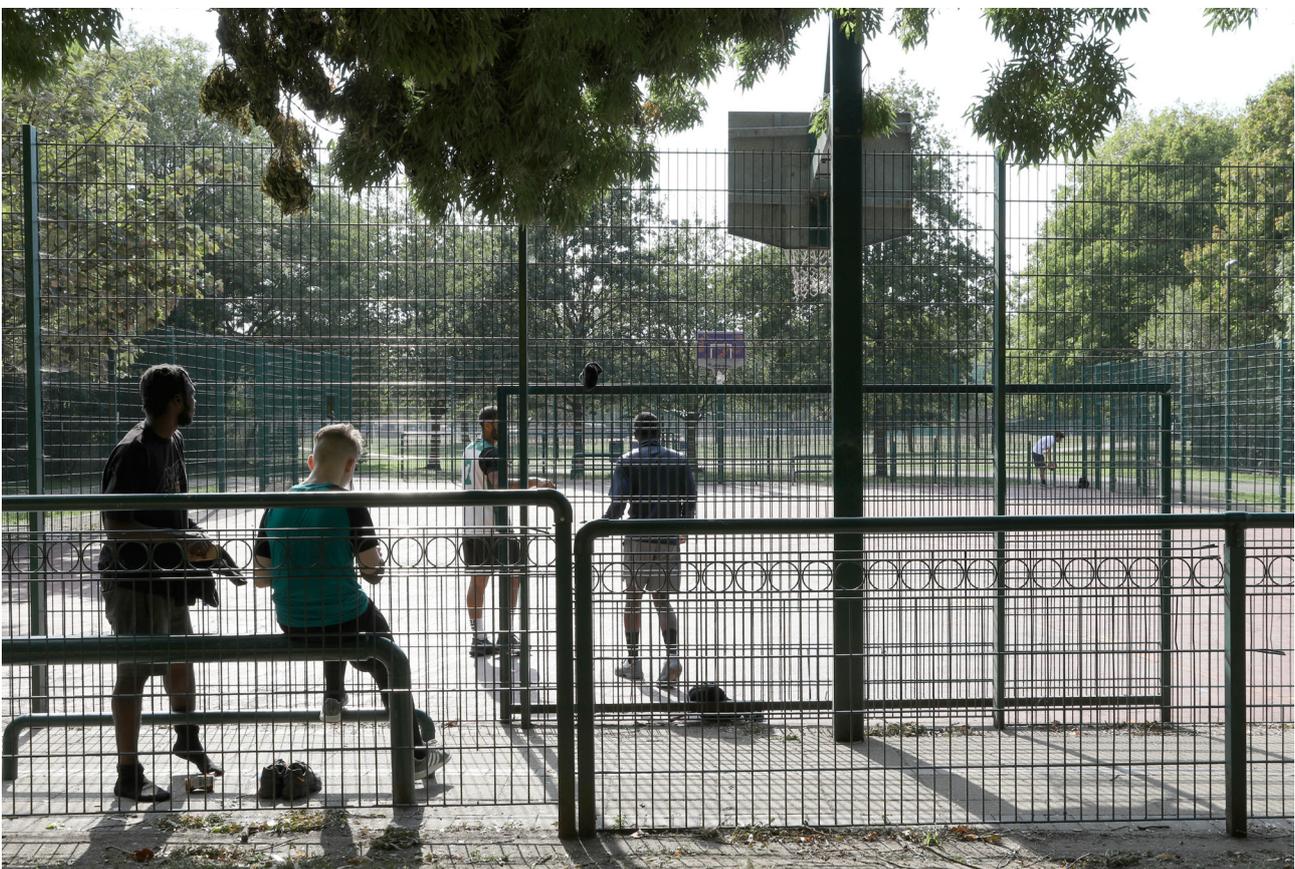
staff and volunteers. In Homerton, one of the first tasks for the local council was to identify spaces that could be used as a food distribution hub. One space identified was the large privately owned multi-storey carpark at Here East. The community hall on the Gascoyne 1 Estate hosted different resident-organised initiatives as well as external organisations providing support.

“We are very lucky - we have the community hall, it’s a great place, people trust it, it’s not far away, has reasonable facilities, and has a good kitchen we can cook in.”

(Stakeholder, Homerton).

Local insight

In **Pembroke House**, the main building was adapted into a food delivery hub organised by the community, whilst their newest building, the **Walworth Living Room**, was filled with refrigerators and used by Southwark Council as a food storage centre and as a food distribution point.



Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

The importance of food

In all three neighbourhoods, the immediate vulnerabilities of residents and key workers were addressed through food solidarity. This was the driving force of most new networks that emerged.

Food was identified by social infrastructure operators and councils as the most prevalent concern for residents. In Catford and Homerton food poverty was already an issue and the response built on support systems like food banks that were already in place.

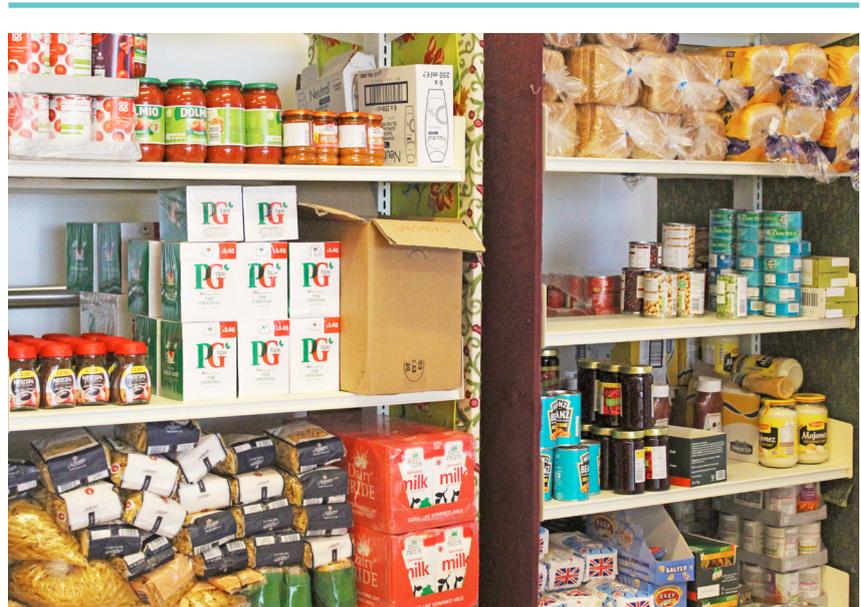
“We have moved further in collaboration between health providers, the council, local community groups and food security more in the past six months than the past six years.”

(Stakeholder, Pembroke House)

Many new networks have been formed around food with different organisations coordinating to pick up supplies, store food, make meals or packs and distribute them to those most in need. In Catford there is now a local food network of all the food banks in the borough communicating through WhatsApp.

Local insight

Pembroke House was already working with Southwark Public Health Team to design a food poverty strategy for the borough. Discussions were accelerated at the beginning of the crisis, which facilitated huge progress in cross-sectoral collaboration.



Pembroke House, Rachel Elizabeth Photography.

The crisis food network on the Gascoyne 1 Estate, Homerton



4. Social infrastructure supporting social integration

The pandemic transformed community dynamics with power relations shifting, new relationships emerging and existing relationships strengthening. Many residents have also become more engaged in their local area. But at the same time inequalities intensified and spaces of exclusion increased.

This section explores how social infrastructure during this time supported three key elements of social integration - relationships, participation and equality.

“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)

1. The impact on relationships

In all three areas and in the case studies, it was reported that the crisis has brought different communities together and that new interactions will have supported social integration.

“The power of relationships is huge. If we hadn’t had those relationships in place we wouldn’t have been able to do half the amount of work.

The goal now is to expand and deepen those relationships, and continue to form relationships with more organisations.”

(Reach Academy Feltham).

Pre-existing relationships were crucial in responding quickly, building the trust already in place.

“A parent would pick up a phone happily...due to that pre-existing relationship. That trust... made a big difference to how fast we could respond.”

(Stakeholder, Homerton)

Resident-led initiatives were often set up by community leaders and residents in all three areas started pooling resources and borrowing and bartering with one another.

“When organisations such as the Felix Project have shared what’s in the latest food parcels for the estate, and someone’s arrived a bit late asking, ‘is there any chickpeas left?’, other people pitch in and go ‘oh I haven’t used mine yet, have some of mine!’

(Stakeholder, Homerton).

Some organisations focused efforts on catering to people from the groups that would usually use their services. In Catford, the Mayoress of Lewisham promoted ethnically diverse hot meals for older people, and the Lewisham Islamic Centre delivered Iftar plates to all Muslims in the area during Ramadan.

There has also been collaboration between different groups. A food bank set up by a church in Surbiton was supported by the local mosque, which stored food in their fridges. Representatives of the church and the mosque did regular food pick-ups from local supermarkets together.

In some cases, the crisis has also seen a shift in the way councils relate to residents. At Barking Learning Centre, council staff began contacting residents in the area to identify what support was needed. Their usual way of working was to wait for people to come to the building rather than through outreach. The staff and managers of the centre are now thinking of ways they can maintain these new relationships and ways of working in the longer-term.

“It was a big transition for the council to begin pro-actively calling residents. But we found that when you call them rather than they call you, it’s a totally different relationship, and makes a huge difference.”

(Barking Learning Centre)

2. The impact on participation

All three areas saw a surge in local participation. In Surbiton the crisis galvanised volunteering and engagement. In Homerton, newer, often more affluent groups became more involved in local community networks and tended to participate in different ways to more established 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)

Volunteering created new relationships between people who did not previously know each other and between people from different backgrounds. Some reported that the level of interaction can be overwhelming.

“I’ve seen him around but I don’t really know him, and now I do!”

(Stakeholder, Catford).

Community groups welcomed the increased participation of new volunteers, and the diversity of new skills and capacity they contributed. There is a hope that this will become the trigger for more sustained community involvement, and that as more people work at home, they will want to volunteer locally. However there is concern that as people stop being furloughed, the volunteer base will shrink. Longstanding volunteers tended to be older residents, many are shielding and it is not known when they will be able to return to volunteering.

“Volunteers in their 70s will not be coming back for a while.”

(Stakeholder, Catford).

In all three areas there is a strong desire to maintain the new community networks which have formed, and continued recognition of the support neighbours can provide for each other.

“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



Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

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"

(Stakeholder, Homerton)

"We have witnessed kindness, compassion, care, supporting local businesses, this needs to continue, we've got to do something different and this is the moment."

(Stakeholder, Surbiton)

In some cases there has also been a shift in the ways in which councils devolve responsibility to the voluntary sector.

Local insights

In Catford, the voluntary sector and council worked together closely. Lewisham Council were very clear from the start of lockdown that they wanted to support a community-led response to the virus. Lewisham Local, an organisation hosted by Rushey Green Timebank, already existed to support Lewisham's voluntary sector and so it became the platform for coordinating the COVID response.

3. The impact on equality

Across London, the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities or created new forms of social, spatial and economic exclusion.

"I worry about the potential for bitterness because of the differences between people's circumstances."

(Stakeholder, Surbiton)

Young people are particularly adversely affected. The spaces that they would most frequently use are now off limits. Schools and sport facilities and outdoor spaces, such as outdoor gyms and basketball courts are now closed. Neither Surbiton or Catford have formal youth clubs and the spaces that acted as youth centres, such as The Surbiton Boxing Club, are closed. In Catford this is raising concerns as many young people are affected by digital poverty and will not be able to connect with online activities.



Gascoyne Estate, Homerton

In Homerton, there has been concern about distanced learning, there were concerns that some disadvantaged children have been sanctioned for failing to complete online work. Stakeholders voiced concerns that some local secondary schools did not take into account the home situation of children, and whether they had access to Wi-Fi and laptops.

There was also concern for older people. People who were shielding were excluded from all spheres of public life outside of their homes during the first lockdown, and many were excluded from digital public spaces as well because of lack of equipment, data or knowledge. The first lockdown meant that older people stopped being present outside in the local area, in public and shared spaces. Many businesses reported feeling uneasy about reopening because they were concerned about older people's safety. In all areas there was a particular concern about people shielding who live alone and those already dependent on support.

“If you're living alone with a disability in council housing, your mental health is going to go through the mill.”

(Stakeholder, Catford)

People without experience of accessing support online that suddenly found themselves in precarious situations, needed more help in navigating the systems available. There were concerns about people already considered vulnerable, in Catford this included migrants with informal living or working situations, mainly eastern European men, and the refugee community. However there was a strong response overall to protect this group.

“Grassroots organisations have sprung up to support refugees.”

(Stakeholder, Catford)

In Homerton and Catford BAME communities living in the area became increasingly concerned as knowledge emerged about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the health of BAME communities. In Homerton, many noted the importance key workers played in responding to the crisis, the high number of BAME residents in these roles, and the lack of recognition and support they received. The increased levels of inequality amplified by the pandemic has the potential to create future divides across communities.

“There are not a lot of white people standing in that line [at food banks]. Mainstream services are black services.”

(Stakeholder, Catford)

“There might be a heightened sense that Hackney owes the poorer members of its community support, gratitude and help. If you think who keeps Homerton Hospital going, it’s not the yuppies.”

(Stakeholder, Homerton)

In Homerton and Catford the relationship with the police has been challenging. Some saw a strong contrast between the way that social distancing was enforced around Broadway Market and London Fields, places used mainly by white people, compared to the stricter enforcement of COVID regulations on younger BAME residents across the neighbourhood. Metropolitan Police data shows that a disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority groups were fined for alleged breaches of the first lockdown in London.



Barber shop. Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

5. The future of social infrastructure

In each neighbourhood there was concern about the immediate future and the longer-term impact of the pandemic and its economic consequences. Agencies in Catford for instance, reported a 70 percent increase in Universal Credit claimants. At the same time, this massive disruption triggered questions about how to 'build back better'.

The ability of different spaces to adapt and reopen varies. Some have outdoor spaces to use, others need to invest in making their spaces COVID-secure at a time when they have no income. Others planned to continue activities online for some time. Many felt there was a lack of practical guidance about reopening and that guidelines kept changing, making it difficult to plan ahead.

“We won't be returning to events or anything requiring gatherings of people until we have a better idea of how this situation is going to pan out...There's just no real end in sight.”

(Stakeholder, Surbiton)

Anxiety about financial viability was reported by community spaces and soft infrastructure including pubs, cinemas and cafes. There was uncertainty about how to replace the loss of income from closure and fears about the impact of social distancing on viability.

Many community spaces that people relied on are struggling to survive and fear for the future. The shock of the crisis has come on top of the slow-burning stresses of austerity, scarce grant income and increasing social need over the past decade.

“All the organisations that have really contributed with such openness and generosity are likely to suffer greatly ...We're all on a boat, and there is a fire everyone is trying to put out, but there's also a leak at the other end.”

(Stakeholder, Surbiton).

Stakeholders voiced concerns about rising poverty and social need as furloughed volunteers go back to work and the impact on the economy becomes clear. Emergency funding, for social

programmes and organisations, vital from the end of March onwards, is by its nature short term.

In addition, flexible outreach has been very successful in the short term however, in the long term it would not be a suitable substitute for physical meeting places.

“Whilst you can do outreach, it’s still not the same. as having a community hub - somewhere people can come to where people feel safe and comfortable.”

(Stakeholder, Catford)

There is a recognition from most agencies and organisations that the effects of the pandemic will be long lasting, and it raises questions about how local social infrastructure will be able to provide the significant levels of support that will be needed for local communities, and how this infrastructure of support will manage to survive in the long term.



Well Street, Homerton. Photograph courtesy of James O Jenkins for the Greater London Authority

6. Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis

The pandemic has shone a light on how social infrastructure ecosystems support local communities at times of stress and insecurity: by leveraging existing relationships, partnerships and networks; deploying resourcefulness and flexibility; and drawing in volunteers, supporters and new resources.

There are lessons from this experience about how social infrastructure can be designed and supported to be better prepared for long-term stresses and short-term shocks, pointing to the possibility of strengthened community participation, and confidence in community-led initiatives and their ability to flex and thrive in the longer term.

1. Adapting the ways we connect

The COVID-19 pandemic has one key characteristic that differentiates it from other emergencies. It has introduced an imperative to operate without social proximity, at distance and in many cases without the physical spaces that usually bring people together. The challenge has been to find new ways to draw on local networks and relationships, and to exploit and strengthen the relationship between the different elements of the social infrastructure ecosystem, at a time when normal communications and ways of working are not possible.

2. Supporting communities during times of crisis

Times of crisis reveal conditions of precarity as well as resilience. Crisis can damage social infrastructure through forced closure or neglect, and energise facilities and networks as they become the focus of providing urgent support. While community facilities and organisations can struggle to keep their established services running, many find opportunities to support the community in other ways.

Nevertheless, organisations and people can experience burn-out, and if the demands on their overstretched resources are ongoing it can become unsustainable.

3. Changing the way local authorities work with communities

New collaborations between communities and local authorities during times of crisis bring the effectiveness of community-led solutions to local challenges into sharper focus. A shared sense of collective purpose can help to remove institutional barriers and streamline processes that may have hampered collaboration.

Times of collective strain also illustrate how agencies - from the public sector and civil society - can quickly mobilise large groups of volunteers and supporters. Crisis provides an opportunity to devolve power to local networks and to think about how to support communities to design, manage and sustain community infrastructure themselves over the longer term.

4. Innovating to meet urgent need

Periods of crisis can generate creative solutions to the ways in which support is offered and organised, and disrupt traditional dividing lines between hard and soft infrastructure, formal and informal services. The need to respond rapidly can lead to a surge in temporary use, informal hubs, co-locations, virtual hubs and more. Sharing of resources across sectors and organisations can be more successful during times of collective concern. Dormant or poorly-used community assets can be reactivated and redesigned to respond to new demand.

This crisis also revealed the value of hyper-local social infrastructure. Groups of residents organise at the scale of the street, with larger spaces hosting smaller organisations such as food banks. Micro-public spaces emerge for offering support like doorsteps and park benches. Individual residents or small groups of residents become connectors for local spaces, increasing their reach. These trends point towards innovative ways of managing and running local infrastructure in the future.

5. Transforming the high street and supporting local economies

A consequence of national and global crises can be that people spend more time in their local areas, a result of restricted movement, financial restraints, new working practices or health concerns.

In wealthier communities, this may have a transformative effect on the character and economy of the area. In Surbiton, a significantly wealthier neighbourhood than Catford and Homerton, there is optimism about the future.

Members of Surbiton Together - a partnership exploring community-led high street regeneration - have identified an opportunity to revive their high street. More home working may mean that central London offices move to local areas where their employers live or invest more in local co-working spaces and offices.

“More and more people are realising they can work from home and this is a brilliant opportunity. The community will be responsible for regeneration.”

(Stakeholder, Surbiton).

Important work is needed across funding, design, social support and maintenance to make sure that all high streets and local economies are equipped to respond to changing demands and needs. If this is not done, the consequence of crisis may exacerbate existing inequalities, with more affluent people settling into new living patterns, and less affluent becoming more excluded.



Catford Mews, Catford.

Useful information

Summaries of the wider research in the three neighbourhoods are available online:

- [Everyday Life in Homerton: How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities.](#)
- [Everyday Life in Catford: How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities.](#)
- [Everyday Life in Surbiton: How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities.](#)

Related GLA publications available online:

- [Connective Social Infrastructure: How London's social spaces and networks help us live well together, 2021](#)
- [All of us: the Mayor's strategy for social integration, 2018](#)
- [Good Growth by Design programme, Greater London Authority](#)
- [The London Plan 2021, Greater London Authority](#)

First published in 2021

© Social Life

Some rights reserved.

12a Peacock Yard, Iliffe Street, London SE17 3LH

www.social-life.co

Cover image: Pembroke House by Rachel Elizabeth Photography.