

**Local Conversations: Final evaluation report. 2016 - 2021.**

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Executive summary

The Local Conversations programme, funded by People’s Health Trust, supports local people in 15 neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of deprivation. It aims to enable them to come together and engage in dialogue, decision-making, and action, in order to increase the components of collective control: social connectedness; knowledge, understanding and skills; confidence and aspiration; money and resources; and influence. The intention is that this will ultimately help to increase people’s control in life and improve local services, the social determinants of health, and health and wellbeing.

This final evaluation report synthesises four years of data collection and analysis of how the Local Conversations have developed and their impact on local communities. Itbegins with a summary of the Local Conversations programme and the evaluation of the programme, followed by a discussion of the process by which the Local Conversations operate. It then considers the impacts of the Local Conversations, framed around the outcomes set out in the programme’s Theory of Change (ToC), and concludes by exploring the key implications of the findings from the evaluation. The eight case studies, the 2020 staff survey findings, and the 2020 residents’ survey findings, referenced throughout the report, are included at the end.

Factors that enable the Local Conversations programme include strong Steering Groups, dedicated project leads, physical space for residents to gather, the programme’s community-led ethos, and investment in residents’ skills and leadership development. Across Local Conversation areas, residents struggle with high levels of poverty, poor housing conditions, and a dearth of community spaces, all of which have worsened under austerity. This underscores the importance of physical space for residents to gather. Moreover, the programme’s community-led ethos, which seeks to empower residents to build control and take collective action to create change, is unique and powerful.

At the same time, there is widespread recognition from residents and staff across the Local Conversation projects that putting the community-led ethos into practice is a challenging process that takes time. For the Local Conversations to be truly resident-led there must be a strong foundation of trust between staff and residents, which makes the relatively long duration of the programme beneficial. The community budgeting aspect of the Local Conversations helps residents cultivate a sense of collective control. However, projects have struggled to strike a balance between having adequate financial oversight processes while also enabling residents to have greater autonomy over funding allocation. In addition to financial and bureaucratic processes, other barriers to achieving the Local Conversations programme objectives include austerity and worsening economic conditions; the Covid-19 pandemic and its ongoing impacts; disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust; residents’ complex personal circumstances; difficulties engaging residents and deepening participation; staff morale and burnout; and interpersonal conflicts.

In terms of the programme’s impacts, there is strong evidence that the majority of the shorter-term outcomes identified in the ToC, have gained traction over time. Residents – particularly those who have been involved for longer and/or have assumed more responsibility within projects – are continuing to build their social connectedness; knowledge, understanding, and skills; confidence and aspiration; and money and resources through participation in the Local Conversations. These outcomes help to enhance wellbeing, as more residents experience an increased sense of purpose and belonging, as well as increased feelings that what they do in life matters.

There is weaker evidence that residents are influencing people, institutions, and organisations in positions of power locally. Many nascent attempts to influence local decision-makers that were emerging across case study areas in 2019 have been severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced projects to pause their regular activities and events and go into crisis management mode. Still, it is evident that residents across projects have increased their engagement with local decision-makers and have cultivated strong partnerships with other local organisations, both of which have increased residents’ capacity for influence and have enabled incremental gains to be made across projects.

For the most part, however, the longer-term outcomes the Local Conversations programme aspires to achieve (e.g. better local services, improvements in the social determinants of health) have not yet materialised. This is largely because such ambitious change takes time and must be supported by wider systemic change. For example, the absence and/or inadequacy of local services – which has been exacerbated under austerity and will likely continue to deteriorate in the wake of the pandemic – has been both a barrier to projects, as well as an urgent priority to address. Although projects have attempted to improve local public services by engaging with relevant local decision-makers, their impacts on the availability, accessibility, and quality of local services are limited in the absence of greater and sustained investments from local and national government.

In fact, many projects have had to plug the gaps left by receding local authorities and services. Although delivering these services helps meet residents’ urgent needs, it also illustrates how the Local Conversations have inadvertently normalised the damaging impacts of austerity on vulnerable populations. Despite this, it is clear that Local Conversations have strengthened social connections and community resilience in areas that have been particularly devastated by austerity and Covid-19. As a result, many Local Conversation projects were able to mobilise efficiently to support vulnerable residents during the pandemic.

While staff and residents recognise the value of the Local Conversations, they also recognise that wider structural changes are needed to help drive the programme’s longer-term outcomes and materially improve residents’ health, wellbeing, and livelihoods, particularly in the wake of Covid-19. The challenge for the Trust is to build on the solid foundations that the Local Conversations have created to increase the potential to realise the longer-term outcomes.

**Key implications for the Local Conversations programme:**

* There is high demand from staff and residents for more training opportunities for residents to increase their capacity for collective action and influence.
* Lead organisations need to be able to employ enough staff to invest in the intensive work with residents that is necessary to build trust.
* Staff mental health is important and should be prioritised to help prevent burnout.
* Projects could benefit from more support with budgeting and related bureaucratic processes so that it is more straightforward for staff and residents.

**Key implications for People’s Health Trust:**

* The Trust could consider strategic partnerships with a range of public, private, and third sector stakeholders – locally and nationally – to develop a shared vision to support the Local Conversations programme and its desired outcomes.
* As projects have essentially lost a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, there is a potential case for extending the programme to account for the lost year, especially to support residents during the recovery from the pandemic.
* A possible extension to the programme could be accompanied by more strategic work that addresses structural inequalities – at the national and local levels – to help drive the programme’s desired longer-term outcomes.

Introduction

In July 2016, People’s Health Trust (the Trust) commissioned the New Economics Foundation (NEF) to evaluate the Local Conversations programme. This report synthesises findings from all four years of the evaluation, building on the interim third-year evaluation report from October 2019, the second-year evaluation report from September 2018, and the first-year evaluation report from September 2017. This chapter describes both the Local Conversations programme and its evaluation.

### About the Local Conversations programme

### Background

Local Conversations is one of the Trust’s three major grant-giving programmes. It provides grants to neighbourhoods across England, Scotland, and Wales where the Trust is currently supporting 15 Local Conversations. Grants for initial engagement work were provided from May 2014; the first Local Conversations area had its full grant approved in May 2015. Instead of asking organisations to bid for a place in the programme, areas were selected, based on:

* Size – typically with a population of around 4,000 to 5,000 people.
* Level of deprivation – typically in the highest 30% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation.
* Presence of a local organisation deemed capable of facilitating the programme in the locality.

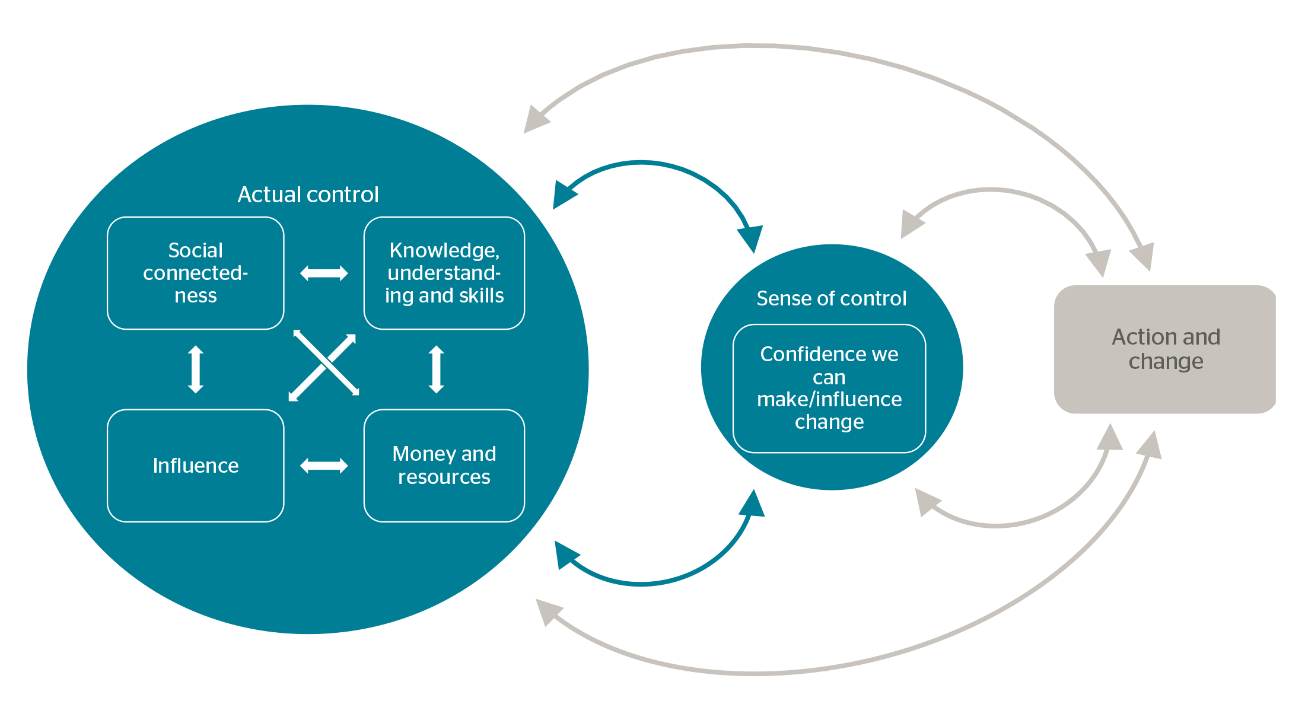
An initial grant of around £20,000 supported local lead organisations to conduct early engagement work with residents in the neighbourhood to identify local priorities. A full grant of between £200,000 and £300,000 over two to three years followed, to enable local people to address the local priorities they identified. Several areas have received top-up funding to extend the length of the programme beyond the initial three-year period, as the Trust intends to fund each Local Conversations area for nine years.

Given the selection process, the programme is reaching neighbourhoods that might not typically be involved in similar programmes. The programme operates in places experiencing challenging socioeconomic contexts that are most in need of investment and change and may ultimately be of greater value to residents if successful. At the same time, there is an understanding that progress may be both slower in pace and more difficult than comparable programmes operating in different contexts.

### Aims of the Local Conversations programme

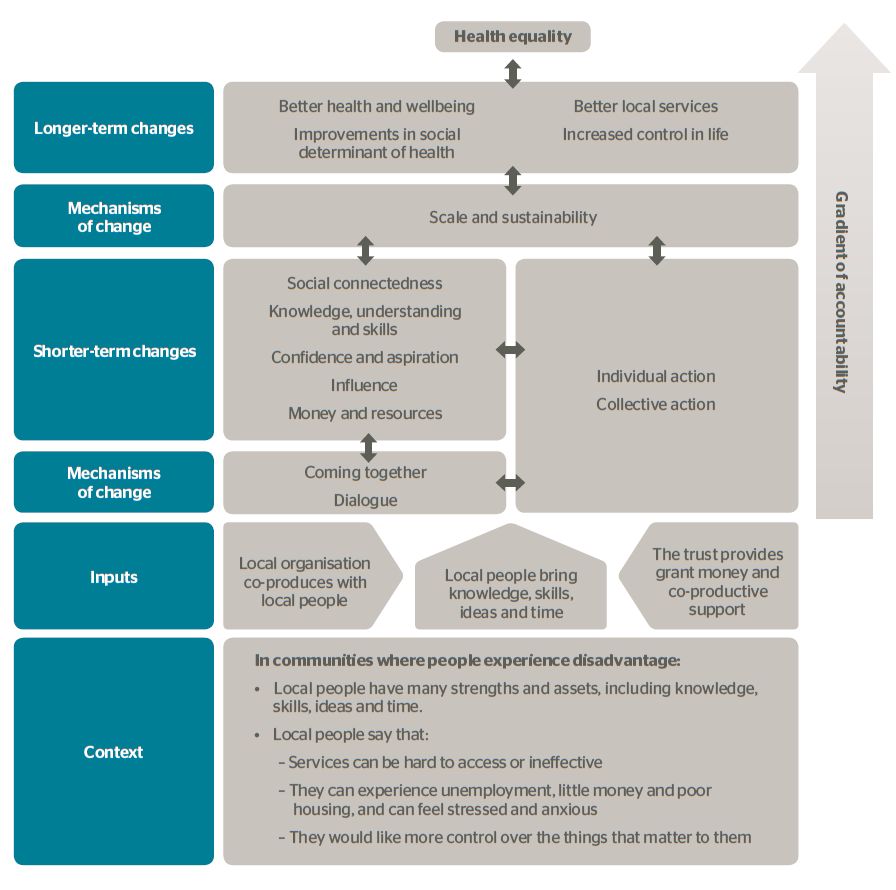
The programme aims to support local people to come together and engage in dialogue, decision-making, and action, and, through doing so, increase the components of collective control. Our previous research has identified the components of collective control (Figure 1):

* Social connectedness
* Knowledge, understanding, and skills
* Money and resources
* Influence
* Confidence

*Figure 1: Dynamic model of collective control*

The intention is that increased collective control will lead to improvements in the local social determinants of health and local services, as well as health and wellbeing, and ultimately contribute to a reduction in health inequalities. A Theory of Change (ToC) for the Local Conversations programme is presented in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Theory of Change for Local Conversations*

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## About the evaluation of Local Conversations

### Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation provides a formative and summative account of the development, implementation, and impacts of the Local Conversations, in order to:

* Inform the development of the Local Conversations programme through identifying key processes, learning, and intermediate outcomes.
* Build the evidence base on the effectiveness of community empowerment programmes in addressing the social determinants of health and subsequent changes in health inequalities.
* Identify ways in which the programme can play a role in strengthening local communities and building back better after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The evaluation is guided by a set of principles that are:

* Pragmatic – yielding insights and analysis to inform discussion and provide improvements to the design and implementation of the national programme and local projects.
* Participatory – seeking to understand and align with the ambition for greater collective control, including creating opportunities for the participation of local organisations and people in the evaluation.
* Part of a wider learning framework – viewing evaluation as part of an ongoing, shared learning process contributing to programme development and informing the evidence base on the social determinants of health.

### Research questions

The evaluation addresses the following research questions.

#### Primary research question

What difference is the Local Conversations programme making, how, and for whom, and how should the programme be developed in response to this learning?

#### Outcomes

* How far have theprogramme outcomes (as set out in the programme ToC) been achieved?
* How far have the projects’ local outcomes (the more specific outcomes that projects intend to achieve locally, which sit within the programme outcomes) been achieved?
* Have any unexpected outcomes (desirable or undesirable) been experienced? If so, what has influenced these?
* Who has experienced these changes?
* How have these changes been achieved?
* How long has it taken for change to happen?

#### Process

**Coming together**

* To what extent has the Local Conversations programme enabled local people to come together?
* Who has come together? Are there any groups who have been less involved/not involved – and if so, why?
* What has helped bring people (including those from minority groups or at risk of exclusion) together?

**Dialogueand decision-making**

* How – and how effectively – have local people, including minority and marginalised groups, been involved in dialogue and decision-making?

**Action**

* What activities and action are taking place as part of the Local Conversations programme?[[1]](#footnote-1)
* How have greater control, coming together, and dialogue (and possibly other processes) resulted in action?

**Control**

* To what extent do local people have control over the Local Conversations programme?
* How is control most effectively enabled by local lead organisations and the Trust?
* How well is control understood by local people to affect what goes on in local neighbourhoods?

**Sustainability**

* What is understood by sustainability locally?
* How sustainable are the experienced outcomes expected to be, and what is needed to ensure sustainability?
* What have local areas done to ensure sustainability?

**Scale**

* How many people have been involved in the Local Conversations programme?
* How much do people not directly involved benefit from changes?
* What is the scale of the changes achieved?

**Mechanisms of change**

* How far do the mechanisms of change (coming together, dialogue, action) result in the intermediate outcomes as described in the ToC, and in what circumstances?
* Should the ToC be modified, and if so, how?

#### Final year research focus

In addition to continuing to explore the evolving processes and outcomes of the Local Conversations programme, the final year of the evaluation includes a focus on three themes: sustainability of actions and outcomes, diversity and inclusion, and the development and outcomes of attempts to influence those in positions of power locally. We explored these three themes primarily through case study fieldwork.

* **Sustainability of actions and outcomes:** Given that this is the final year of the evaluation of the Local Conversations programme, it is important to explore the capacity of the programme’s actions and outcomes to continue to develop and endure beyond the end of the programme.
* **Diversity and inclusion:** The 2019 interim report notes that Local Conversations have been engaging with a wider and more diverse range of residents, although Steering Groups largely continue to lack diversity. The final year of research considers how – and how effectively – Local Conversations have engaged with underrepresented groups and involved them in dialogue and decision-making.
* **The development and outcomes of attempts to influence:** One of the key changes noted in the 2019 interim report is an increase in Local Conversations’ attempts to influence local organisations, institutions, and individuals in positions of power, in order to make desired changes. As such, it was important to monitor these nascent attempts to influence those in power locally in the final year of the evaluation.

These three areas of focus were established prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although these themes are still relevant, the pandemic severely disrupted Local Conversation projects and the evaluation, which limited our exploration of certain themes. For instance, while we had hoped to follow up on emerging attempts to influence local decision-makers in some Local Conversation projects in 2020, the pandemic had stalled many of these attempts, as projects were forced to halt regular activity and rapidly shift into crisis management mode.

### Methodology

We used amixed-methods design to give breadth and depth to an evaluation of the programme’s processes, outcomes, and impacts at project and neighbourhood levels. This involved:

* Case studies of Local Conversation projects.
* A longitudinal survey of residents participating in the Local Conversations.
* An annual survey of lead organisation staff.
* Peer research.
* Support for self-evaluation.

#### Case studies of Local Conversation projects

Five case studies of Local Conversation projects have been featured in all four years of the evaluation. The case studies comprise a significant part of the qualitative fieldwork and provide an in-depth analysis of how the programme works across different areas and the progress it has made in achieving outcomes. To gain a holistic view of each case study area, various research methods were used, including semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups with residents, project staff, and local partner representatives, as well as observations of Local Conversations activities, such as meetings, community events, and resident-led walks.

In 2020, the five case study areas were included in the fieldwork:

* Govanhill, Glasgow
* Claremont Ten, Blackpool
* Lozells, Birmingham
* Merstham, Surrey
* Caia Park, Wrexham

While three of these five areas (Govanhill, Claremont, and Lozells) have been included as case studies throughout the evaluation, Merstham and Caia Park are two new case study areas in 2020 replacing two other sites that were previously included as case study areas, Netherfield in Milton Keynes and Upper Afan Valley in South Wales. The Trust discontinued funding Netherfield in the Local Conversations programme in 2019 and Upper Afan Valley in 2020.

Changes to the case study areas has meant that while we have been able to collect and analyse longitudinal data from four years of case study research in Govanhill, Claremont, and Lozells, we have not been able to obtain the same level of analysis for the Merstham and Caia Park projects. Still, the inclusion of both sites provides greater breadth of information about the processes, activities, outcomes, and impacts of Local Conversation projects in different areas.

In addition to these five case studies, we conducted three additional case studies in 2020 with the specific purpose of capturing elements of good practice in certain Local Conversation projects and sharing learning. Compared to the five main case studies, these additional case studies are less in-depth and are limited in scope, as they focus exclusively on highlighting areas of good practice. The Trust identified the three additional projects to include as case studies of good practice, as well as the ways in which they demonstrated good practice:

* **Edberts House, Gateshead** – This case study focuses on a pioneering social prescribing programme, Community Linking, which places community development workers in local GP surgeries. Though separate from the Local Conversation and part of Edberts House’s broader community work, the Local Conversation informed the development of the Community Linking programme.
* **Penparcau, Ceredigion** – This case study highlights the Penparcau Local Conversation’s good practice in three areas: a strong and engaged Youth Forum, an expanding community food-growing project, and an established community space that has enabled engagement with a diverse range of residents.
* **Stanwell, Surrey** – The areas of good practice highlighted in this case study are effective conflict resolution within the community, the development of strong governance processes, and a thriving community allotment. In addition, the Local Conversation in Stanwell served as a key lifeline for local families during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The research methods for the three case studies to capture good practice included desk-based research to better understand the context of the area and the Local Conversation project (e.g. reviewing relevant background documents provided by the Trust and the projects’ social media pages), as well as semi-structured phone or online interviews with project staff, volunteers, and residents.

#### Residents’ survey

Findings from a longitudinal survey of participating residents across the 15Local Conversation projects are the only source of quantitative data in the evaluation. Six waves of residents’ surveys have been administered every six months self-completed online and in paper form. Lead organisation staff in all areas typically hand out paper surveys or online survey links to every resident they come into contact with through the Local Conversation.

The residents’ survey includes three kinds of questions:

* Demographic questions to find out who is taking part in the Local Conversations and how they are involved.
* Questions asking participants’ opinions of the Local Conversation and the difference they think the project is making.
* Questions about health and wellbeing outcomes, which can be tracked over time.

The outcomes questions are mostly taken from the Cabinet Office’s annual Community Life Survey (CLS), which provides official statistics on issues related to social action, community empowerment and engagement, volunteering, giving, and wellbeing. The CLS questions were chosen to make national data available as a comparator to the Local Conversations residents’ survey data.

Because the Local Conversations residents’ survey includes areas in Wales and Scotland, CLS findings are limiting as a comparator, as the CLS only captures outcomes for England. Where the exact same questions are used, this final report also includes outcomes from the annual National Survey for Wales (NSW) as a comparator with the Local Conversations residents’ survey. However, comparison with Scotland was not possible because although the Scottish Household Survey covers similar topics, its questions are worded differently and therefore are not comparable.

#### Staff survey

On an annual basis, lead organisation staff are sent an online survey that explores:

* General reflections on the development of the Local Conversation project in the past year.
* The impact of the Local Conversation on the lead organisation, residents involved, and the wider neighbourhood.
* The formal and informal structures within the Local Conversation and how well they work.
* Resources available to each area, including staff time and funding.
* People, organisations, and institutions the Local Conversation has attempted to influence, how they have sought to influence them, and the outcome.

Most of the questions in the lead organisation survey are open-ended and qualitative. There are, however, a number of closed questions designed to capture information about the resources, staff, and institutional capacity of the Local Conversations. Responses are kept anonymous to encourage honesty in the answers provided. In 2020, there was a dramatic decrease in the response rate to staff surveys, largely because the Covid-19 crisis was emerging as the deadline for submissions neared.

#### Peer research

Peer research was undertaken with residents across the five main case study areas as part of the Local Conversations evaluation to both build research skills within Local Conversation projects and increase the reach of data collection for the evaluation. Peer research involves training and working with ‘experts by experience’ – people who have lived experience of the issues being researched. The topic for peer research projects is negotiated between peer researchers and evaluation team members and is intended to be mutually beneficial.

At the time of writing this report, two rounds of peer research have been completed and the third round remains underway, following significant delays due to Covid-19. So far, 13 peer research projects have been completed in total, with topics ranging from young people’s experiences of the local area to intergenerational relations and digital connection.

Peer research has improved understanding of local priorities and actions within the programme and enabled a deeper understanding of the social context in which interventions occurred. However, it is a time-intensive activity for both peer researchers and evaluation team members. In each round, it has been consistently challenging to complete peer research projects with all five sites, with sites having to prioritise other activities as the most common barrier. This has particularly been the case during Round 3, as Covid-19 limited residents’ capacity to participate in peer research.

Learning from peer research will be included in a separate peer research report, which complements this final evaluation report. The peer research report will provide more information about the peer research projects completed in 2020, as well as the peer research process, findings, and reflections over the past four years.

#### Self-evaluation

All Local Conversation projects have been supported to evaluate their own practice, although engagement has been difficult. The primary aim of self-evaluation is to build evaluation skills and capacity to encourage sites to reflect on and learn from their findings. At the time of writing this report, two rounds of self-evaluation have been completed, with a third currently underway. There have been modifications to specific procedures and variations in engagement between each round.

In the first round (2017/2018), a member of the evaluation team conducted a two-day self-evaluation workshop with each Local Conversation project. At the workshop, staff and residents discussed and agreed the following:

* Outcomes they were aiming to achieve through their project.
* Indicators for each of these outcomes.
* Methods for collecting information about indicators.

With support from an evaluation team member, staff and residents then developed a self-evaluation plan using a template developed by the evaluation team. The evaluation team reviewed self-evaluation plans, provided feedback, and offered bespoke support for local self-evaluation needs over the phone or via workshops. Support tended to focus on research tool development (e.g. an outcomes survey) or data analysis.

In Round 2 (2018/2019), a one-day self-evaluation workshop was carried out with all Local Conversation projects, which covered the same content as the previous round but in a condensed manner, at the request of projects. This meant there was less time for discussion and group reflection. Follow-up support was provided remotely. The number of self-evaluation plans submitted to the evaluation team was significantly lower than in Round 1.

Round 3 (2020/2021, ongoing) replaces the previous workshops with a pack of self-evaluation materials for Local Conversations to access independently and ad hoc remote support from the evaluation team, where requested by projects. The self-evaluation pack contains PowerPoint slides with audio commentary from the evaluation team, written information, examples, and talking head video or audio files.

In all three rounds of self-evaluation, none of the Local Conversation projects had completed a self-evaluation plan, carried out the actions in the plan, or updated their plan ahead of the next round of self-evaluation. This, plusthe turnover of project staff and Steering Group members, meant that each round required starting with basic principles, rather than building on prior self-evaluation reflections. Feedback from projects was that self-evaluation was a good idea and that the workshops were helpful. However, it is a relatively resource-intensive activity and seemed to have been perceived as an unwelcome additional task that projects struggled to locate within established procedures.

Learning from self-evaluation does not feature in this final report for two reasons. First, as already mentioned, it has been challenging to engage projects with self-evaluation and only a few projects have completed self-evaluation reports. Second, the primary purpose of self-evaluation is to be a resource for projects, independent of the external evaluation of the Local Conversations programme. The hope is that self-evaluation resources (e.g. the PowerPoint slides) will be of use to projects in the future.

#### Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruptions across all Local Conversation projects, as well as the evaluation of the Local Conversations programme. The pandemic forced all projects to halt their regular activities and programming, and instead divert efforts to crisis management and emergency relief. The final waves of the staff and residents’ surveys were sent out, completed, and returned prior to the first national lockdown in March 2020; however, the response rates for both, especially the staff survey, were lower due to the emerging Covid-19 crisis.

The impact of Covid-19 on case study fieldwork has been considerable and imposed several significant limitations. Fieldwork for all eight case studies was scheduled to begin in spring 2020 but was delayed and then conducted online between July and November 2020. As a result, the following occurred:

* The usual diversity of research methods – including group discussions, observations, and informal conversations – was not possible. Instead, research methods were limited to one-to-one telephone or Zoom interviews. As such, analysis is based solely on interviews this year, whereas in previous years it was based on multiple interactions throughout researchers’ site visits, such as participant observation, focus groups, and informal discussions.
* A larger burden was placed on lead organisation staff to arrange interviews with residents during a challenging time when they had many competing and more urgent demands and were in less frequent contact with residents. However, staff at all eight case study sites were tremendously helpful in arranging interviews with residents and other project staff.
* Despite help from lead organisation staff, it was challenging to speak with more residents, and so we conducted fewer interviews with residents in 2020 compared to previous years. This exacerbates a limitation identified in previous years, whereby residents who are more engaged in projects (e.g. members of Steering Groups) are likelier to participate in interviews.
* Given the difficulties of interviewing more residents, the case studies rely more heavily on interviews with staff. This is something we have avoided in previous years, as the evaluation aims to understand the impact of the Local Conversations programme on *residents*.
* Compared to in-person interviews, it was difficult to achieve the same level of engagement with residents and staff through telephone or Zoom interviews. For instance, in-person interviews in previous years enabled researchers to pick up on body language and non-verbal cues, which are lost in remote interviews.
* Several case studies were conducted when the UK was slowly emerging from nationwide lockdown in July and August 2020. However, constantly changing government guidelines caused uncertainty in several Local Conversation areas, especially around whether, when, and under what conditions the lead organisations would be able to reopen and resume activities.
* Meanwhile, other case study interviews were conducted shortly before and/or during England’s second lockdown in November 2020. The same confusion and uncertainty about whether and when Local Conversations activities could resume persisted. This is the challenging operational context within which staff and residents reflected on the previous year and tried to think about the year ahead.

Although the case study interviews did not focus on the impact of Covid-19 on projects, this was understandably at the forefront of many interviewees’ minds.

### About this final report

This final evaluation report synthesises findings from four waves of qualitative case study data, six waves of the Local Conversations residents’ survey, and four waves of the Local Conversations staff survey. Quantitative analysis of all six waves of the residents’ survey produced descriptive statistics across key variables. Quantitative and qualitative data from the staff survey provided key insights about staff perspectives and assessments of Local Conversation projects. Qualitative data from each case study have been collated and analysed. This includes individual cases describing what is happening in context and examination across cases to identify crosscutting themes.

This report tests the programme’s theory of change by exploring whether, how, and to what extent the shorter-term and longer-term outcomes have been achieved. It also explores the limitations of the ToCin order to help refine it. The report begins with a discussion of findings about the process of the Local Conversation projects, framed around enablers and barriers to progress. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of the Local Conversation projects, framed around the outcomes identified in the programme’s ToC, as well as additional outcomes that are omitted from the ToC. Finally, the conclusion highlights key findings and explores the implications for the Local Conversations programme, the Trust, and beyond.

Process findings

Four years of data collection have provided in-depth information about how the Local Conversation projects operate and have developed at the local level.Using case study findings and data from staff and residents’ surveys where applicable, thischapter focuses on aspects of the process by which residents come together, engage in dialogue and decision-making, and take action through the Local Conversation projects. This includes a discussion of what works to enable progress in the Local Conversations, as well as areas that need improvement.

### Enabling factors

Enabling elements of the process by which the Local Conversations operate include the following:

* Strong Steering Groups.
* Dedicated project leads.
* Physical space for residents to gather.
* Community-led ethos.
* Investment in residents’ skills and leadership development.

### Strong Steering Groups

Most Local Conversation projects have established resident-led Steering Groups. These are the primary means through which residents regularly convene and engage in dialogue and decision-making.They provide strategic management and financial oversight. Previous reports indicated that Steering Group members are more likely to have been involved with their Local Conversation for two or more years, and almost all members feel more influential in developing their Local Conversation, compared to people volunteering or participating in activities.

#### Factors that contribute to Steering Group strength

Case study research suggests that a strong Steering Group is fundamental to the successful delivery of the Local Conversations. There is evidence that Steering Groups across areas are strengthening year on year. A range of characteristics contributes to the strength of the Steering Groups.

First, as identified in the 2019 interim report, it is important that Steering Groups reflect the diversity of the local population. Across Local Conversation areas, there is a reasonable amount of diversity within the Steering Groups in terms of employment status and previous voluntary experience. However, there is a less consistent spread of ages, and ethnic diversity is limited in some areas, with some Local Conversations having primarily white British Steering Group members. At the same time, ethnic diversity varies across areas. In some cases, the homogeneity of the Steering Groups, volunteers, and participants largely reflects the local population.

Some Local Conversations have used Steering Groups to help give a voice to previously marginalised segments of the population. In Lozells, for example, most residents who participate in the Local Conversation, including Steering Group members, are women. The lead organisation deliberately aimed to get more women involved early on so that they could have an active voice in the community, as local services and community-based activities primarily targeted men.

Second, the size of the Steering Group membership is important. The case study data suggests that the Local Conversations need a wide pool of Steering Group membership to draw on for each meeting or activity, both to ensure that meetings are quorate and to ensure input from a cross-section of residents. Across areas, there are challenges with finding enough residents who can commit regularly, because of their existing commitments and mental health issues.

However, staff are aiming to be as inclusive as possible, and so do not want to limit Steering Group involvement to those who can commit to regular attendance. In areas with fewer Steering Group members, there are active recruitment attempts, so that more residents can join the Steering Group but not necessarily commit to attending every meeting. Having a larger pool of residents to draw on can enable a wider distribution of responsibilities between Steering Group members.

Third, the ability to learn and evolve is an important strength of the Steering Groups. This attribute is clearly present in some areas, particularly in Stanwell. Here, the Steering Group faced initial challenges, including conflict between members. However, the Steering Group, residents, and lead organisation staff worked together to address this. Governance processes were improved to enable a more even distribution of decision-making power, increased equality, greater collaboration and smoother processes.

Finally, while Steering Groups are the backbone of many Local Conversation projects, there are other tools that enable residents to engage. As identified in the 2019 interim report, many of the Steering Groups form sub-groups to delegate responsibilities, oversee certain events or activities, and help distribute workload. Beyond this, some Local Conversations have also created neighbourhood or community forums for residents to focus on specific issues or to engage directly with local councillors. WhatsApp groups are a common tool used both to reach large numbers of residents and to seek residents’ opinions on key issues.

#### How Steering Groups enable successful delivery

There are four key ways in which Steering Groups enable the successful delivery of the Local Conversations. First, they act as a locus of formal and informal contact between residents and lead organisation staff, and therefore strengthen both those relationships and the residents’ understanding of the project.

Second, Steering Group members are often active members of the community and tend to be involved with a range of Local Conversation activities, as well as with other community initiatives. This helps with the effective dissemination of information about the Local Conversations, especially as Steering Group members can act as ambassadors for the project, therefore encouraging engagement from residents who are not yet involved.

Third, the case studies demonstrate that Steering Groups are helping to develop residents’ skills and confidence. Many Steering Groups have formal agendas and take minutes. Residents are encouraged to take on specific roles within the group. Residents report high (though not universal) levels of consensus within the groups and many feel comfortable using Steering Group meetings to test ideas and share views. This enables residents to be heard, build confidence, develop a more detailed understanding of others’ perspectives, and engage in discussion and deliberation.

Finally, Steering Groups are a good vehicle for residents to develop independence and a sense of ownership over the Local Conversation. The 2019 interim report noted that Steering Group members were increasingly becoming independent of lead organisations. Though there are varying degrees of independence across areas, this trend has continued, with evidence of Steering Groups making decisions more autonomously.

*They’ve become more responsible, more vocal. Them being more confident in what they can and cannot do, having training, them knowing the area… They’ve grown with the projects and with the Local Conversation. They’ve got more confidence. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

### Dedicated project leads

While all the Local Conversations have a strong resident-led approach to delivering the programme, it is also apparent that having paid, dedicated staff members to oversee their delivery is fundamental to the programme’s success. This is important for three reasons.

First, having paid staff is vital to ensure continued momentum, structure, and leadership. Though residents have demonstrated a clear ability to deliver and lead activities, in most areas the vast majority, if not all, residents are unpaid volunteers. While getting involved in the Local Conversation undoubtedly helps some residents gain confidence and skills, and there is a need for the programme to be resident-led to ensure a genuine sense of ownership, over-reliance on residents to deliver activitiesmay inadvertently put them at risk of exploitation, rather than empowerment. Staff across the areas are aware of this and do a lot of the heavy lifting around project delivery, plugging gaps that residents are unable to fill.

In many areas, for example, paid staff largely drive the partnership-working element, as they have both the skills and the networks to reach out to local organisations and stakeholders in a way that many residents do not. Likewise, staff often need to support residents when they take on new tasks and more responsibility. In some cases, this role reduces over time as residents build their confidence and skills.

Second, although there are many residents who want to be involved in the Local Conversations, they experience notable physical or mental health issues, which leave them occasionally unable to fulfil their responsibilities. It is important to have paid staff who are willing and able to pick up the slack when volunteer residents need the pressure taken off them. Linked to this is the need for paid staff to drive the Local Conversation in times of change. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, lead staff were fundamental to supporting the transition to online and socially distanced activities, as well as identifying ways to reach out to and support more vulnerable members of the community.

Finally, having paid staff is important for the development of trust in the Local Conversations, on both an individual and a community level. Lead staff develop important relationships with residents, who are then more likely to want to get involved. Effective delivery of the project also demonstrates its potential to the wider community, who are then more likely to trust its motives and see the benefits. It is worth noting, however, that while it is crucial to have dedicated lead staff in each area, who these staff members are and the specific qualities and skills they bring make a huge difference.

*The one thing I would say to the Trust is you can have all the greatest policies in the world…but if the delivery organisations aren't employing the right type of people it's a waste of time. (Caia Park, Resident, 2020)*

For example, in Govanhill, the lead organisation has made a point of ensuring that there are paid Roma team members and Roma volunteers. This approach is making a huge difference since it reflects the *for Roma, by Roma* ethos of the Local Conversation project, helps to break down barriers, and encourages wider resident engagement. This is not only because the paid project team speaks the same language as the residents, but also because they look ethnically more familiar. As a result, residents perceive the project to have more cultural relevance and are better able to build rapport and trust with the project team.

### Physical space for residents to gather

Having a dedicated physical space for residents to gather is a key enabler of progress in the Local Conversations. These spaces might include community hubs or centres, lead organisations’ offices, or hired venues. Evidence from the case studies suggests that having a defined and dedicated space for the Local Conversations’ activities is important.

Many residents in Local Conversation areas suffer from poor housing conditions, including homes that are often too small or overcrowded and therefore not suitable for hosting others. The high levels of poverty in these areas mean that many experience a dearth of community spaces, which staff and residents across case study areas cited as barriers. Austerity measures have compounded this issue, as increasing numbers of community centres, libraries, leisure centres, and local pubs have closed. Social isolation is also a huge issue across Local Conversation areas. Therefore, the Local Conversation having its own premises provides residents with much needed community space.

For example, initial engagement in Penparcau in 2014 found that the lack of a communal meeting space in the local area was a key concern among residents. Following this, Penparcau received funding from the Welsh government for the construction of a Community Hub building, which opened in December 2017 and hosts many Local Conversation and other community activities.

*There isn’t a lot of places to meet up in Penparcau. This is why the Hub is so important. It brings people together. I help out at least twice a week. I don’t know what I would do instead if the Hub wasn’t there. (Penparcau, Resident, 2020)*

Research across the case study areas suggests that there are four key ways in which having dedicated space facilitates the delivery of the Local Conversation projects. First, having a central space for residents to come together gives the project a focal point, which means there is somewhere to host meetings, share ideas, and deliver activities. A physical focal point also helps to create a sense of buzz and connection, which makes the project seem more tangible and accessible for residents.

It is important to note that the layout of the physical space is salient here. In Govanhill, for example, many activities take place in the lead organisation’s offices. Staff said that the fact that the offices are made up of four smaller rooms is a benefit, as this allows multiple activities to take place simultaneously. Staff feel that if there were just one large space, this would reduce the volume of activities and the energy around the Local Conversation.

Second, staff often say that having a shared space for the Local Conversation creates opportunities for informal support for residents from staff and peers. In some areas, including Merstham, Penparcau, and Caia Park, there are informal communal spaces or a café area where residents can drop in for a cup of tea and some conversation, even if they are not involved in a formal activity. The ability to get out of the house and have somewhere else to go, where there are other people to spend time with and where there is no pressure to spend money, has a notably positive impact on residents’ mental health and confidence. This directly contributes to the programme’s desired outcomes and helps residents feel more positively about their Local Conversation.

*People hang around, have conversations with each other. There’s a lot of peer support that goes on. People will hang back and have a quiet word with a member of staff about an issue that’s going on.(Edberts House, Staff, 2020)*

Finally, having a focused central space can support collaboration with other local organisations and services. This is especially the case when a Local Conversation is co-located with other local organisations or agencies. In Merstham, for example, where the central hub houses a range of organisations, staff identified value in knowing more about those organisations’ activities. They were able to keep a closer eye on what else was happening locally and avoid replicating activities and events. Likewise, co-location enables the various organisations to identify, monitor, and support more vulnerable residents between them.

While there are obvious benefits to shared indoorcommunal space, during the Covid-19 pandemic outdoor space has become increasingly important. In Stanwell, for example, the community allotment blossomed during the spring lockdown, as it allowed residents to gather while adhering to social distancing guidelines. In Caia Park, the Local Conversation invested in gazebos that allowedresidents to meet safely outside, meaning that some of its small group activities could continue when guidance allowed.

The importance of physical space for the smooth running of the Local Conversations is underlined by the experience of some areas where this vital amenity has not been consistently available. In Govanhill, the Local Conversation had use of a local church, which provided a solid centre of gravity for many of the project’s activities. When the church closed unexpectedly, this restricted what the Local Conversation was able to deliver, and it has since struggled to find a new venue.

Community-led ethos  
Interviews with staff and residents reveal that the Local Conversations programme is considered unique in its resident-led approach, which seeks to empower residents to build control and take collective action. Across case study areas, staff and residents have commented on how the Trust funding is both unusual and more effective because it gives the local community more autonomy.

*It was the power of the Local Conversation rules and the way that that's structured – it’s one of the very few projects I've come across which is structured with the community first.(Caia Park, Resident, 2020)*

The structures (e.g.Steering Groups, neighbourhood and community forums, sub-groups, including active WhatsApp groups) that projects use are typically resident-driven. Decision-making powers are explicitly placed in the hands of residents, as residents decide which priority areas projects should focus on and how to go about it. In most areas, residents are also in charge of making budgetary decisions and agreeing which local projects, activities, and initiatives should receive funding. This is regarded as hugely powerful, although residents have experienced challenges trying to get approval for grants that are larger and therefore require a more rigorous approval process.

While the community-led ethos is widely valued and considered a key enabler, there is also recognition that a truly resident-led programme does not establish itself rapidly and is not without its challenges. Staff across areas were keen to point out that building trust and confidence between the lead organisation and residents is a process that takes time. In this respect, the relatively long duration of the Local Conversations programme is beneficial.

### Investment in residents’ skills and leadership development

#### Leadership skills

Offering residents the chance to develop their skills can be a good way to recruit and retain more volunteers, as well as to upskill residents, improve their confidence and autonomy, and potentially improve their employment opportunities. Each Local Conversations area approaches this in a different way. The 2019 and 2020 staff surveys identified that lead organisations deliver a range of activities to support residents’ leadership development. These include leadership training programmes that build on and are tailored to people's existing skill sets, using Steering Groups as a steppingstone to greater responsibility, peer mentoring, residents shadowing staff, and individualised support to nurture potential leaders.

The 2019 staff survey indicated that the most common approach is for staff leads to provide tailored one-to-one support to emerging leaders to increase their potential. Meanwhile, the 2020 staff survey revealed that lead organisations actively encourage their staff to support the development of local projects, but not to actively lead them. This enables residents to assume greater responsibilities and shape the development of the project.

This finding is supported by the case study research, which suggests that staff develop residents’ leadership skills by gradually handing over increased levels of responsibility to them. This often takes residents outside their comfort zone, but the supportive environment within Steering Groups and lead organisations help to build their confidence. Staff are typically motivated to upskill residents by a desire for them to have a greater sense of ownership over the Local Conversation. In addition, staff are committed to the resident-led ethos of the Local Conversations and therefore try to ensure that projects are largely delivered by the community, for the community, with a limited need for outsourcing leadership roles.

#### Wider skills and routes to employment

While a focus on leadership skills is widespread, some Local Conversations are also investing in residents' broader skills with a view to supporting their path to employment. The Local Conversation in Govanhill, for example, has offered a strong employability service since 2018, consisting of tailored support with CVs and interviews, formal training opportunities (e.g. a Food Safety Hygiene certificate),and bespoke English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes. Figures from 2019 show that in its first year, the employability service supported 68 residents with CVs, job applications, and interviews, and placed over a dozen people in work.

The Local Conversation in Lozells used to run an externallyfunded Access to Employment project, which helped residents fill out forms, write CVs, prepare for interviews, and identify skills needed to return to employment. This continued until late 2018 when the funding, which came from the European Union, ceased. Despite this, the project still runs regular sessions to support residents with developing their CVs and interview skills.

*[On Tuesdays] we’ll help people with brushing up their CV.A lot of people don’t even have a CV. A lot of people have never been on an interview, never done a whole interview.So it’s really basic skills we’re trying to get people brushed up on.(Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

In Caia Park, while the Local Conversation does not directly deliver activities to support employability, the lead organisation runs a range of training courses. Residents who get involved with the Local Conversation often learn about these courses simply by being on the lead organisation’s premises and go on to develop their skills considerably.

Some areas go one step further than this and actively seek to employ local residents involved in the Local Conversation to give them valuable work experience and potential routes into other employment. The best example from the case studies is the Local Conversation in Govanhill, in which the paid majority of the project staff are Roma. Over the years, the project has recruited more Roma residents as community facilitators. The project is also transitioning some volunteers into paid sessional workers,hoping it will develop into part-time or full-time work.

However, experiencing gainful employment as paid Local Conversations staff is an outcome limited to just a handful of individuals, and not all Local Conversation areas focus on employment as a hard outcome. In many areas, there are profound challenges with the local labour market, including high levels of unemployment and precarious work. The absence of secure, well-paid and quality jobs within local economies means that even with support with writing CVs and doing interviews, as well as skills development, many local residents are unable to obtain or maintain quality work.

## Barriers

Barriers that the Local Conversation projects have faced include the following:

* Austerity and worsening economic conditions.
* Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying restrictions.
* Disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust.
* Residents’ complex personal circumstances.
* Difficulties in engaging residents and deepening participation.
* Staff morale and burnout.
* Interpersonal conflicts.
* Lack of clarity over financial and budgetary processes.

#### Austerity and worsening economic conditions

The UK’s worsening economic situation is deepening the levels of disadvantage in the Local Conversation areas. The updated *Marmot Review – 10 Years On*, published in February 2020, found that over the past decade austerity has led to an entrenchment of social, economic, and regional inequalities.[[2]](#footnote-2) These increasing inequalities, alongside cuts to government spending and real cuts to people’s incomes, have led to health deteriorations and have significantly contributed to the decline in life expectancy, particularly for those living in areas of high deprivation.

These inequalities have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. This makes delivery of the Local Conversations programme considerably more difficult since staff in the lead organisations have spent significant amounts of time and energy supporting residents with their urgent needs. As a result, delivering beyond that can be a challenge. Moreover, in some cases, the opportunities offered by the Local Conversation do not even begin to address residents’ fundamental needs.

The Community Linking social prescribing programme in Edberts House, for example, arose from the inadequacy of local services to meet residents’ complex needs, especially around mental health. Despite the programme’s success and expansion in the local area, the absence of quality local services and stable third sector organisations remain a barrier.

*[Government] sees social prescribing as taking Mabel to her art class on a Wednesday afternoon because she’s lonely. Don’t get me wrong, there is an absolute place and time for that, and Mabel will absolutely benefit from accessing that. But the reality is in an area of high deprivation like Gateshead and its pockets, [cases like this] are few and far between. Because, you know, the referrals we get are so complex. They’re like, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, the kids are going into care. You know, really significant issues. (Edberts House, Staff, 2020)*

Residents need more fundamental support, such as access to benefits, help working with social services, reliable housing advice, and access to other vital local services. Some areas are delivering services that reflect this need. In Govanhill, the lead organisation has set up a much-needed welfare advice service. Though not directly funded by the Local Conversation, it has been fundamental to helping reach Roma residents who would otherwise not have access to the welfare support they need.

There is evidence that worsening economic conditions are undermining the potential sustainability of the Local Conversations. Staff in some areas feel that without an economic boost and an increase in employment opportunities, residents who have been empowered by the project will not have the opportunity to translate that empowerment into tangible outcomes, such as gainful employment and a decent income to live on.

#### Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying restrictions

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant restrictions have presented significant challenges to all Local Conversation projects. Some Local Conversations were starting to gain momentum at the point when the crisis took hold and restrictions were introduced. The need to cancel or suspend activities has been hugely disappointing for residents who have put a considerable amount of work into projects, only to see them indefinitely postponed. In Caia Park, for example, a group of residents had overcome many challenges to plan a large community music event, and then had to shelve all their hard work and planning.

Residents have suffered heavily during the pandemic. In addition to the huge negative economic and health impacts, it is evident that the very essence of the Local Conversations approach, which is to enable people to engage with others and act together to take control of their lives, has been severely undermined by continuing restrictions on personal mobility and social gatherings. Residents and staff across areas have had to redirect their energies towards supporting vulnerable residents in crisis, meaning that core project activities had to take a back seat. Where activities have been able to continue in some form, maintaining participation levels has been difficult because some groups of residents have needed to shield themselves, or found it hard to engage with technology.

Staff at lead organisations have faced practical challenges, such as needing to move activities online or outside, but have also been confronted with a range of other pressures and barriers. With limited face-to-face contact and a heavy reliance on virtual means of communication, staff have not been able to assess residents’ needs as easily since they cannot read physical, emotional, or behavioural cues. This is particularly challenging in more marginalised communities and among residents who struggle to voice their needs for whatever reason. This, coupled with the higher volume of residents needing support, means that staff workload has increased and intensified, becoming much more emotionally demanding.

#### Disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust

There are several reasons why residents might experience disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust of the Local Conversations. Evidence from across case studies suggests that some residents previously had bad experiences of external interventions or funded programmes, which were dropped into the community for a short time and then removed with seemingly little positive change as a result. Where this has happened repeatedly, it can generate apathy and reluctance to get involved.

Another barrier is residents’ mistrust in programme staff and other professionals working in the local area. Staff feel that this deters residents from getting involved or believing they have the potential to influence change. Similarly, many staff and service providers are not used to working with residents as collaborators in designing and delivering projects, like the Local Conversations. Consequently, there is often a reticence to relinquish control of decision-making to the local community. Building trust takes time and sustained hard work. While the relatively long duration of the Local Conversations supports the development of more trusting relationships, this is a slow process.

*The residents don’t trust the professionals and some professionals think the residents are out for what they can get […] It takes time for residents to build up relationships with local councillors and other local agencies. We have started that now – some of our residents go to the local neighbourhood partnership which is a multi-agency group. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

In some areas, there is also tangible apathy and disillusionment driven by underinvestment in the area and a history of poor local reputation. Residents recognise the stigma attached to their post codes, which leaves them feeling disempowered and unconvinced that any investment will improve their lives. Negative experiences of engaging with local services and the local authority can also leave residents feeling sceptical about the potential of the Local Conversations to elicit any meaningful change when the structures that sit around it remain unyielding.

*I’ve had a few barriers with the Council. They are the only ones who haven’t helped us. We are still in battle with them about the park. We have been campaigning about it since January…I remember the town clerk writing us an email about how disappointed she was because of a Facebook post about how we need a better park, basically the ethos of the Council is ‘Penparcau: just put up and shut up.(Penparcau, Resident, 2020)*

#### Residents’ complex personal circumstances

The high levels of disadvantage within the Local Conversation areas mean that many residents experience instability and complex problems that hinder their ability to engage. Often lead organisation staff find that they need to put considerable effort into supporting residents with these challenges before they are in a position to even consider getting involved with Local Conversations activities.

Responses to the staff survey highlighted the impact that residents’ complex lives can have on core aspects of projects, such as the Steering Group. If Steering Group members face continuous personal and family challenges or ill health, this reduces their ability to stay involved. Their absences can affect the morale of the remaining members.

*The ongoing challenge for us is the complexity of the lives of our community members. We have seen how strong, active and strategic members of the group can quickly become diminished by personal and family challenges. This has a knock on effect on other members and local people – sometimes maintaining a sense of optimism and hope is sadly very difficult. (Staff Survey Respondent, 2020)*

Poor mental health is another common challenge, often preventing residents from being able to engage consistently with groups or activities. Many Local Conversation projects have acknowledged the prevalence of social isolation and mental health issues in their communities and are delivering activities that are designed to address them. However, they are unable to provide all the support that residents need.

**Difficulties in engaging residents and deepening participation**

As the programme progresses, lead organisations are having more success at increasing the breadth and depth of engagement from residents. However, widespread, meaningful participation remains a notable challenge across the areas, with Local Conversations struggling either to engage sufficient numbers of the local population or to deepen the level of residents’ engagement.

There are various reasons for this. Some areas have highly transient populations, which means that residents are less invested in the local area, and so are less willing to make commitments. Many areas also have minority populations who are less integrated into the community and so are harder to reach. Even in areas with a stronger sense of community, the high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage means that residents are facing a plethora of challenges, which can make it difficult to find the time and energy to get involved in their Local Conversation.

*They don’t want to get involved because it requires effort, commitment, and I think a lot of people aren’t prepared to commit to go every week to the centre. People have their own lives to lead. They’re quite busy, and they’re quite happy for other people to do it. (Claremont Ten, Resident, 2020)*

In some areas, the challenge is a cultural one. In Govanhill, for example, the Local Conversation has struggled to encourage sustained engagement from the Roma community, as volunteering is not culturally normative among Roma people. To get around this, the lead organisation has tried to raise funds to pay for residents’ input, even if just a few hours a week.

In other areas, the problem comes down to confidence. Residents without previous involvement in community activities or who are in long-term unemployment can lack the confidence to get involved or take on any level of responsibility, instead preferring to defer to staff to lead activities. In order for confidence and skills to develop, residents need to have trust in the process, in the lead organisation, and in themselves. They also need to have multiple opportunities to try out activities and leadership roles.

#### Staff morale and burnout

The risk of staff burnout and low morale was flagged in the previous two reports and continues to be an issue. The high levels of disadvantage and complex needs among residents means that staff time and energy is often focused on delivering one-to-one support for residents who are experiencing crisis. As socioeconomic conditions worsen due to Covid-19 and ongoing restrictions, the pressures on residents, and therefore on staff, will only intensify. As a result, staff will have less time and energy to support the core elements of the Local Conversation. Staff capacity in Lozells suffered during the summer due to staff shielding and self-isolating, which added to the strain.

*We’re worried about the restrictions that are going to kick in...and how we deal with it because we’ve had to manage our staff shielding and people falling ill and then [for] a period in August, we had about three members of staff off because they had family members that were positive, so they had to stay away. So that becomes a big issue as well, so you lose a bit of skills and expertise. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

The effect on staff mental health can be profound. Staff are dealing with emotionally taxing issues on a daily basis. The recent shift to increased working from home has exacerbated the challenge since staff no longer benefit from valuable daily support from their colleagues when managing challenging resident cases. Consequently, some lead organisations are considering implementing formal support systems for community project staff.

#### Interpersonal conflicts

Difficult interpersonal dynamics among residents and Steering Group members remain a challenge in some Local Conversation areas. Some of these issues stem from residents’ limited experience of community work or operating within democratic group structures. In Stanwell, for example, there were challenges with residents understanding where decision-making powers lay and how the Steering Group operated. Some residents carried out activities on behalf of the Local Conversation on their own without fully understanding democratic processes and collective action. This created conflict, which required project staff intervention, and led to three Steering Group members leaving the group.

Since then, the Steering Group has actively improved its governance processes to ensure more democratic operation. To help mitigate the risk of future conflicts, the Steering Group members took part in a workshop to learn how to run a Steering Group effectively, how to work with each other, and how to write and adhere to a constitution. To improve governance processes, the Steering Group developed a Code of Conduct/Terms of Reference, created a separate grants panel, and appointed two chairs instead of just one. The Steering Group now records votes and takes meeting minutes. As a result, Steering Group members and residents feel that the Steering Group follows a smoother and more structured process and acts more collaboratively and transparently.

*People learnt from the conflict from support provided. People were growing up. People appreciated that there’s space out there for everyone. (Stanwell, Resident, 2020)*

In other areas, there have been challenges when groups or forums become overly dependent on a small number of leading individuals. When those individuals are unavailable, for whatever reason, activities stall. This can be a particular problem if individuals who assume leadership roles centralise responsibility in themselves or micromanage others. Strong personalities can be divisive and create tension, which might require staff to help diffuse. However, a respondent to the 2020 staff survey noted that *“*over the course of the Local Conversation, the need for this is decreasing.”

#### Lack of clarity over financial and budgetary processes

Evidence from case studies shows that the community budgeting aspect of the Local Conversations programme shifts power to residents and helps to nurture a sense of collective control. At the same time, residents and staff find the bureaucracy confusing, cumbersome, and frustrating at times. Projects have struggled to strike a balance between putting in place processes to ensure financial oversight while also enabling residents to have autonomy over how they choose to use the funding.

For example, in Govanhill, the Community Forum – the main mechanism through which residents participate in and control the project – has felt that the financial control and approval processes set up by the Trust undermine residents’ sense of collective control. During Community Forum meetings, for instance, when residents propose ideas about certain activities, the lead organisation sometimes responds by saying that they need to check with the Trust first. This makes residents feel like they are not in control, as they need permission or approval from the Trust before proceeding with certain activities.

Similarly, residents in Caia Park feel they lack control in decision-making processes where larger sums of money – exceeding £500 – are involved. On one occasion, residents agreed to fund a large community music event for summer 2020 (which did not happen due to Covid-19) but received pushback from the Caia Park Partnership for reasons that were unclear. While some residents recognised that requests to use larger sums of money require a more rigorous signoff process, others experienced the lack of autonomy as frustrating and undermining.

From the perspective of staff, the Caia Park Partnership had previously never administered such a large grant for the Local Conversation project before, which meant that staff and residents alike were unfamiliar with the process. Senior managers at the Partnership initially refused the residents’ funding request because it was too informal but approved it once residents submitted a formal request. Over time, residents and staff increasingly came to understand that there is a learning curve on both sides. Residents need time to understand and appreciate the need for check-and-balance processes; staff need time to understand how to make oversight processes as straightforward as possible.

# Impact findings

This chapter discusses the impacts of the Local Conversation projects, framed around the Theory of Change (ToC) outcomes and additional outcomes that are not included in the ToC.

### Shorter-term outcomes

The 2019 interim report discussed how residents involved in the Local Conversations were increasingly achieving a number of shorter-term outcomes identified in the ToC, especially compared to 2018. The hope was that these outcomes would start to accumulate and lead to several longer-term outcomes. However, Covid-19 has significantly affected all projects and its ongoing impacts will likely pose barriers to achieving the longer-term outcomes. Still, there is strong evidence from the 2020 case study fieldwork, staff survey, and residents’ survey that the programme is achieving the majority of the shorter-term outcomes.

### Social connectedness

Since the inception of the Local Conversations, case study areas have organised a wide range of events and activities to provide residents with opportunities to come together regularly. These events and activities are popular, well attended, and the main mechanism through which residents meet other people, make new friends, and increase their social connectedness.

During the initial two years of the programme, regular activities (e.g. knitting groups and fitness classes), cultural events (e.g. Carnival, Halloween, and St Nicholas parties), as well as social actions aimed at making tangible changes to the neighbourhood (e.g. cleaning streets and planting community gardens) were prevalent across Local Conversation areas. In 2019, these activities, events, and actions largely continued and there were notably more actions aimed at influencing local decision-makers to make desired changes in the area, which are discussed under the section on*Influence*.

Table 1 indicates the types of actions, events, and activities across the five main case study areas (grouped by theme) that have developed over the past four years to bring residents together and increase their social connectedness. Examples of actions and activities under each theme are as follows:

* Environment – litter picking, community gardens or allotments, planting, and clean-up days.
* Employability/skills development – CV support, interview skills, English language classes, and IT training.
* Cohort-specific provision – youth clubs, forums, and groups; activities for women and girls; luncheons and social clubs for elderly residents; a men's club specifically for isolated older men; and a lunch club for adults with complex needs.
* Social and cultural events – religious and cultural festivals, knitting groups, fitness classes, group cooking, team sports, and crafts clubs.

*Table 1: Indicative list of actions, events and activities across case study areas*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Govanhill** | **Claremont Ten** | **Lozells** | **Merstham** | **Caia Park** |
| **Environment** | ✓ | ✓ | ✓✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| **Employability / skills development** | ✓ | ✓ | ✓✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| **Cohort-specific provision (e.g. elderly or youth provision)** | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| **Social and cultural events / activities** | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓✓ |

The Local Conversations have reached out to many residents through these activities and events, which have enabled a greater sense of social connectedness.

*That sense of connection, of somebody being there, your person, who understood your stuff and would walk you through it, is powerful for people. (Edberts House, Staff, 2020)*

Residents in Claremont Ten described how engagement in social activities meant that they were not only getting more involved in local events and feeling part of a community, but also working together as a team. In Merstham, residents reported feeling a greater sense of social connectedness and belonging through volunteering.

*I became known in the community and it makes me feel part of something and feel welcome. It breaks down the isolation barriers, I think. (Merstham, Resident, 2020)*

Targeted outreach to specific demographics in some areas has been an effective way to diversify participation in the Local Conversations. For instance, the Local Conversation in Caia Park developed a new youth LGBT+ group and a parents’ group. The project in Lozells has continued engaging with more diverse residents, mainly newly arrived migrants from Yemen, Eritrea, and Somalia, who have jointly organised new activities, such as cooking programmes. The Men’s Group in Govanhill has grown so much that it has now split into two groups according to age. The project in Penparcau created the JOY (just older youth) club to engage with the older people’s population and address social isolation. In addition, the Local Conversations provide space for residents to socialise, which is powerful, given the lack of spaces for people to gather.

*JOY club literally became the go-to event every Tuesday and really helped create much more community engagement in Penparcau for the elderly residents and tackle loneliness. (Penparcau, Staff, 2020)*

The community ties that the Local Conversations have put in place and strengthened over time have been a lifeline for residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had a detrimental impact across all areas. The pandemic derailed many nascent attempts that emerged in 2019 to influence those in power locally, and lockdown restrictions meant that many activities and events ground to a halt. In spite of this, many Local Conversations remained busy, with lead organisations launching various kinds of emergency relief efforts to support local people. Projects delivered food packages and children’s activity packs to vulnerable families, for example. They also translated public health messages and established telephone buddy systems to stay connected with vulnerable residents.

During the first national lockdown in spring 2020, many Local Conversations migrated some activities and events online, communicating via Facebook or WhatsApp and meeting virtually on Zoom, with varying degrees of success. For instance, the employability service in Govanhill has been running remotely since spring 2020, offering residents support with CVs and job applications over the phone. Meanwhile, the strong and engaged Youth Forum in Penparcau moved its weekly meetings to Zoom, but attendance has since diminished. Staff believe this is likely because young people have been attending school virtually and are less willing to spend more time on video calls. Despite reduced attendance, the Youth Forum Facebook group remains active.

In the summer, when the government eased lockdown restrictions, some projects resumed face-to-face activities and events in a socially distanced manner, whereas other activities and events continued remotely. Following the lifting of lockdown measures, the Local Conversation in Lozells organised a trip to the Peak District for women, particularly those who usually attended Zumba classes and English lessons. In Caia Park, the Local Conversation invested in gazebos to enable some activities to take place outside in all weather conditions. These activities include mindfulness sessions and afternoon tea, both targeted at older people to help reduce social isolation.

It is unclear what the long-term impacts of Covid-19 restrictions and further lockdowns will be on social connectedness in Local Conversation areas. The premise of the Local Conversations programme is to empower residents by bringing them together to talk about what matters to them and take collective action. When this was not possible because of pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns, many projects lost momentum and felt that they were losing progress they had made over the past few years. Technology was instrumental in allowing projects to move activities and events online and residents to maintain a degree of social connectedness with each other. In some cases, participation in online activities has led to increased intergenerational contacts and residents establishing new connections with neighbours.

At the same time, residents who lack the technology skills or internet access required to participate in online activities are at risk of digital exclusion. Furthermore, it may be harder to deepen residents’ participation and encourage them to assume greater responsibilities in projects through online engagement only, without any face-to-face encouragement. Finally, while apps such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook allow residents to keep in touch with each other, they do not compensate for the absence of human contact.

### Knowledge, understanding, and skills

Overall, there is strong evidence that residents have improved their knowledge, understanding, and skills across different domains through participation in the Local Conversations:

* Skills relating to hobbies and leisure activities.
* Leadership and community development skills.
* Employability skills and formal education.

The level of improvement in skills and knowledge vary and are dependent on levels of engagement. Findings from the case studies and residents’ survey suggest that those who assume greater responsibility in projects and/or have been involved for a longer period of time (e.g.Steering Group members and project leads) experience a greater change in outcomes relating to knowledge and skills.

In line with previous years, the majority of residents’ survey respondents in 2020 (62%) either agree or strongly agree that their Local Conversation has helped them develop and learn new skills. Steering group members were most likely to agree or strongly agree that the programme helped them learn and develop new skills (73%), followed by volunteers (65%) and participants[[3]](#footnote-3) (62%). Compared to the first two years of the programme, the 2020 residents’ survey reveals an increase in the proportion of volunteers and participants agreeing or strongly agreeing the Local Conversations have helped them learn and develop new skills.

#### Skills relating to hobbies and leisure activities

Residents involved in several activities and projects have gained skills in a range of areas, such as gardening, arts and crafts, and sports. One example of improving skills through activities is the Govanhill Music Group, which started in 2019 and is a weekly meet-up for residents to practise playing instruments. Covid-19 restrictions stopped the weekly meetings, but individuals continued practising on their own and participants were in discussions about how to resume practising as a group online.

Other areas, such as Claremont Ten, Stanwell, and Penparcau, have enabled residents to learn about gardening and growing vegetables. The Claremont Growers group was established to teach residents about hydroponics, a method of growing plants without soil, relying on water to deliver nutrients to plant roots. Penparcau has a food-growing project, which has allowed residents to learn about gardening, seasonal fruit and vegetables, and healthy eating, and will soon expand to schools.

Meanwhile, the Local Conversation in Caia Park established a weekly Craft ‘n’ Chat group for residents to develop their craft skills. Many residents started with minimal craft skills, but some are now teaching and sharing these skills with others. One resident, for example, created a specific craft space in their home for their new arts and crafts hobby.

#### Leadership and community development skills

Those more heavily involved with the Local Conversations (e.g. through the Steering Group or leading activities) have continued to improve their knowledge and skills, specifically in leadership and community advocacy. Setting up and being part of a Steering Group was quite a challenge for some and remains a learning process for many. The Steering Groups in Stanwell and Claremont Ten received training. In Stanwell, this included two workshops, which improved how the Steering Group operates and how individuals work with each other. In Claremont Ten, the Steering Group took two courses in community development training, which developed their skills and abilities to continue to help and advocate for their local area. The aim is to make this training available for other residents.

While some residents have received direct training, many residents have also gained leadership skills and confidence through delivering activities. The strong resident-led culture in Caia Park means that residents are continually developing new skills in order to be able to organise and run certain activities. Staff actively encourage residents to take on leadership roles, which helps them develop knowledge and skills in a range of areas, from local government processes to event management to health and safety. Residents in Govanhill have learnt how to run a small grant scheme, where they interviewed applicants and made joint decisions about which applications would create most benefit for the youth in the community.

#### Employability skills and formal education

Upskilling residents to improve their employment prospects and personal capacity, largely through help with CV writing and provision of training or accreditations, is most evident in Govanhill and Lozells. Many Roma residents in Govanhill lack English skills and are employed in low-paid, precarious work. The Local Conversation offers an employability service and one-to-one support for Roma residents. This has enabled residents to improve their English skills, gain confidence, feel in greater control of their own lives and assist others around them (e.g. with reading a contract or completing an application form).

*I’m happy to call, meet with people in English. I would have avoided it or been really nervous before. (Govanhill, Resident, 2020)*

*I had never used Word/PowerPoint/Excel before and now I use them frequently. (Govanhill, Resident, 2020)*

The Govanhill project also supports residents with educational pursuits. For instance, the project’s first volunteer Roma resident has now been one of the project leads for over a year, is completing his Higher National Diploma in Community Development, and will soon start his full degree.

Similarly, the Lozells project has supported adults in finding work opportunities by helping them write their CVs and improve their interview skills. Women in Lozells have reported increased English skills, confidence, and feelings of employability because of involvement in Local Conversation activities. The project has also provided IT training to older residents and therefore improved their digital access and usage, which has enabled more residents to engage online during the Covid-19 pandemic. More recently, the project has partnered with Warwick University to conduct research (forthcoming) on local health inequalities. This will entail training young people to help gather primary evidence in the local area and conduct research.

#### Other

Residents also learn from each other simply by being in the same space and interacting with others. This includes learning more about other people’s cultural and/or religious backgrounds and traditions. For example, the range of cultural events and festivals the Local Conversation in Stanwell has enabled residents to learn about different cultures and religions.

*We celebrate all of religious festivals – a lot of families with different backgrounds together […] They’ve given us the chance to share our cultures. We sent out Diwali packs. (Stanwell, Resident, 2020)*

This interlinks with social connectedness, as cultural activities and events enable people to take part in something as a group, while also gaining knowledge and exposure to other traditions and cultures. In Lozells, group cooking activities in which people cook food from their countries of origin for each other has been a key way to integrate new migrants in the community and engage them in the Local Conversation.

*They [decide] to do the cooking and together they decide, “this week we will cook Somali cuisine”, “this week Yemeni cuisine”, “this week Bangladeshi”, ”this week Pakistani”. So because of that, it gets a nice balance of people from all different backgrounds. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

### Confidence and aspiration

The case studies and the 2020 residents’ survey provide evidence that the Local Conversation projects are actively helping to improve residents’ confidence. Those participating in the Local Conversations gained confidence in leading activities, talking to others, being part of the Steering Group, and/or taking on additional roles and responsibilities. Almost two-thirds of the 2020 residents’ survey respondents (65%) either agree or strongly agree that their Local Conversation has made them feel more confident. In the 2017/2018 survey waves, 18% of volunteers reported that the project had helped increase their confidence; this almost doubled to 33% in 2019/2020.

*I'm really confident now. I never wanted to talk to people, now I do: I'll talk to anyone about anything! (Claremont Ten, Resident, 2020)*

As is the case for increased knowledge, understanding, and skills, residents who assume more responsibilities, or have been involved in the Local Conversations for longer, experience higher levels of confidence. Steering group members were most likely to agree or strongly agree that the programme has made them feel more confident (78%), followed by volunteers (68%), and participants (66%). Some Steering Group members also received support from Local Conversations staff to undertake formal training, which enabled them to learn new skills and therefore become more confident in their decision-making skills and their ability to act more independently of lead organisations.

Participation in the Local Conversations has improved residents’ confidence in various ways. For example, residents in Merstham gained confidence in exploring their local area due to participating in activities in parks and greenspaces. One resident explained that they had been too nervous to venture beyond the paths on the lakeshore before they joined guided walks. Similarly, the Local Conversation in Lozells organised a trip to the Peak District following the lifting of lockdown in the summer, which helped residents gain more confidence by expanding their sense of place.

*We get a lot of people that have been here for 40 years and have never been to the city centre, you know? So hence we used to do a lot of trips here. They used to go to [the] Peak District. They’ll go to Wales to get a bit of that experience of what the outdoors is like. So, we see it a lot, in terms of personal growth where they’re a bit more confident, they feel a bit better. They’ve not felt like they’re in the four walls of their house… (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

Overall, women who participate in the Local Conversation in Lozells have become more confident and autonomous.

*Confidence has been massive, being able to come out, being able to speak up, being able to take lead roles, which they’ve previously never ever done. We’ve mapped the journeys of when people used to come in first and how shy and timid and fragile they used to be to where they are now. And they want to do things. This also means they can go back and be confident with their own family and children when they go out. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

Evidence from the case studies suggests that social connectedness and positive relationships with others play an important role in improving residents’ confidence. In Caia Park, for example, staff and residents spoke about how they had seen young people’s confidence grow when they took part in Youth Forum activities and experienced new situations with other young people they had not met before. In Penparcau, the Steering Group has seen more confident residents supporting quieter one to express their own opinions and have a say in what happens.

Across case study areas, the increase in residents’ confidence has helped them to have more ambitious aspirations for their local area and vocalise them. This is a crucial foundation for residents to try to influence local decision-makers and organisations. For instance, in Penparcau, the area’s longstanding negative reputation and the Council’s lack of responsiveness to the community have made residents feel that the Council does not believe Penparcau is worthy of investment and that change is not possible. However, through the Local Conversation, residents have come together and gained the confidence and courage to approach the Council to demand greater investment in Penparcau.

*This is spurring the residents on to become more active in our campaigns and speaking out at the injustice they feel is being served in Penparcau. (Penparcau, Staff, 2020)*

A staff member at the lead organisation in Claremont Ten echoed this sentiment:

*Some from the Steering Group are going to the Council in their own right for meetings, and they’re finding that they can try and influence the Council. They have the confidence and knowledge to go and stand and talk to people and influence change. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

In Govanhill, the community forum has developed a greater sense of aspiration and is increasingly demanding more change, like cleaning up the local area and getting youth off the street with sports. Residents in Govanhill also have a long-term ambition to establish a Roma-led organisation that delivers the support and services that the Local Conversation currently delivers. Though this a future aspiration, Roma staff and volunteers have the vision and confidence to work towards it and try to make it happen.

### Influence

Compared to the first two years of the Local Conversations programme, there were promising developments in 2019 demonstrating that across case study areas, the Local Conversations were increasingly attempting to influence those in positions of power locally. According to respondents to the 2019 staff survey, 14 out of 16 Local Conversation areas attempted to influence those with power locally, such as local councillors, Council officers, local MPs, and decision-makers in the NHS and housing associations. In the 2020 staff survey, there were only four responses to the question about whether the Local Conversation had attempted to influence powerful local people and organisations, but all four responses were affirmative.

One example of a nascent attempt to influence is the housing study that the lead organisation in Govanhill commissioned in 2019, following widespread concerns expressed by Roma residents about poor housing conditions and discrimination. The purpose of the study was to develop an evidence base about the quality and affordability of housing in the local area, especially for the Roma population, to share with policymakers and the local housing association in order to improve local housing conditions.

Follow-up in 2020 demonstrates that although the study has not yet led to any tangible improvements in local housing conditions, two positive impactsarethe increasing visibility of the Roma population and the valuable relationships they have built. Roma residents now regularly participate in the Govanhill Regeneration Group, which is the City Council’s planning group, to voice their concerns about local housing issues. For example, the Roma attendees identified the absence of Roma as a category in the housing association’s data collection methods as a problem, especially given the large Roma population in the area. The housing association then agreed to change their data collection methods to capture Roma residents and better understand their living situations.

Meanwhile, the Local Conversation in Merstham has been working towards increasing residents’ engagement with local decision-makers during the Covid-19 lockdown by launching virtual Councillors’ Q&A sessions. The Q&A sessions aim to enable greater involvement by residents in shaping the community and to increase the accountability of local elected representatives to residents. The Community Engagement Officer collects questions from residents in advance, and then poses them to local councillors and/or to the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner during the sessions. There is also an active Facebook group for residents to pose questions to councillors outside the Q&A sessions and councillors can respond.

Although it is too soon to ascertain whether the Q&A sessions are increasing residents’ influence over councillors and other decision-makers, it illustrates residents’ increased engagement with local decision-makers. This is particularly notable, given the widespread disillusionment, apathy, and mistrust of authorities that many Local Conversations residents typically feel. According to staff, the more residents engage with local councillors, the more councillors feel accountable to residents. This will ultimately increase residents’ capacity for influencing.

Throughout the evaluation, the Local Conversation in Lozells has offered one of the strongest examples of successful attempts to influence those in positions of power locally. This is largely due to a combination of a strong and active neighbourhood forum, as well as close connections with the local councillor, and an influential cabinet member in the city authority who has enabled residents to gain access to other local decision-makers. The project’s established and positive relationship with the local councillor enabled residents to receive adequate support with business rates grants during the pandemic.

*But we were very fortunate. We never had the relationship at the time with someone in the Council department in the business rates team who dealt with that, but through our local councillor we managed to get the direct contact for the head of that department who worked with us really closely and we were getting some really good results on that. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

In addition to increased engagement with local decision-makers, evidence from case studies suggests that another way that projects have been building residents’ capacity for influence is through developing good relationships with other local organisations. For instance, the Local Conversation in Caia Park has cultivated a strong partnership with the local Community Council, which has resulted in joint activities such as community clean-up weeks and Youth Forum sessions. There are plans to collaborate on finding a much-needed mental health worker to support residents.

Similarly, the Local Conversation in Claremont Ten has further entrenched the lead organisation, the First Step Centre, in the local ecosystem of services and third sector organisations by making it a more desirable partner in the area. The Council took notice of the success of Raid the Larder, a food bank set up by the Claremont Ten project in 2019 that operates out of the First Step Centre and approached the Centre to serve as a hub for some of its Covid-19 outreach. This demonstrates a synergistic relationship between the Centre and the Local Conversation, as affiliation with the Centre lends the project credibility and the project’s increasing visibility reaffirms the Centre’s credibility. Funding from the Trust also enhances the Centre’s reputation.

*It shows that we have good standing, to say that you have funding from people like [the] People’s Health Trust […] it goes a long way. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

Overall, despite residents’ increasing attempts to influence local decision-makers since 2019, there are few examples of tangible changes as a result, largely because change takes time, and so it will be a while before the effects of residents’ efforts to influence materialise.

*It’s never gonna be a quick fix in Claremont. We’ve got many years of people feeling quite isolated and unempowered… [Influencing is] definitely achievable, but this isn’t a 3-year project, it isn’t a 5-year project. This is about changing the culture within an area over the next 10, 15, 20 years.(Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the precursors to influence, such as residents’ increased engagement with local decision-makers and stronger partnerships with other local stakeholders, have been evident across case study areas. This has enabled incremental gains across various projects, which could eventually contribute to the structural changes necessary to improve residents’ health, wellbeing, and livelihoods.

### Money and resources

There are two aspects of the money and resources outcome:

* Money and resources for lead organisations, Local Conversation projects, and/or other local groups.
* Money and resources for individual residents.

Staff survey findings provide evidence of the former; staff survey and case study findings inform the discussion of the latter.

#### Money and resources for lead organisations, projects, and/or local groups

Findings from the staff survey across all four years of the evaluation show that the Local Conversation projects have enabled lead organisations to obtain additional funding for their organisations and other local groups. The 2019 staff survey indicates that 9 out of 14 lead organisations successfully secured additional funding because of work related to the Local Conversation project. Though there were far fewer responses to the 2020 staff survey, two out of three respondents that answered questions about additional funding confirmed that work related to the Local Conversation had helped their organisation secure additional funding.

The resources of the lead organisation (e.g. physical space and staff capacity) as well as the community-led approach of the Local Conversations appear to be the key reasons that Local Conversations has helped lead organisations to obtain more funding. Across areas, lead organisations play a pivotal role in providing much-needed physical space for local people and community groups to gather, including the Local Conversation projects. This allows for the sharing and spreading of ideas, and the incubation of other projects, as well as access to additional resources and networks.

Staff capacity of the lead organisations has also been an important resource for other groups applying for grants. Respondents to the 2018 staff survey said that staff provided administrative and technical support for local groups in their early stages, such as helping to set up a bank account. Lead organisation staff have also said that their data collection and annual reporting to the Trust helps with other funding bids.

*When we leverage extra funding, it is on the back of evidence from the PHT work. (Govanhill, Staff, 2020)*

Finally, the community-led approach of the Local Conversations and the ethos of working *with* residents seems to be a model that works and helps attract additional funding. According to a respondent to the 2020 staff survey, this community-led model has enabled one lead organisation’s staff to build a closer relationship with residents, which drew attention and approval from potential funders. The organisation subsequently received £838,000 from the National Lottery Community Fund to support community development and systems change, as well as £2,600 to help deliver the Council’s holiday hunger scheme in the area.

Likewise, the Local Conversation in Caia Park received a grant from Tidy Wales to develop a garden wildlife sanctuary, which residents will design and create with Tidy Wales. Staff attributed this to the Local Conversation’s resident-led approach and the strong partnerships the project has developed with external organisations.

In addition to money, Local Conversation projects have succeeded in acquiring other important resources, such as space for meetings, activities, and events. For example, in 2020, the Local Conversation in Penparcau secured donations from supermarkets in the form of plants and seeds to expand its community food-growing project. Residents also expanded their community food-growing project by engaging with the local football club; in exchange for cleaning up the pitch, the football club has agreed to donate land for residents to use to grow more vegetables.

Similarly, in 2019, the Local Conversation in Stanwell acquired two allotment plots (250m2 total), which residents further developed and utilised during the spring 2020 lockdown. Meanwhile, the Local Conversation in Lozells managed to obtain a minibus for residents, which helps the community save transport costs in the long term.

#### Money and resources for individual residents

Several Local Conversation projects have tried to help individuals secure more income, through work or benefits. For example, jobs and money are a priority area for the Lozells Local Conversation, given the dearth of quality, secure, well-paid work in the area. Since the Access to Employment project ended in 2018, residents who participated have been helping other residents fill out applications for Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, and other benefits. During the Covid-19 pandemic, residents volunteered in droves to help the lead organisation Aspire and Succeed manage increased demand for welfare advice and support navigating the furlough scheme. Aspire and Succeed drew on the expertise of local accountants and lawyers to support residents who were furloughed but prevented from accessing their wages.

Employment and training have been a priority for the Local Conversation in Govanhill. Sources of placements from the project’s well-established employability service increased during the pandemic, as Uber Eats required more delivery drivers and factories that produced essential items required more people to staff 24-hour shifts. Some employers relaxed job requirements, such as forgoing interviews or the need for spoken English, before appointing people to an unskilled role. However, though the quantity of jobs for residents through the employability service may have increased over the past year, most of these jobs are low paid and precarious. In the absence of broader structural changes in the labour market and the economy, the employability support service is unable to increase residents’ access to rewarding and secure employment.

Besides helping residents increase their financial resources through employability and welfare advice services, and on rare occasions through direct employment, the Local Conversations offer valuable communal space for residents to gather. This is particularly important because across Local Conversation areas, residents largely lack indoor and outdoor public spaces to gather and experience poor housing conditions. The pandemic has underscored the importance of accessible outdoor space in supporting mental health. The community allotment in Stanwell has been a key legacy of the Local Conversation and a lifeline for residents throughout the pandemic. It is a versatile space that includes a pond, a seated area, a sheltered area, a children’s play area, and a place to burn firewood.

*I love going over there, chatting to the other people, getting in a lot of exercise. It makes me happy. (Stanwell, Resident, 2020)*

It is important to note that the Local Conversations have been a key resource for residents throughout the pandemic. Staff and residents worked tirelessly to support residents and help them stay connected with each other. Several case study areas organised food deliveries for vulnerable families. The Govanhill and Lozells projects translated public health messages and the changing government guidelines into other languages, so that more residents would understand them. The Caia Park project also fundraised around £3,000 for local relief efforts.

### Negative outcomes

There were two unintended negative outcomes seen across Local Conversation projects:

* Residents have been acting individually to pursue their own agendas.
* The Local Conversations have been filling in gaps left by receding local authorities, therefore normalising the negative impacts of a decade of public spending cuts.

#### Residents acting individually

The 2019 interim report identified that an ironic and unintended consequence of Steering Groups becoming increasingly independent of lead organisations was that residents were acting individually to pursue their own agendas, rather than acting in the collective interest. This was most notable in two case study areas. 2019 staff survey respondents also cited a need for more support with and training in negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

Fieldwork in 2020 offered limited opportunities to follow up on this, partly because pandemic-related concerns eclipsed other topics, and partly because projects halted most of their regular activities to respond to the pandemic and adapt to changing government guidelines. However, the few responses to the 2020 staff survey demonstrate that there is still a demand for support with conflict management and resolution.

#### Normalising austerity

The 2019 interim report noted that many Local Conversation projects have stepped in to fill gaps left by retreating local authorities and local services. For instance, several projects have supported residents with issues around welfare, immigration, Universal Credit, and Housing Benefit. Though this has been valuable for residents, especially during the pandemic, it illustrates an unintended negative outcome of Trust funding, in which residents take it upon themselves to provide vital services that have disappeared from the local area.

Fieldwork in 2020 has shown that this continues to be the case. Some of the successes of the Local Conversations are actually an indictment of the devastating impacts of austerity on vulnerable populations. For instance, following the closure of the Citizens Advice Bureau and other local services in Lozells at the outbreak of Covid-19, a large number of residents volunteered to help the lead organisation manage the influx of demand for welfare advice services. In Govanhill, the welfare advice service has been immensely popular with residents and recently became more closely integrated with the employability service, which creates a more streamlined process for residents.

The Local Conversations have proved invaluable for vulnerable residents during the pandemic. Many residents are better off because the Local Conversations have stepped in to provide much-needed services that have largely disappeared over the past few years. There are several instances where these activities (e.g. welfare advice services in Lozells and Govanhill) have become increasingly self-sustaining as more residents step in to help others. Overall, however, when responsibilities for meeting needs are shifted from the public sector to local communities, the results are too often patchy, precarious, and burdensome for residents – a grim reflection of the long-term harm that can be inflicted by austerity and a retreating state.

### Longer-term outcomes

Many of the longer-term outcomes in the programme’s ToC have not yet materialised. This is mainly because four years is not enough time to achieve the scale of the change that the Local Conversations aim to achieve. Furthermore, the efforts of the Local Conversation projects must be supported with wider systems change in order to drive these ambitious outcomes. This section does not seek to measure how well the Local Conversations programme has done against the longer-term outcomes, but rather, map where things stand in relation to each of these outcome areas.

### Increased control in life

In general, residents’ increased feelings of control in life are reported on a very small scale; however, evidence from the case studies suggest that increased confidence, sense of ownership, and empowerment are precursors to increased control. The case studies and residents’ survey findings demonstrate that, while residents may feel in control of their Local Conversation project, they do not necessarily feel in control of their lives.

*It’s...this kind of feeling of those that are in power tell me what to do, and I don’t know who they are, I just know that they’re making it very difficult for me. (Merstham, Resident, 2020)*

Participating in Steering Groups and/or leading certain activities and events are the main routes to increasing residents’ feelings of control over their Local Conversation project. In Govanhill, there is a general understanding and acceptance that any event will be organised by a residents’ sub-group, which increases residents’ feelings of ownership over the project. In Caia Park, the resident-led ethos of the Local Conversation has contributed to a real sense of increased empowerment among residents. Staff indicated that the community spirit has grown and residents are recognising that they can act collectively to create change.

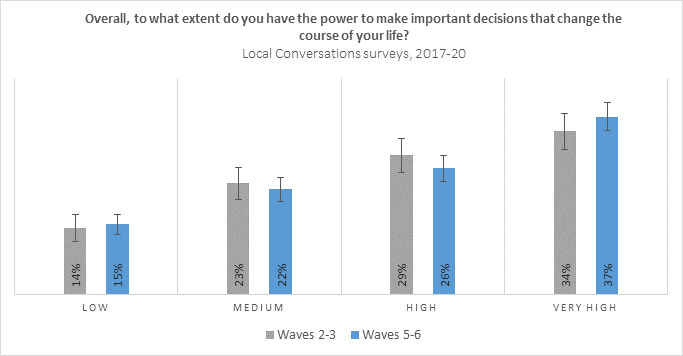
*I think historically community development does things for people and now we've got this new model where we're saying, “People should do things for people”. (Caia Park, Staff, 2020)*

Similarly, in Claremont Ten, residents’ capacity for collective action has increased. A resident described this as particularly important in Claremont Ten, as residents have a history of having things done to them, as opposed to being the ones doing things themselves in their community. Residents and staff spoke about how the Local Conversation participants had formed strong, supportive relationships with one another over the years. People are more socially connected and able to look out for each other, and therefore are more able to take action together, which is a new development for the area. This reflects how residents are developing a sense of ownership over their Local Conversation and a sense of community.

The residents’ survey also reflects increased feelings of empowerment. Comparing residents’ survey responses from 2017/2018 to those from 2019/2020, there was an increase across all levels of participation (Steering Group member, Resident, participant) of those who strongly agreed that they were able to have a say in developing their Local Conversation project. This was more pronounced among volunteers and participants, which suggests that the expansion of activities and events across projects has widened participation and opportunities for residents to shape projects.

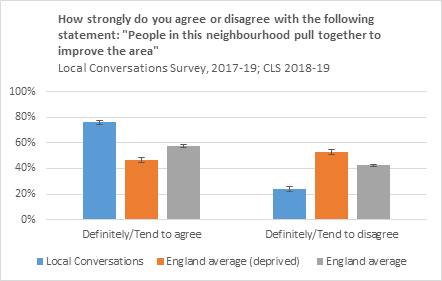
In addition, between 2017 and 2020, the majority of residents’ survey respondents have consistently reported high or very high levels of power to make important decisions that change the course of their lives. As Figure 3 illustrates, when the 2017/2018 survey waves (2–3) are compared with the 2019/2020 waves (5–6), there was a greater proportion (though not statistically significant) of residents reporting ‘very high’ levels.

*Figure 3: Extent to which residents have the power to make important decisions*



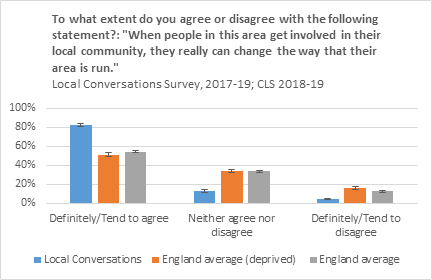
On average, significantly more Local Conversations residents agree that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve their neighbourhood (76%) than in similarly deprived areas (47%), and in England as a whole (58%). This is illustrated in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: Neighbourhood pulling together to improve the area*



As seen in Figure 5, Local Conversations residents are also much likelier to agree that when people in the area get involved in their local community, they can really change the way the area is run (82% compared to 51% in similarly deprived areas and 54% in England as a whole).

*Figure 5: Local involvement changing how an area is run*



While it is positive that more residents feel in control of their Local Conversation, many do not feel an increased sense of control over the material conditions in their lives that could improve their health and wellbeing (e.g. housing conditions, health care, gainful employment, access to statutory services, transport infrastructure).

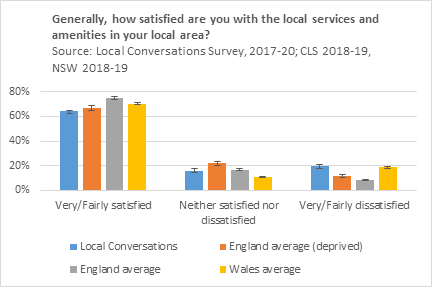
*You can’t get a GP appointment in our neighbourhood for about two or three weeks. What’s the use of getting someone in on the third week? We’ve got really bad housing. A lot of the private ones are really damp. The landlords don’t fix them. (Lozells, Resident, 2020)*

### Better local services

Evidence from the case studies, residents’ survey, and staff survey suggests that local public services are not improving and residents’ satisfaction with local services remains low. The wider socioeconomic and political context has meant that the Local Conversation projects have not been able to work on improving the availability and provision of local public services. Instead, many have taken it upon themselves to plug the gap left by disappearing local public services. While this helps residents in the short term, it means that the Local Conversations have limited opportunities to influence, strengthen, and improve public services.

Consistent with residents’ survey findings in previous years, Local Conversation areas continue to report lower levels of satisfaction with local services, compared to the average for similarly deprived areas in England and the England-wide average (Figure 6). Across case studies, residents continue to cite the inadequacy of local services as a key problem.

*Figure 6: Satisfaction with local services and amenities*



Given residents’ dissatisfaction with local services, Local Conversations have taken action to improve residents’ access to local services through engagement with the local authority and wider public sector, such as local GP surgeries and the NHS, as well as other local organisations. For instance, the Local Conversation in Merstham has been tackling food poverty by working in collaboration with charities and the Council's Community Development Officer. Similarly, residents in Caia Park have been working with the Community Council to find a mental health worker to help improve mental health provision locally. Though this has not yet happened, a resident-led men’s mental health group has been set up as a first step.

Many Local Conversation projects have shifted to service delivery to fill the gaps left by receding local services in the context of austerity. For instance, the social prescribing programme in Edberts House was created in response to the failure of local public services to adequately support residents with various mental health problems and complex personal circumstances. People experiencing mental health issues typically receive prescriptions or referrals for therapy, which take too long:

*Too often people will go and present with mental health issues and they’ll go “Here you are, here’s a prescription, go away and take these pills.” If you’re lucky you might get referred for talking therapies, but even that’s not ideal cos then you’ve got your 12-week wait. (Edberts House, Staff, 2020)*

The social prescribing programme in Edberts House has been successful in enabling more residents to access support with complex mental health issues. At the same time, staff emphasised that the fundamental lack of statutory services, particularly mental health services, in an area of high need continues to be a barrier. Even though the social prescribing programme has expanded,it is still not enough to meet the high demand for mental health support.

Lozells offers another example of how the Local Conversations are filling in the gap for disappearing services. The project has been overwhelmed with residents in need of welfare advice since the closure of the Citizens Advice Bureau and other local support services at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Across case study areas, the rapid closure of services during the spring 2020 national lockdown and subsequent lockdowns has had a detrimental impact on many residents who rely on public and voluntary services.

*For the elderly in Blackpool, there’s been a massive shortage, a shock[ing] shortage, of services. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

The pandemic also exacerbated health inequalities and underscored the inadequacy of local services to address these health inequalities. Staff and residents across case study areas shared concerns that local services will continue to deteriorate due to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and associated restrictions, which will in turn continue to have an adverse effect on residents. In the absence of greater and sustained investments in local services from local and national government, projects’ efforts will continue to have a limited impact on the quality and quantity of local provision.

### Improvement in the social determinants of health

Although many Local Conversation projects have recognised and acted on the need to improve the social determinants of health in local areas, there have been limited changes. Projects have had the most success in making incremental improvements to residents’ access to quality green space, but quality housing and employment continue to remain out of reach. Staff and residents shared a widespread fear that this will only get worse due to the ongoing negative impacts of Covid-19.

#### Green spaces

Previous years’ reports noted an increase in small-scale improvements to local green spaces across case study areas, which have continued to increase. For example, the community allotment developed by the Local Conversation in Stanwell has been a key asset for residents during the pandemic. The Local Conversation in Penparcau also has a robust and expanding community food-growing project, and the Claremont Ten project has an established community garden. The cleaner and greener environment activities the Local Conversation in Lozells has carried out over the past few years has made Lozells one of the areas in Birmingham with the lowest rates of fly tipping. However, fly tipping levels have spiked in the area since the pandemic hit, which residents are actively working together to address.

*We don’t want to be that place that goes all the way back to how it used to be prior to when we started off and we put a lot of hard work into it. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

#### Housing

Across case study areas, residents struggle with the lack of secure, quality, and affordable housing. Residents have been liaising with housing associations to try to improve housing conditions. For instance, residents in Merstham and Claremont Ten do walkabouts with the local housing association to identify issues (e.g. around maintenance or anti-social behaviour). In Govanhill, Roma residents now attend the Regeneration Group meetings to participate in discussions about local housing quality. The Caia Park Partnership also regularly works with residents and the local authority to tackle housing issues.

Despite residents’ efforts to improve the local housing stock, little has changed. One anomaly is that in Lozells, during the lockdown months in the spring and summer, many residents were able to access social housing at a much quicker rate compared to previous years.

*Since March, we managed to get seven new families into homes. Normally that would have taken about two to three years because it’s a very, very slow process. We’re just trying to identify how is that possible, because that’s like a two/three year kind of goal for us, usually. (Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

However, the extent to which this was a direct result of the project’s relationship with the local Council and housing providers and/or the project’s efforts to improve local housing conditions is unclear. Ultimately, structural reform is needed to address the UK’s housing crisis and improve housing conditions in Local Conversation areas.

#### Jobs and income

A lack of secure, well-paid, quality local jobs has been a consistent issue for residents across case study areas. Although Govanhill and Lozells have well-established employability services that have supported many residents with job applications, interviews, and placements, local labour market conditions have largely remained unchanged, and so residents still struggle to find decent work locally.

*[The] hospital and [the] university are the big employers, but you have to speak Welsh. If you don’t, or [if you] have a low educational background, then the options are limited. There are a number of hospitality jobs, given it’s a seaside town, but these tend to offer insecure work with no sick pay or annual leave… a lot of families are scraping to get by. (Penparcau, Staff, 2020).*

The pandemic has exacerbated residents’ economic insecurity. A huge concern for staff in Claremont Ten is that the worst of the economic fallout has yet to be seen in the area. Many residents depend on seasonal work in the tourism industry, which was already in decline prior to the pandemic and has suffered tremendously since then. Staff reflected that this may be the first year when many people in Blackpool have no paid work at all. Relatedly, food insecurity has increased since the pandemic, as more people have lost work, income, and livelihoods. Many projects delivered food parcels and worked with food banks to ensure that vulnerable residents did not go hungry.

*[We went into] reactive mode when Covid started: lots of food banks, giving out prescriptions, becoming an outreach worker, really. (Penparcau, Staff, 2020)*

### Better health and wellbeing

#### Health

Consistent with residents’ survey findings in previous years, Local Conversations participants report slightly lower levels of good or very good health, compared to Wales and similarly deprived areas of England. At a statistically significant level, Local Conversations residents were almost twice as likely to report bad or very bad health (10%) compared to the England average (6%). However, the proportion of Local Conversations residents reporting bad or very bad health is lower than the Wales average.

Further analysis of how health has changed over time demonstrates that Local Conversations residents experienced a greater decline in health between 2017 and 2019, which was more prominent among women than men. This is consistent with findings from the updated Marmot Review: that austerity has led to a deterioration of health and life expectancy across England, particularly in deprived areas and especially those in the North of England, over the past decade. Given that Local Conversation areas experience high levels of deprivation, and that a third of Local Conversation areas in England are in the North, it is plausible that health outcomes have worsened in Local Conversation areas relative to the rest of England.

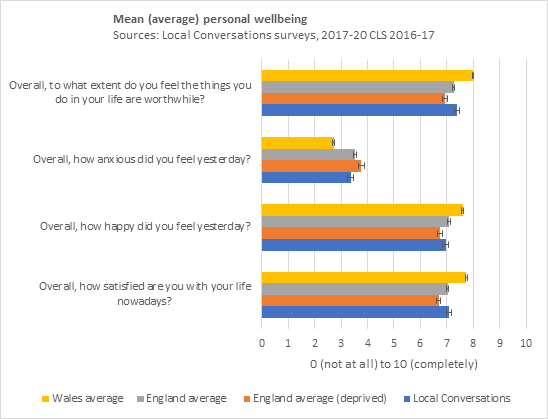
There could also be various causal factors taking effect. For instance, it is unlikely that the same cohort of Local Conversations participants have responded to all six waves of the residents’ survey, and so it is possible that the Local Conversation projects have been attracting more diverse and marginalised residents who experience poorer health. Furthermore, rising rates of obesity, mental health issues, and an ageing population compound the negative impacts of austerity on health. Evidence from case studies shows that residents across case study areas acutely struggle with mental health issues and social isolation.

Projects have tried to support residents with mental health and social isolation, but their impacts are limited without greater and sustained investments in and improvements to local services. Staff across case study areas foresee an increased need for mental health services because of the ongoing impacts of Covid-19, as more residents are experiencing bereavement and anxiety related to job loss and economic insecurity. However, staff are concerned that the fundamental lack of statutory services means that residents’ increased mental health needs will not be met, and therefore mental health will continue to decline.

#### Wellbeing

Relative to England averages, Local Conversations residents had slightly higher scores for life satisfaction and for feeling what they do in life is worthwhile, as well as lower levels of anxiety (Figure 7). At a statistically significant level, Local Conversations residents are more satisfied with life, less anxious, and more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile, compared to averages for similarly deprived areas in England. Reported happiness was lower among Local Conversations participants than England averages, but higher than similarly deprived areas in the country. Meanwhile, relative to Wales averages, Local Conversations residents feel less happy, less satisfied, more anxious, and that the things they do are less worthwhile.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Figure 7: Average personal wellbeing*



Findings from the 2018 and 2019 interim reports demonstrate that residents’ increased social connectedness through participation in Local Conversation projects has a knock-on effect on residents’ wellbeing. This is especially the case for those who have assumed greater responsibility within projects, such as Steering Group members and volunteers, as well as people who previously struggled with loneliness and social isolation. Volunteers who helped deliver activities or events that enhance social connectedness also experience increased wellbeing.

*When I see the kids bonding and talking to each other, it makes me feel really good inside because I could then say... I helped them do that... I helped them make friends. (Caia Park, Resident, 2020)*

In addition, participation in the Local Conversations can provide residents with a greater sense of purpose and belonging, which can enhance wellbeing. Relative to England averages, Local Conversations residents are more positive about their neighbourhood and community, indicating that they have positive interactions and a strong feeling that the community can come together to create change.

*You're with people who care about what's going on around and care about everyone; pensioners, the kids, adults, you know it's just that nice feeling […] I've never seen nothing like it.(Caia Park, Resident, 2020)*

This, plus the fact that Local Conversations residents are significantly more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile, compared to averages in England and deprived areas in England, suggests that the Local Conversations play a role in helping residents feel that what they do matters.

*It’s nice to be able to do something completely different on a social level – not just meeting up with friends, doing something as a team.(Claremont Ten, Resident, 2020)*

Participation in the Local Conversations has knock-on effects on residents’ wellbeing in other ways, too, by helping to increase their sense of control and confidence, as well as their knowledge and skills. Increased confidence, knowledge, and skills can contribute to increased perceptions of control, which, in turn, helps to improve wellbeing. The majority of residents’ survey respondents in 2020 strongly agreed or agreed that they are able to have a say in how theirLocal Conversation project is designed, developed, and run.

*I think the project will probably make people feel appreciated and also valued. I also think the project quite often reminds people that there is somebody thinking of them. A simple thing like a craft pack. (Stanwell, Resident, 2020)*

## Outcomes beyond the Theory of Change

Beyond those outcomes identified in the ToC, there is evidence of two key additional key outcomes that the programme is contributing to:

* Improved community reputation, positivity, and pride.
* Sense of structure and purpose.

### Improved community reputation, positivity, and pride

Case study research has revealed that, in addition to experiencing high levels of disadvantage and underinvestment, many Local Conversation areas have also struggled with a poor reputation locally. This is largely because Local Conversation neighbourhoods experience many of the challenges associated with deprivation and inequality, such as crime, high unemployment, and poor maintenance of homes and public spaces. Many residents have been acutely aware of the stigma attached to their local areas, which has even led some residents to withhold their addresses. However, there is evidence that the Local Conversations are helping to shift the reputations of the local areas.

Residents and staff across all eight case study areas spoke of how instrumental the Local Conversation projects have been in improving the reputation of the local area among residents, local authorities, and local organisations. Those we spoke to at the Local Conversation in Edberts House described the area’s historically bad reputation, mainly due to high levels of deprivation, anti-social behaviour, and empty homes. A staff member feels that because of the Local Conversation’s resident-led ethos and emphasis on building residents’ control, participation in the project has given residents a stronger sense of belonging and social connection.

*[The area] is much better now. It’s a much better place […] People respect it now, and all because of Edberts and Pattinson House. (Edberts House, Resident, 2020)*

In Lozells, staff described how the Local Conversation has been pivotal in transforming the area’s bad reputation, particularly through its environmental clean-up activities, which have made Lozells an example of good practice for other parts of Birmingham.

*We had a riot in ’85 in this neighbourhood. It was really well known, so there has always been a bad reputation around Lozells. [However] when the local authority’s talking about what [we have] done in the neighbourhood around planting, rubbish dumping has gone [down]… People say, “Oh, you want to see a really good project? Go to Lozells.” “You want to speak to really active residents? Go to Lozells.” In the [local authority] circles we’ve got a really good reputation […] we’re really well known as an active kind of neighbourhood and active community.(Lozells, Staff, 2020)*

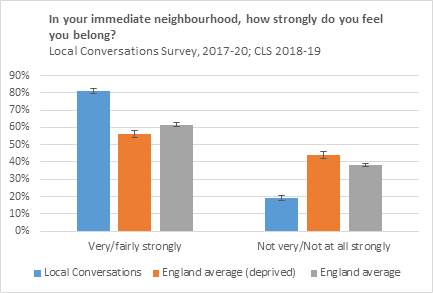
Caia Park has also seen a shift in how the area is perceived by residents. Historically, Caia Park had a poor reputation to the point where the estate’s name was changed in the 1980s in an attempt to create a fresh image. However, the wide range of activities that the estate is now delivering, largely though the Local Conversation, and the relationships that the Local Conversation has built with key local stakeholders, services, and organisations, has helped to raise the estate’s profile in a positive way. New slogans have started to appear, such as ‘Up the Park’ and ‘Team Caia’. Staff noted how residents are “starting to feel more ownership of the space” and using positive language to describe the estate, reflecting their increased optimism about the local area.

These small but notable shifts in local reputation are helping to boost residents’ positivity and pride in their communities. Merstham residents also described the positive effect that the changes in the local area were having on them individually:

*[M]akes me feel very positive for Merstham […] positive for myself. It has been nice to see how things have changed round here for the better. [...] Back in the day we had very little going on locally, but it’s wonderful to see things now. (Merstham, Resident, 2020)*

This is reflected in the residents’ survey, which shows that Local Conversations residents have consistently reported stronger feelings of neighbourhood belonging (81%), which is higher than England averages and the average for similarly deprived areas (Figure 8).

*Figure 8: Neighbourhood belonging*



Increased positivity and pride in the local area are important because they help to raise residents’ aspirations. Where before residents may not have dared to hope that change could occur, now it has become possible for them to imagine, demand, and expect more.

### Sense of structure and purpose

As noted earlier, the sense of belonging and purpose, as well as feelings that what one does is worthwhile, that people gain from participating in the Local Conversations helps to improve wellbeing. Across case study areas, it is evident that some residents who get involved in the Local Conversations activities are finding that this gives new meaning to their lives. For some, this manifests as increased structure, as they are now attending regular meetings or fulfilling an ongoing commitment. This is understandably more notable for residents who are unemployed or had few previous commitments. In Merstham, for example, staff spoke about how the project has enabled residents to create more of a routine for themselves and consequently to feel more in control of their lives:

*[They’re] able to come here every day, get out the house, take back very basic control of their lives by being engaged with a routine. (Merstham, Staff, 2020)*

For other residents, their ongoing relationship with the Local Conversation not only adds structure to their lives, but also gives them a sense of purpose. This comes partly from doing something for themselves, such as attending a specific support group or activity, as well as being involved in something that is community-focused and has a wider social purpose. Residents enjoy seeing the positive changes that are taking place in their local areas over time and appreciate the role that they have played in facilitating that change.

*[I]t gives you the general feeling that life is worthwhile to get out there and do something. (Claremont Ten, Resident, 2020)*

*It's got the feel-good factor about it and I don't have any experience of that in my life, to be honest. (Caia Park, Resident, 2020)*

As staff in Claremont Ten pointed out, being able to have input and feel a sense of purpose are particularly important in an area like theirs, where residents have a long history of having things done to them, rather than being the ones who are delivering change.

*You can see it in their faces, that smile of achievement when they’re helping people. (Claremont Ten, Staff, 2020)*

Conclusion

This report concludes with a brief summary of the Local Conversations programme’s progress towards the outcomes set out in the Theory of Change (ToC), followed by a discussion of the programme’s key strengths and opportunities. Finally, we consider the implications of the findings from the evaluation for the Local Conversations programme and the Trust.

### Outcomes

There is strong evidence that the Local Conversations programme has added value to residents’ lives and achieved – to varying degrees – the majority of the shorter-term outcomes identified in the ToC: social connectedness; knowledge, understanding, and skills; confidence and aspiration; and money and resources. There is weaker evidence that the programme has increased residents’ influence over local decision-makers.

Although there have been notable increases in residents’ attempts to influence local decision-makers since 2019, these emerging efforts were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. In spite of this, there is evidence that the Local Conversations have achieved outcomes that are not identified in the programme’s ToC but are precursors to influence. These outcomes include increased engagement with local decision-makers and stronger partnerships with other local stakeholders.

Though the Local Conversations programme has made considerable progress against the shorter-term outcomes in the ToC, for the most part, the longer-term outcomes (better health and wellbeing, improvements in the social determinants of health, better local services, and increased control in life) have not yet materialised. This is largely because the Local Conversations programme is only one part of the wider system and structures that shape a place.

For the programme to have longer-term traction and embed its incremental gains across the local contexts within which it operates, it may need to explore ways to create more formal partnerships with other relevant local stakeholders, such as local authorities, schools, public services, and other community organisations. Furthermore, more time is required to achieve the ambitious scale of change set out in the longer-term outcomes.

Of the programme’s longer-term outcomes, there is strongest evidence that participation in the Local Conversations has improved residents’ wellbeing. Residents have gained confidence, social connectedness, as well as knowledge, understanding, and skills by participating in the various activities and events in their Local Conversation. Participation in the Local Conversations has also increased residents’ sense of purpose, sense of belonging, feelings that what they do is worthwhile, and perceptions that collective action can drive change.

All of this is likely to enhance wellbeing. In addition, the majority of residents feel they have a say in how their Local Conversation is designed and delivered. These perceptions of control, albeit on a small scale, can contribute to increased wellbeing.

## Key strengths and opportunities

Key strengths of the Local Conversations programme include its relatively long duration, flexibility, community-led ethos, and efforts to foster collective action. Staff survey respondents have indicated that other grant-making bodies have already taken notice of the difference that the programme’s community-led ethos and efforts to foster collective action have made, particularly in terms of in increasing residents’ engagement and sense of ownership over projects.

Furthermore, there is a lot of value in the trust and sense of community that has built up between residents and lead organisations, as well as the individual projects and local partner organisations. This has established a strong foundation that has the potential to support the delivery of wider systems change to challenge structural inequalities, which have been exacerbated under austerity.

The challenge for the Trust is to build on the strong foundations created by the Local Conversations, which can help increase the capacity of wider systems and structures to support and accelerate progress that the Local Conversations have achieved. This may include finding opportunities in the Build Back Better agenda for the UK coronavirus recovery.[[5]](#footnote-5) For example, one of the demands on the Build Back Better agenda is to protect and invest in public services. The fundamental inadequacy and lack of services in Local Conversation areas has been both a barrier for many projects and a priority area that residents have felt the need to address.

However, to a certain extent, the Local Conversations programme may have normalised the negative impacts of austerity because community organisations and local people have been stepping in to fill the gaps left by receding local authorities and disappearing local services. For instance, various projects have run successful welfare advice services, which are an immense resource for residents but an indictment of the damaging impacts of austerity.

At the same time, it is important to note that the Local Conversations programme has strengthened community cohesion and resilience in many places that have been hit particularly hard by austerity and Covid-19. In the absence of vital public services, the range of opportunities for local people to get together, meet, and talk to others; make new friends; participate in and/or plan activities and events; and engage in the collective action that the Local Conversations enable has helped to increase residents’ social connectedness and strengthen their support networks.

Crucially, these strong social connections have enabled projects to mobilise rapidly during the pandemic to provide emergency relief for vulnerable residents. While this is hugely valuable, it is also fragile. Unless the programme can find a way to work with local partners to build on and embed the participatory structures that projects have created (e.g. residents’ sub-groups), as well as the services that they have delivered, there is a high risk that when the programme ends, the Local Conversation areas will be left with larger gaps than they had before.

### Implications

Findings from the evaluation have several implications for the Local Conversations programme:

* The case study interviews and staff survey responses demonstrate a clear demand from residents and staff for more training opportunities for residents to enable democratic processes and collective action more effectively. This, in turn, could help increase residents’ capacity to have more influence over local decision-makers. Suggested topics for training include effective governance processes, negotiation, conflict resolution, political education, and community organising.
* Project staff play a key role in helping residents cope with their complex personal circumstances, getting them to the point of being able to engage in the Local Conversations, as well as supporting them to develop valuable leadership skills and knowledge of community work and democratic processes. As such, lead organisations need sufficient funding to enable them to employ enough staff to invest in the intensive work with residents that is necessary to enable greater resident participation in projects.
* It is important that project staff are adequately supported with their mental health needs, especially as their work can be intense and emotionally demanding. Most staff are committed to the communities they work with. During the pandemic, staff went above and beyond to support residents. Ensuring that staff support mechanisms are in place can help prevent burnout and protect valuable, trusting relationships between staff and local residents.
* Budgeting and related bureaucratic processes appear to have created challenges for project staff and residents. In many cases, residents feel frustrated that they lack autonomy over decisions about how to allocate funding. Sometimes this is because staff are not used to giving residents so much control over budgeting and therefore hesitate. Projects could benefit from more support with budgeting processes so that it is more seamless for staff and residents alike.

Meanwhile, there are implications for the Trust:

* Many Local Conversation projects have been working towards greater integration in the ecosystem of local services and third sector organisations, with varying degrees of success. Evidence suggests that for a place-based initiative to be successful, it should “work collaboratively across different organisational borders and levels within organisations to develop a shared vision and harness their reach and resources to realise this vision”.[[6]](#footnote-6) To help drive systems change, the Trust might consider playing a greater role in working with a range of relevant stakeholders from the public, private, and third sectors – both locally and nationally – to develop a shared vision to better support the Local Conversations programme and the outcomes it seeks to achieve. For instance, the Trust could work more closely with local authorities and public sector actors to embed co-production in service design and delivery.
* While the length of the Local Conversations is one of its key strengths, projects have essentially lost a year due to the pandemic. Many projects paused their regular activities and programming, and staff rapidly shifted into crisis management mode. Across case studies, staff and residents expressed grave concerns about the pandemic’s enduring detrimental impacts on projects and residents. The momentum that projects built over the past few years, through continuous engagement with and encouragement of residents, suddenly ground to a halt. In some areas, staff and residents felt that the pandemic and associated restrictions had even reversed the progress and incremental gains projects had made over the past few years. There is, therefore, a potential case for extending the programme to account for the lost year, especially as the need for the measures put in place by the Local Conversations will likely only increase in the wake of Covid-19.
* A possible extension to the programme could be accompanied by more strategic work that aims to address structural inequalities, both on a national level and how they manifest on a local level in the Local Conversation areas. This would help drive the programme’s desired longer-term outcomes, such as better local public services and improvements in the social determinants of health. For example, the programme illustrates how local services, such as those associated with health, education, and care, are vital to the functioning and wellbeing of society. Findings from the evaluation strengthen the case for increased investment in public services to build back better after the pandemic. This is an area the Trust could explore with local partners and relevant stakeholders.

Overall, it is evident that the Local Conversations programme has been making a difference to residents, lead organisations, and other local organisations. However, the programme’s impact is limited because it is not embedded in a wider systems-change approach. There is more appetite among staff and residents for many of the structural changes required to help the programme achieve its longer-term outcomes. The challenge for the Trust is to consider whether the programme can evolve during its remaining term to develop more strategic local and national partnerships and help to strengthen the ecosystem of structures and services in the places where projects operate, in order to increase the potential to realise the longer-term outcomes.

# Annex 1. Govanhill, Glasgow

Supported by Community Renewal.

### Method

Fieldwork took place in September 2020, conducted remotely by Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions. Previous years of fieldwork took place face-to-face in May 2019, May 2018, and April/May 2017. This fieldwork involved a range of methods, including one-to-one interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations and observations recorded as fieldnotes.

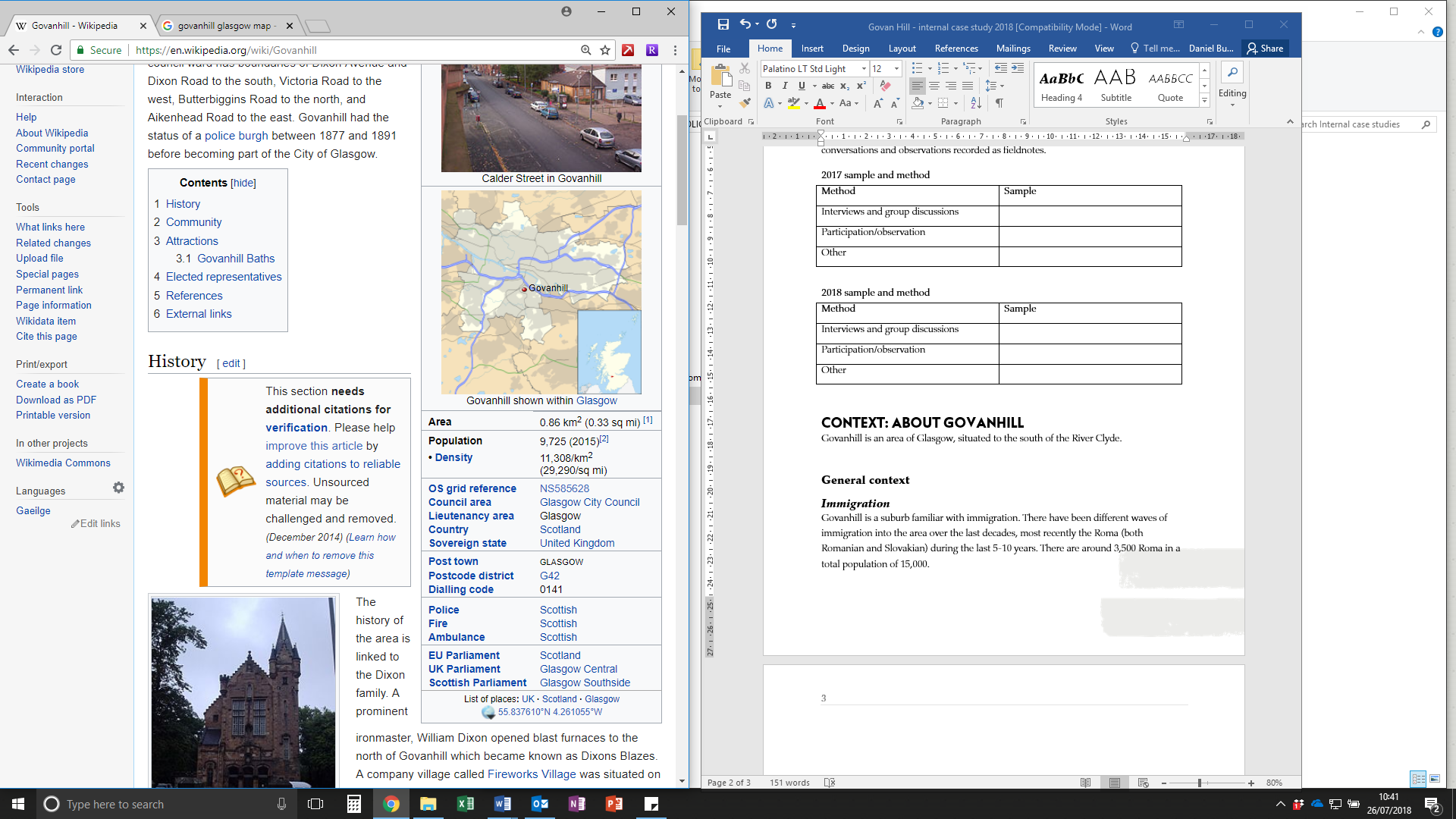
Due to the restrictions around Covid-19, fieldwork was carried out virtually in September 2020. As a result, the usual diversity of research methods – including group discussions, observations, and informal conversations – was not possible and research was limited to one-to-one online interviews via Zoom. These interviews, with project staff and community facilitators, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were not recorded; instead extensive notes were taken for analysis.

At the time of the interviews, the UK was slowly emerging from a nationwide lockdown. However social distancing guidelines were in place and changing frequently. This is the operational context in which interviewees reflected on the last year, and within which they were trying to think about the year ahead.

## Context: About Govanhill

Govanhill is an area of Glasgow, situated to the south of the River Clyde. There are around 15,000 people living in Govanhill. Life expectancy of residents is around the Glasgow average. Nearly all of Govanhill is in the lowest 20% of the Scottish Government’s 2020 Index of Multiple Deprivation: half is in the lowest 10% and a small portion in the lowest 5%.

Govanhill is a suburb familiar with immigration. The proportion of residents from a minority ethnic group rose from 19% in 2001 to 33% in 2011[[7]](#footnote-7) which is notably above the Glasgow average. There have been different waves of immigration into the area over the last decades. There has been a wave of Roma immigrants in the last decade, coming mainly from Romania, Slovakia, as well as Hungary and the Czech Republic. The Roma population is around 3,500 in a total population of 15,000. Many Roma arrive in Govanhill due to a family member or friend already living in the area.



Many Roma residents are employed in low-paid, precarious work and supplement their low incomes with benefits while they look for better employment opportunities. The jobs they have typically require low skills, are temporary, pay low wages, and offer few opportunities for development, such as food delivery like Uber Eats, potato-processing plant work, *Big Issue* selling, and construction site labouring. Other jobs that offer some training, such as cleaning in hotels, often operate on zero-hours contracts and are unpredictable. Jobs that Roma do frequently pay less than the minimum wage (e.g. car washing at £2/hr).

*Everyone is poor, which we are around here. (Resident, 2018)*

### Connections and community

Strong family connections are clear to see: the weekly organised groups such as dance, sports, and youth groups (discussed later) are often made up of siblings, cousins, parent/child pairs, as well as family friends. This is partly due to the Roma people's strong reliance on family relationships, as well as an inherent side-effect of news of the activities being spread by word-of-mouth. People attend events with people they know.

The Roma people in Govanhill speak a plethora of languages: Romanian, Slovakian, Romanes, Hungarian, and Polish among others. Many residents speak at least two of these languages, sometimes more. However, very few Roma residents speak English to a workable level. It is worth noting that there are two main Roma communities, defined by the language predominantly spoken: either Romanian or Slovakian. In the past there has been little integration among the adults who speak either language with English-speaking members of the community, though there has been slightly more integration among children who can converse in English.

*I think the biggest challenge [the community faces] would be the language barrier, that prevents a lot of members of the Roma community from accessing services. (Resident, 2017)*

*[Roma have less control over their own lives] than people who speak good English. They don’t fully control their life. (Resident, 2018)*

*[Via interpreter] I can’t chase my landlord or complain about the lack of cleaning I pay for, as I can’t speak English. (Resident, 2019)*

Most younger Roma who have been at school for a few years locally speak good English, and often operate as translators for older relatives. ESOL classes have been provided for free by the college but are not necessarily seen in a positive light by the Roma project participants because classes are large and standardised, and not always at convenient times.

The English classes that had been offered stopped during the Covid-19 restrictions and have just resumed online. In 2020, English proficiency remains a significant barrier to Roma residents improving their own lives, whether it is finding better work, liaising with their landlord, completing an application for welfare support, or understanding an appointment letter from the NHS. The recruitment of community facilitators who already speak (or are rapidly learning) Romanian, among other languages, has opened up the possibility of extending the range of beneficiaries of the Local Conversation, as well as integrating different sections of the Roma community.

### Services and amenities

**Support services** in Govanhill do exist, although they are almost exclusively provided by the third sector rather than the public sector. As a result, they are in a constant state of flux as funding streams end or the funding focus shifts.

*At the community shop yesterday I saw 8 people waiting to see one worker at the drop-in, who works only 3 hours. I imagine she wasn’t able to see all of them. Appointments take 1-2 weeks, which is too late.They need help quickly, quickly. (Resident, 2018)*

*The welfare advice service is amazing, but what will happen when its funding ends? (Resident, 2020)*

**Premises.** The Local Conversation anchor organisation, Community Renewal, rents a four-room office space that has served them well. The office space includes a social/meeting space, with three side rooms for office working or group activities, plus a small kitchen and a toilet. Before the Covid-19 restrictions resulting in remote working, these premises were being extremely well used, with a constant flow of meetings, volunteers coming and going, residents coming in to ask for advice, and formal group activities held most evenings, often reaching maximum capacity.

Community Renewal continues to look for a replacement for the local church venue it used to rent, where it ran a community canteen three nights a week alongside most of its other project activities, such as weekly groups and seasonal social events regularly hosting 100 people. This church venue provided a solid centre of gravity to the Local Conversation’s work (among other funding streams), where residents attending one activity would bump into others, building social connectedness.

In 2018, the church venue was closed at short notice after it failed an electrical safety inspection, and there is no prospect of this being resolved in the near future. Once the church venue was closed, the project rented space on an ad hoc basis elsewhere for events. While other possible premises were scoped prior to Covid-19, no viable short-to-medium-term options emerged. Long-term options exist for repairs and purchasing, and the feasibility of this is being explored, though any practical change is some years away.

**Places to socialise.** Roma residents often live in small or overcrowded flats with little privacy or space for friends to visit. Instead, they tend to meet in the street to chat and share news. This has caused friction with other residents who are not Roma, who have felt intimidated by youths on street corners.

*Some of them were scared to pass by because of a group of six, seven [Roma] people on the corner and they were taking the whole pavement. (Staff, 2018)*

In response to Roma residents’ requests for “somewhere where men could meet and socialise” and to mitigate friction between Roma residents and other residents, the Local Conversation started a Men’s Group (for men 16 years and older) that met once a week. The group grew over a year to include 25 men, reaching the point where splitting the group was considered as the office could not easily host such a large group. The restrictions that arrived with Covid-19 meant the Men’s Group stopped meeting in person, although this has been replaced with some online mechanisms, to be discussed later.

The local park is close, sizeable, and has a varied layout enabling picnics, games, and general socialising. This has been used well by the Local Conversation in previous years and is now being used as a socially distanced meeting space as easing Covid-19 restrictions allow small groups to meet.

### Power and control

There is a low level of confidence in the Roma community about standing up and taking action to improve their own lives and the community around them. Most Roma have a deep suspicion and mistrust of authorities given the systemic discrimination they experienced from authorities in their home countries. Although Roma people have not mentioned experiencing discrimination from UK authorities, they have alluded to discrimination from members of the public on social media. These experiences of discrimination have led to a sense of inevitability around decisions, and little ability and therefore willingness to try to influence them:

*[If a leisure centre was closing…] I don’t think I’d do something. If something closed, I don't think I’d manage to open it again. I don’t complain. (Resident, 2017)*

*People are worried that if they challenge a problem, it might cause problems with their housing or have their kids taken away. (Staff, 2019)*

English is still a significant barrier for residents. Apart from the English-speaking Roma who work or volunteer with the project, there are almost no Roma who are able to ring the Council to ask for waste bags to be picked up, for example, or chase their landlord to clean a communal area. This leads to a strong sense of personal disempowerment. It also affects their ability to find better paid and more stable work opportunities, as employment agencies often require English at a certain level.

*I can’t ring up for them to ask about work – the agency tells me the worker must ring themselves, but some can’t do this yet. (Staff, 2019)*

The regular meeting of the Community Forum has tried to tackle both of these issues, slowly building a sense that each person has the ability to make changes, in small ways, first to their own lives and second to the lives of those around them.

The recruitment and retention of four Roma residents as community facilitators for the Local Conversation has proven an excellent choice, allowing the project to step up a gear in terms of the volume of activities and number of residents benefitting from the work.

Community Renewal also runs a welfare advice service for Govanhill residents, focussed specifically on Roma needs (not funded through the Local Conversation). One of its key activities is helping residents through the process of applying for Universal Credit, a complicated process of paperwork and documentation that requires English proficiency. This service is delivered for Roma, by Roma. It was busy and has continued to be successful over the last year, despite having to convert to online remote support during Covid-19. The community facilitators assist with this work.

*It is like a lighthouse, giving us help. (Resident, 2019*)

A narrow city street with cars parked on the side of a road

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### Housing

The area has a high proportion of over-crowded households.[[8]](#footnote-8) Most properties in Govanhill are traditional tenements and the quality of the stock varies. Superficially, the properties appear quite grand and in good condition but much of them are dilapidated, with rotten windows, leaking gutters, flaking paint, and broken front doors. Although this is not evident in every property, many Roma residents suffer from poor housing conditions.

Local landlord practices are variable, as has been the case previously. There is a housing association offering social housing but also a significant stock of private rental properties with questionable or illegal practices being reported as relatively commonplace. Such practices include asking for a 3–6-month deposit, failing to conduct repairs, and barring Roma from renting their property. In addition, one interviewee in 2018 cited evidence of gangmaster/landlord collusion that leads to overcrowding in flats, the practice of hot bedding (sharing a bed across a day and night shift), and gang employment in factories. Many of the private rental properties are in closes that have no factor,[[9]](#footnote-9) which allows them to get run down. Many are uninsured.

*My guess is that around half of the property in Govanhill isn’t factored and therefore insured. (Resident, 2018)*

In 2020, there was little evidence this situation will change significantly in the future. The local housing association is renovating around 1,000 properties – a major development that initially offered hope that housing could be improved. The Local Conversation has been focussing on trying to ensure Roma residents can benefit equally from the property improvements.

However, these properties are largely 1–2 bedroom flats, which are far too small for a typical Roma family, which is large and normally spans three generations. The authorities do not appear to incorporate the Roma population's intergenerational housing needs in the development and remain resistant to even monitoring the ethnicity of residents. In the absence of robust data about how much the Roma are benefitting or being excluded from new housing renovations, it is difficult push for change.

### Process: About the Local Conversation in Govanhill

Local Conversation priority areas in Govanhill:

* Young people
* Employment
* Social/cultural events
* Wellbeing and rights

Over the years, the four priorities have become more prominent. During the last year the Community Forum decided to change the previous ‘environment’ priority to ‘young people’, as they realised this was more important to them and reflected where their long-term interests lay: seeing the development of their young people as leaders of tomorrow.

### For Roma, by Roma

*Our priority is people: what they need, what they want. We go from there. (Staff, 2020)*

The philosophy of the Community Renewal team has been clear over the last 3–4 years of the project: helping residents to build their skills and confidence so they can improve their own lives and the lives of those around them. Importantly, this means not doing things *for* residents. The entire team is both consistent and insistent in this:

*To begin with when I joined I occasionally did things* for *residents. It doesn’t work. Now when they ask I say “I’ll show* you *how to do it” or “I’ll do it* with *you.” (staff, 2020*)

In 2020, this philosophy coalesced into a project ethos that the team calls *for Roma, by Roma*. This is frequently spoken of and represents the essence of their work in four words. On a practical level, the clear majority of the paid team are Roma, which is an open embodiment of the ethos, by enabling Roma people to be in paid positions of leadership to contribute their knowledge, skills, and community ties.

As a demonstration of progress along the path, the first volunteer Roma resident with Community Renewal has now been joint project lead for over a year, is completing his Higher National Diploma in Community Development, and will be starting his full degree shortly. This evidences that the Community Renewal team has supported and cultivated a pathway to leadership, which not only encourages upskilling among younger people, but also ensures continuity within the project.

The ethos has enabled the project to reach more residents. For example, when conducting street work or trying to encourage residents to get involved with the project, the Roma team finds it easier to connect, converse, and be accepted by the Roma residents. This is not only because they speak the same language, but also because they look ethnically more familiar. As a result, residents perceive the project to have more cultural relevance and are better able to build rapport and trust with the project team. In the words of one project staff:

*They are opening up to us now we have more Roma on the team. (Staff, 2020)*

### Activities and actions taken

*Our focus has always been “bringing people together” whether at canteen, family trips, or one of the groups. Even during Covid it’s true: bringing people together online to chat, learn, play or help with practical support. (Staff, 2020)*

Actions undertaken as part of the Local Conversation in the last 12 months are varied

**Social and cultural events:** The Local Conversation has organised diverse social events since July 2019:

* Govanhill Carnival (August), co-organised with other organisations.
* Family trip to Deep Sea World: 156 people attended on 3 buses.
* Halloween party (November): organised by residents with 100 people attending.
* St Nicholas party (December): organised by residents with 100 people attending.
* Youth Christmas party (December): organised by the Young Leaders.
* International Women’s Day: organised by female Young Leaders with other local organisations.
* Multicultural Ceilidh: organised with two other local organisations.

The usual Roma Day parade in April was cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions. Consistent with previous years, social events are organised not only to provide a focus for Roma people to meet and celebrate but also for mingling with different nationalities locally. These events are identified by residents either at the start of or during the Local Conversation project as it progresses.

Events are always popular with residents, frequently reaching or exceeding the 100 maximum capacity for the venue.

*People always want to meet, talk about plans and the future as well as have a good time. Last event we had the maximum 100 people in the party, and 20 families waiting outside in case they could get in! (Staff, 2020)*

In 2019, the Community Forum decided to charge a small ticket price for attending social events, in order to make participants put a greater value on the experience, while simultaneously keeping it affordable for all. The group of residents that organise the events believe they see residents valuing the events more as a result: they turn up when they book a ticket (instead of saying they’ll come and then don’t), they better appreciate the work put in to organising the event, and they are more willing to help out. This has worked very well, and the practice has continued.

*Somehow charging a small amount makes people value it more, I’m not sure why but it’s really clear. (Staff, 2020)*

Equally, the practice of forming a small organising group of residents to do all the practical organisation for each activity has continued. Residents make the practical decisions (e.g. time, place, price), organise and sell tickets, organise catering equipment and music, as well as steward the event alongside other volunteers at the event. The ambition for more events continues and is growing but was dented by the Covid-19 restrictions in recent months.

**Housing:** In 2019, Community Renewal published its feasibility study on housing conditions for Roma in Govanhill. The results of the study formally show the housing conditions of the Roma and their requirements for quality housing. Results have been presented to and discussed with the housing association and similar local stakeholders. Whilst there is no immediate change arising from the work – for instance, a proposal for a social housing agent has not been taken forward – the study has now enabled the team to regularly attend the Govanhill Regeneration Group. This is the council's local high-level planning group, which includes the local housing associationdirector. The team can represent the Roma perspective so that it is not overlooked.

In previous meetings the team had pointed out that the housing association did not have Roma as a category in their data collection mechanism, despite the high numbers of Roma living in the area. This meant the housing association did not know how many Roma were either tenants or on its waiting list for properties. The housing association agreed to change its data collection methods on a trial basis and to report the situation back to the Regeneration Group. The representation of Roma people at the Regeneration Group has changed the dynamic of discussions and has also served as a reminder to people with power that local people are watching their decision-making and holding them accountable.

Additionally, Roma representatives can help decision-makers understand the Roma situation better. For example, there was a suggestion in a recent meeting that Roma would be able to benefit from the 1–2 bedroom flats by splitting families according to generation. A Roma representative from the Local Conversation was able to explain that culturally Roma always live in one family group, so the idea was unlikely to work:

*You can’t split grandparents and the younger generations; they must all live together – we just don’t split in our culture like people do in the UK*. *(Staff, 2020)*

**Employability service:**

The employability service is now two years old and continues to offer a one-to-one support service for Roma residents. The service is largely run by one project co-lead and one of the community facilitators, both on a part-time basis. The service works with a client to understand their situation, skills, and experience, and then offers advice on working towards employment. This can include simple advice on writing or improving a CV, getting work experience as a Resident, undertaking formal training, doing mock interviews or practising test, and getting support with job applications. This service is now run solely by Roma staff, for Roma residents.

The impact of Covid-19 has been variable, with some residents losing their jobs immediately with no recompense or support. Meanwhile, a few have been able to access the furlough scheme even if they had only worked a few days in a particular factory. Other sources of placements have increased, with services such as Uber Eats requiring more delivery drivers, and factories manufacturing essential items needing to staff 24-hour shifts. Some employers have relaxed the requirements for some jobs, such as forgoing interviews or the need for spoken English before appointing someone to an unskilled role.

*Don’t come to work tomorrow: work has stopped.(Staff, reporting what some employers said to employees upon Covid-19 restrictions starting, 2020)*

Covid-19 restrictions have meant that the service runs remotely, offering support over the phone to review CVs, complete applications, and discuss opportunities. This was initially challenging but has ultimately led to the two staff members becoming very proficient at supporting clients with technology, often using two phones simultaneously to illustrate how to do something online (one phone to talk and video, and the second phone to browse online or format a document). This in itself is seen as progress:

*At the start it was really a problem that we couldn’t see people face to face: now we don’t notice it much and it has advantages*. *(Staff, 2020)*

**Men’s Group:** Before March 2020, every Tuesday evening the Community Renewal office hosted men and boys who wished to drop in to socialise, play music, or play computer games and other games like cards or pool. It was facilitated by one of the community facilitators who tracked attendance, welcomed new members, and monitored what happened, balancing the need to let attendees have control over the evening and maintain some structure and order. The idea arose at an informal consultation session in the canteen and has since been well-attended, with numbers growing steadily to around 25 regular attendees.

*There’s something like this missing in the community. (Staff, 2018)*

Covid-19 restrictions meant the meetings stopped. The group has now split into two largely according to age, where the older men meet the community facilitator to play online card games like poker on a platform where they can see each other and chat while playing. The younger group meet with another community facilitator to play PlayStation games that again allow chatting during the game.

The group is still meeting its aim of bringing Roma men/boys together to chat, have fun, practise English, and learn. Remote liaison happens via Facebook messenger. A video of a socially distanced 5-a-side football match – with teams swapping on the pitch to maintain adherence to the rules – was posted on Facebook to advertise the group. New members are joining as the word spreads.

**Dance group:** The dance group has continued to meet once a week, organised and run by a volunteer resident. Before the Covid-19 lockdown it met 10 times, with a core group of 6 members. The group performed at the Multicultural Ceilidh and the International Women's Day event organised by three local organisations, with 200 people attending the events. Activity stopped during the lockdown but will restart when possible.

**Sewing group:** For several years the sewing group was one of the success activities of the project bringing together a range of women every week to learn a new skill, chat, and at times even sell the products they made. However, the core members of the group – the ones that gave it energy and momentum – have returned to their home country. The remaining members have now lost interest and the group has stopped. Even the opportunities to make masks at home with online training did not motivate people to become involved. The abrupt change illustrates how fragile progress can be, especially if a group coalesces around a couple of energetic motivated people.

**Girls’ sports group**: Once a week, in parallel with the mixed junior football (age 6–11 years), the girls’ sports group meets at the sports centre. This meant that up to 40-–50 young people were meeting and playing sports each week, facilitated by the Local Conversation project.

*It’s great to see so many kids playing and mixing and having fun, developing. (Staff, 2020)*

Covid-19 restrictions stopped these groups from operating, but the aim is to restart them shortly.

**Young Leaders:** Evolving from the youth team last year, this group of young people (mostly girls between 15 and 18 years old) meets weekly to socialise and organise activities. These activities include a Christmas party, a survey of other young people in the area, or a short training course they want to go on. This group is based on the recognition that today’s young people are tomorrow’s leaders in the community and aims to cultivate leadership.

*It’s up to them, they do it: we only support them. (Staff, 2020)*

*The aim is to get them so they can run the show without us. (Staff, 2020)*

The group consists of a core of 8–9 members with others who attend occasionally. With the group’s permission, two new members are about to join. The group is forming an online channel on Facebook to post their activities and create links with others, enabling them to have a wider reach to non-members. The biggest achievement for two of the Young Leaders was preparing and delivering a presentation to the large Roma National Convention in Ipswich (before lockdown), which represented a significant leap in personal confidence.

*The two Young Leaders were absolutely brilliant at the conference: they were the stars of the day. (Staff, 2020)*

**Music group:** From an emerging idea last year, this group has established itself as a weekly group where the members of the group practise playing instruments together. Covid-19 restrictions meant that meetings stopped but practise has continued individually. There are online discussions about how to restart the group, and what they plan to do in future. One such plan is for an online gig, which is being tested to ensure that it works technically. The community facilitator who supports the group is teaching members how to use the equipment and make a podcast and video, some of which are already on Facebook and YouTube. Members are making their own personal progress with music, too:

*Two boys from the group played their first gig and got paid: they were really really pleased. (Staff, 2020)*

**ESOL classes:** Core Community Forum members had been attending bespoke English language classes, which were organised for their language level and designed around their commitments. These were going well until the Covid-19 restrictions meant they had to be cancelled. After a six-month break, classes have restarted online.

**East of England Local Government AssociationConference:** In March, just before Covid-19 restrictions began, a team from the project attended a Roma conference organised by the national Roma Support Group. Over 100 delegates from Roma projects across the UK attended, as well as members of the Roma community. The team of six from Govanhill consisted of a Resident, two Young Leaders, both co-leads, and a community facilitator: all Roma except one. The team put together a presentation on their work in Govanhill, including their*for Roma, by Rom*a ethos. Each team member, including the Young Leaders, presented their section, demonstrating their ethos in practice.

*Your approach is the best… your presentation was the best! (Staff, recounting the feedback received from delegates*, *2020)*

*The two Young Leaders were fantastic. People followed them out of the room to speak with them. (Staff, 2020)*

*The conference and the reception we got to what we’re doing was a defining moment for us. (Staff, 2020)*

**Welfare advice and associated support:** The welfare advice service, although not funded by the Trust, has increased in strength over the last year. It has a steady stream of Roma clients seeking help with applying for Universal Credit, other benefits, or passports under the EU settlement scheme. Some of the clients have started volunteering at the reception to help staff the service by greeting people and chatting to them while they wait for an advisor to be free, for instance. This enables clients to be drawn into the wider project as they can learn about opportunities and be encouraged to participate. In addition, the connection between the employability service and the welfare service is now stronger, allowing clients to be actively moved between both services more seamlessly, depending on their needs.

*We’re still helping people apply for their own ID cards or Universal Credit. (Staff, 2020)*

However, the existence – and success – of the welfare advice service is indicative of the devastating impacts of austerity on the community. Despite having a high need for support in navigating the welfare system, there is no realistic way that Roma people in Govanhill would otherwise be able to access it without this service. The fact that it is even necessary in the first place reflects the grim realities for many communities under austerity, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and its economic fallout.

To prepare for the UK leaving the EU, Community Renewal approached the Slovak Embassy to ask if immigration officers could visit Govanhill to process the large number of passport applications from Slovak residents. They were initially reluctant as previous visits had been chaotic and officers had at times felt threatened. However, the Local Conversation team organised the schedule and managed the appointments tightly in their offices so that officials saw residents one by one in a calm and productive way. Embassy officials were highly appreciative of community support and were “happy to come any time”. Over 100 passport applications were processed in one visit.

#### Activities in response to Covid-19

*People lost their job, their house, there was no furlough for them. Things got really severe here for some people: we’ve just done whatever was needed to help them. (Staff, 2020)*

The introduction of lockdown restrictions in response to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic hit the project hard, just like many other Local Conversations and organisations around the world. All activities and productive work stopped abruptly as the team worked out the practicalities of how to communicate together and fulfil the most basic of work functions remotely. However, soon the impact of lockdown on the residents started to become apparent and the team’s efforts focused on four main activities.

**Collaborating with local organisations.** With various third sector organisations operating in Govanhill and no ability to meet, it rapidly became clear that there was a significant risk of the duplication of activities and/or lack of oversight on who was doing what. Community Renewal called a meeting of local stakeholders to coordinate who would do what, and to support the establishment of sub-groups that each had its own focus: communications, food, mental health, creativity, support staff. These sub-groups are ongoing, with one Local Conversation team member representing the Roma in each group.

**Food deliveries.** The team started putting food packages together and providing them to local Roma families who had particular difficulties. They delivered to 110 families in the area, many of which the project had not been in touch with previously, including Romanian families who had been harder to reach due to language barriers. Each family was called before the delivery, and during the delivery they were briefed on the latest restrictions. This was particularly useful because in Scotland, very few of the public health messages were published in any language other than English. Where a translation was provided by the Scottish Government, it was either not in Roma languages, or provided no explanations, ie, just a poster with a few words that acted as a reminder, not a full explanation of the rules.

**Translation of public messages:** It rapidly emerged that many of the Roma did not understand or know about the lockdown restrictions, causing bad press locally when some Roma people did not self-isolate during the early stages. The local team quickly developed the ability to edit voiceovers onto the Scottish Government videos, narrated by well-recognised members of the team speaking to give viewers confidence in the material. These video translations were used nationally by Roma groups.

A picture containing person, building, front, holding

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**Focus on Facebook.** The Community Forum had already started using Facebook to communicate, but the lockdown restrictions in March 2020 provided a huge impetus to switch communication and information sharing to Facebook. One hundred fifty people joined the Facebook page within the first fortnight of lockdown, and membership is now at 450, with some posts reaching over 20,000 people nationally (eg the Slovak Embassy visit). The IT skills to work with Facebook and WhatsApp have developed for everyone in the team as well as many residents, and as time passes, they have become familiar with them, developing habits of group chat or messaging.

As the lockdown restrictions lifted, the team noticed a drop in levels of engagement online as peoples’ lives became busier again. The focus now therefore is on maintaining connections with new and existing participants.

*For the first couple of months young people in particular were really connected online but it’s dropped off a bit*. *(Staff, 2020)*

### Local participation in, and control of, the project

Residents are able to participate in, and have control over, the Govanhill Local Conversation in a number of ways.

**Community Forum.** The Community Forum has been running regularly for over two years now meeting every six to eight weeks, with only a short gap during the early stages of the Covid-19 lockdown. The Forum met twice online during lockdown, and once in the local park as restrictions eased. The Forum lies at the informal end of the spectrum of how such groups can operate: it does not have a strict membership, budget, or voting function, although it has a core membership of eight to nine people and makes decisions largely by consensus.

Ideas raised here are respected, discussed, and carried through, assuming somebody from the community is willing to put some time and effort into it beyond the project staff. The energy for new ideas and enthusiasm for implementing them are firmly up to residents. This ethos is consistent with the ‘*for Roma, by Roma’* principle, and is aligned with ideas around collective action and collective control in the Theory of Change (ToC) the Trust is exploring.

Specifically, the *for Roma, by Roma* principle encourages collective action (e.g. a residents’ organising group), which increases the level of accountability of participants, and allows their sense of confidence and aspiration to grow in the longer term when they implement actions successfully. The fact that the majority of Forum attendees are Roma and decisions are made and implemented by Roma evidence how this principle manifests.

When asked why they attend the Community Forum, responses include:

*I come because I want to steer the project*. *(Resident, 2019)*

*What we asked to happen has happened, like the dance group, the day trips and also the ESOL classes: they have all happened because we asked for them*. *(Resident, 2019)*

The meetings have a formal agenda and minutes that are organised by the resident who is now the community facilitator in charge of administration. The forum meetings are chaired by the two project leads (one Scottish, one Roma) and translated by a mixture of people depending on the languages required, often simultaneously, so the meetings are lively affairs.

A group of people walking down a street

Description automatically generatedA picture containing chair, table, child, building

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Community Forum meeting in the local park, abiding by social distancing restrictions.

The Community Forum makes decisions about where it allocates its budget and what activities it undertakes as well as a host of other decisions about implementation, such as whether to charge for an activity. One example was the decision to organise a family trip to Deep Sea World. The Forum assumed responsibility for organising the trip, phoning the coach company, finding out prices, organising snacks, allocating volunteers to each family, advertising the outing, and selling tickets.

A significant decision for the Community Forum was changing the formal priorities of the Local Conversation. The Forum decided to shift one of its four priorities from ‘environment’ to ‘young people’ to better reflect the interests and passions of the group in the long term.

Although it is slow, the sense of responsibility of the Community Forum is growing:

*The forum is increasingly asking for bigger and more meaningful things beyond parties: they want to get kids off the street with sports, organise park benches, or clean up the area. (Staff, 2020)*

It could still go further, in particular in terms of direct control of funding:

*The forum still doesn’t fully recognise that they can control the funds and activity. (Staff, 2020)*

**Control beyond the Forum.** The ethos of “supporting you to support yourselves” runs through all the groups and activities organised. For example, the resident who volunteers her time to teach the dance group discusses with the group participants what they want to learn and when, including whether they want to do live performances at social events. Similarly, the Men’s Group decides each night what activity or game they are going to play, or indeed whether they want to try to buy or borrow another game in future. The Young Leaders also make their own decisions about what they are going to focus on, whether to expand their group, and what activities to organise (albeit facilitated by the two youth workers). It is very much owned by them, not Community Renewal.

The social events are all organised by resident sub-groups and this is now the norm. Over the last four years, it is possible to see a progression in the assumption of who will do the work of organising events:

Now there is a general understanding and acceptance that any event will be organised by a residents’ group, which leads to greater feelings of ownership as well as the building of skills and confidence.

#### Influence of organisations/systems

Influencing organisations and systems is one area which has been slower to develop in Govanhill. The project finds it often needs to put considerable effort into supporting residents to stabilise and improve their lives before they are able to engage with any other aspect of the Local Conversation, such as volunteering or trying to influence others in positions of power locally. This takes time.

Residents’ underlying mistrust of authorities means most residents have very low expectations of the degree to which they can influence authorities. However, the request to the Slovakian Embassy to visit Govanhill demonstrated clearly that sometimes authorities will listen, respond, and help, in the right circumstances. This has shown residents that if the conditions are right and the situation well-handled, authorities can and will deliver useful services.

At least one Roma representative attends all the meetings of the Govanhill Regeneration Group. Even if their ability to directly influence the decisions and actions of the Regeneration Group is low, their interests are at least being represented and considered during discussions. This is a first step to having any influence.

One long-term ambition held by the project team is to start a Roma-led organisation that delivers many of the services and support that the Local Conversation does currently. It may have to be set up under the umbrella of Community Renewal in some way at the start, but the long-term ambition would be to become stable and resourced enough to be delivered by an all-Roma staff.

This is a future aspiration, but it is possible to see a group of Roma residents rapidly developing the skills to be able to deliver this successfully. The growing and well-evidenced capacity of Roma staff and volunteers, their desire to make it happen, and the support that Community Renewal could potentially provide at the outset, could help funders feel confident that the project is sustainable.

#### Diversity

The project aims to help Roma people. Nearly all of the beneficiaries of the Local Conversations funding in Govanhill are Roma people. This has become increasingly embedded as among them the four community facilitators speak a range of Eastern European languages and so are increasing the reach of their work. There is a recognition though that cross-cultural connections are important too, hence helping to organise the Multicultural Ceilidh with the Asian community for socialising.

The gender balance appears to be good, with activities specifically for each gender as well as opportunities for all people. There has been a gender balance at the large mixed cultural events, which at least 100 people attend every time.

Within this broad ethnic group, there appears to be relatively good diversity with one exception: there is a relatively large number of Romanian Roma in Govanhill who the project has not managed to engage. This has been the case in previous years. Which residents are involved can sometime feel “more by chance than by design”, given how quickly things can change and how many factors are outside the team’s control. For example, two new Romanian residents have joined the Community Forum, but equally some of the sewing group members were Romanian and that has stopped. However, the project has the language capability now, and has made many new connections with Romanian families via the emergency food deliveries.

#### Sustainability of activities and outcomes

*This is a process, not a project. (Staff, 2020)*

A number of interviewees confirmed that there are two aspects of sustainability to consider given the nature of community development in Govanhill.

**Activities.** If funding were to cease, many activities would also cease. They simply cannot be held without funds to pay for venues, travel, food, translation, or a qualified youth worker. The dance group, Men’s Group, Young Leaders, sports groups, English lessons, and social events would, under current circumstances, most likely stop, or at least be significantly scaled back, if funding ceased. The prices that would need to be charged to maintain events would likely be unaffordable to most members, making a standard self-financing model unlikely to work. Social enterprise ideas such as opening a café may in theory have a chance to become self-financing, but many see this as over-optimistic.

**Outcomes.** The activities, however, are a means of reaching a goal: to help drive the outcomes. Many of these outcomes (covered later) are ‘banked’ as they are achieved and do not disappear when the activity is complete. For example, improved skills (English and other language skills, IT skills), confidence, friendships, and organisational ability are examples of outcomes that likely will continue beyond activities. These are the components of empowerment and the reason for the project’s existence. At least some of these outcomes would remain and continue to offer value long after funding ends.

*Capacity building is our most long-lived achievement: better education and confidence, some people could continue work even if the organisation stopped today. (Staff, 2020)*

**Pathway of personal support and development.** The model of social change and community empowerment that the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) has used with the project in Govanhill is reproduced in Figure A1.1. All levels of this pyramid are visible in the Local Conversation with real-life examples noted on the right. Furthermore, examples exist of where a resident moves up the pyramid: first they hear about a service or activity (1), then they participate or benefit from it (2) and go on to a higher level in the pyramid to either join the weekly Men’s Group (3), become a volunteer (4) or even join the Young Leaders group or the Community Forum (6).

*Figure A1.1: Pathway of personal support and development*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| New-Pyramid | **6** | **Leading:** Community Forum, Young Leaders |
| **5** | **Owning:** Residents groups to organise social events |
| **4** | **Contributing:** Volunteers |
| **3** | **Recurring endorsement:** Weekly group members (dance/men’s/sports/girls) |
| **2** | **Following and participating:** Attending social events, accessing welfare advice or food parcel |
| **1** | **Observing:** all local residents |

Beyond the residents who attend social events (2) and the weekly groups (3), there is a constantly changing flow of volunteer roles (4/5) that emerge and are filled to perform functions like selling tickets, organising games, delivering food parcels, or staffing an event.

More often than not, residents in Govanhill either volunteer because they want an activity to happen and they know they need to help to make it a reality, or they see volunteering as a steppingstone to employment (more experience, better CV). In other words, the motivation to volunteer is more practical than altruistic.

*In Slovakia we don’t really have the habit or culture of ‘volunteering’ like there is in the UK.(Staff, 2019)*

It therefore follows that volunteering can be harder to sustain. The project tries to sustain volunteers in a longer-term commitment by finding funds to pay them on a sessional basis (even if just two hours a week), which can in turn grow into part-time employment, and so on into full employment and all the benefits that brings. This is a clear pathway that maximises the volume of action being taken and builds the skills and confidence of residents in the long term.

*He started by volunteering with us. He stayed because he liked the ethos of the project. When money is available, we can bring people into either sessional work or part-time work, to help more. (Staff, 2019)*

### Enablers

**Roma team.** Having paid team members and volunteers who are Roma clearly makes a world of difference. It is the outward manifestation of the project’s*for Roma, by Roma* ethos, and helps break down barriers of mistrust between ethnicities. A steady increase in Roma ability, confidence, and presence has occurred over four years in the project and is the key asset of the Local Conversation.

*Young people on the street that weren’t willing to speak English to us, are now opening up now we have a Romanian speaker on the team. (Staff, 2019)*

*We were the only project who was represented by Roma at the East of England Roma conference: it was a shock to me. (Staff, 2020)*

**Cross-fertilisation of funding streams.** Although sometimes uncomfortable for funders, the ability of the project to leverage additional funds has provided the opportunity to make a step change in the level of activities organised. The team when working on one project part-time can talk to residents about another project, and volunteers move between them to best suit their roles. Maintaining a tolerance and embracing this cross-fertilisation is – in terms of outcomes delivered – a productive standpoint.

To give one example, the Young Leaders group (which is funded by the Trust) secured money from another funder to conduct a survey of young people in the area last year. This survey has helped them better focus their Trust-funded work around the needs of young residents and has attracted more people to their group as they developed the Young Leaders idea. The additional funding was leveraged on the back of the demonstrable stability and success of the Trust-funded group, and the new funding has in turn boosted the productivity and progress of the group.

*None of the activity could happen if the PHT work was not in place. When we leverage extra funding it is on the back of evidence from the PHT work. (Staff, 2020)*

**Office premises.** The Community Renewal office is – or was, before Covid-19 restrictions – a busy place. In addition to the normal office work and daily group activities held in the office on weekday afternoons and evenings, there is a constant flow of side-meetings, informal discussions, appointments, introductions and advice sessions happening. It can be hard to find somewhere to sit due to the vibrant and constant activity: there is a positive buzz of action and connection about the place. It is notable though that a smaller office, or one with just one large room, rather than four smaller rooms, would be unsuitable and would severely hamper the Local Conversation because there would not be sufficient separate spaces to conduct parallel activities.

For instance, a common scenario would involve one person working quietly, one person conducting a confidential employability client meeting, two people chatting socially and briefing a Resident, while in a separate room again a group of young people are planning an activity with the youth worker. The size and layout of the office premises are a real asset. However, as expanded on under the Barriers section, the main community venue has been lost and the existing offices are unsuitable for some major activities because they are simply too small for a party of 100 people. Also, they are in a terraced building with flats overhead, so noise has to be limited.

**Covid-19 restrictions.** Responding to the short-term demands of the Covid-19 virus outbreak has been challenging. However, it has pushed the team in productive new ways, largely by increasing their technology and virtual communication skills:

*As with everyone, it’s driven us into new work patterns where we’ve learned loads about IT possibilities. (Staff, 2020)*

The project now uses Facebook messenger for most of its communications, both via text and video messages. Staff use WhatsApp regularly to stay in touch quickly, and many team members have developed significant new skills with using IT devices to deliver their work in ways they were not able to do 6 months ago, for example having online meetings or editing video translations.

*If 6 months ago you had said “go and run this project online” I would have said it was impossible, but we’ve done it – I’m amazed! (Staff, 2020)*

While clearly not a normal enabler, the Covid-19 restrictions have in some ways had specific benefits, some of which will remain with the team members and volunteers long after the restrictions are lifted.

### Barriers

Several barriers inhibit progress.

**Lack of English.** According to some interviewees, the single main barrier to the further growth of the Local Conversation in Govanhill is the lack of workable spoken English in the majority of the Roma population. Progress is being made, though, with the recruitment of four community facilitators who all speak good English in addition to other languages, and also a limited number of residents participating in English lessons.

However, in terms of numbers, this will currently do little to change the ease with which the majority of Roma in Govanhill can converse with the English-speakers in ways that can meaningfully influence their lives. For instance, their English levels would still prevent them from having conversations about their needs or resolving issues with teachers, doctors, immigration officials, and landlords.

*People say “I can't do this because my English is not good”. They don’t fully control their life. (Staff, 2018)*

*He can’t phone the employment agency to ask for work in English, so he won’t get any. (Staff, 2018)*

*English is still only coming very slowly to the core residents beyond the community facilitators and project workers. (Staff, 2020)*

*I always encourage residents to learn English, but they say they don’t have time – I say “that’s not possible!” It is frustrating sometimes. (Staff, 2020)*

Residents who have become most involved in the project and secured paid work have had better English than others. More thought is required to ensure residents fulfil their potential to learn English, so that they can continue to develop the skills and confidence they need to take more control of their own lives in the long term. Indeed, the fact that English has been a key challenge for some years suggests a need for the team to find ways of giving it higher priority.

The project already believes in putting the onus on residents to help themselves, in which case could the commitment to develop their English be a similar responsibility? Free and flexible resources exist such as smartphone apps that give residents control over when, where, and how they learn: paid lessons are not always needed. Clearly this is a sensitive area and care is required to achieve a delicate balance between encouraging people to improve their English skills while also avoiding a perceived sense of neo-colonialism or undermining the use of the Roma languages.

**Loss of community premises.** The Local Conversation benefitted enormously from the local church venue before it was closed on safety grounds. This was the focal point for conversations, meeting, and making social connections. The venue was becoming a *de facto* cultural and social centre for the Roma. All other suitable local venues have been investigated and, although each has their pros and cons, none is really suitable for what is needed. For instance, one was too expensive, another one was too small, a third needed construction work to adapt it in order to be suitable, and yet another had a landlord who feared there would be racial tensions between the existing users of the space and the Roma people using the space.

*The loss of premises has really hit us. (Staff, 2019)*

*We need premises to do what we do: a place to meet, talk and connect. (Staff, 2019)*

There is no immediate solution in sight. There is a long-term possibility of the original church venue being purchased and repaired but this is some years off, even as a possibility, and cannot be relied on.

**Funding.** The limits of funding are always a barrier. The team finds they cannot fit all they have to do into the paid time they have. If there was more funding, they would simply be able to achieve more – more activities, more participants, more learning, and more confidence – as it would pay for more staff time.

*There are always more people to help, more people waiting. I can’t fit it into the days that are funded. (Staff, 2020)*

**Covid-19 restrictions:** At the time of writing the lockdown restrictions around Covid-19 are the most obvious barrier to activity. Groups cannot meet easily, and large groups cannot meet at all.

*All activity stopped really, for a while at least. Only slowly can we restart physical meetings. (Staff, 2020)*

However, the team has maximised the opportunities that the challenge has thrown at them by migrating several in-person activities to virtual ones and waits with patience for a new kind of normality to return.

## Outcomes and achievements

Key achievements and outcomes in 2020:

1. Translations of public health messages during Covid-19 restrictions.
2. Social media messages viewed by almost 4000 people
3. Food deliveries during lockdown to 110 families twice a week.
4. Slovakian Embassy’s visit to Govanhill and the issuing of 100 passports.
5. Social activities reaching 100–200 people at a time, across cultures.
6. Weekly activities for Young Leaders, men, girls, and junior sports.
7. Shift to Roma delivering the majority of the project activities, including residents organising social events themselves.

These achievements appear to deliver outcomes at three different levels in Govanhill, largely for three different groups of beneficiaries:

**Short-term stabilisation for one-off beneficiaries.** Immediate help to stabilise residents’ lives to a minimum level in terms of receiving a minimum level of income, food, and support through the Covid food deliveries, the Covid health message translations, the Slovakian Embassy issuing passports, and the employability service getting them on the first rung of the employment ladder. The project sees having basic needs met as a pre-requisite for residents to be ready and able to contribute more widely to the community and the project, and develop themselves.

**Social connectedness of participants.** The social events that are regularly organised deliver a greater sense of social connectedness amongst participants including across ethnicities – both within the Roma people and across other cultures. The weekly sports groups also bring girls and juniors together to socialise and play. The act of coming together to do a fun activity is the main mechanism through which social connectedness is built. These groups and activities are all run by the Local Conversation team, so participants are exposed to the wider opportunities in the project and can be drawn into other parts of the work.

**Skills, knowledge, confidence, and control.** For those more involved in the Local Conversation, the outcomes are deeper and longer term. The leap in personal capacity of the project workers, community facilitators, Young Leaders, and core volunteers is evident, as manifested in the skill to organise, the confidence to meet and persuade in both their own languages and English, and the ability to take more control of their own lives and assist others around them (e.g. to read a contract, fill in an application form, make a complaint, ring the Council). This outcome feels the most dramatic, tangible, and long-lasting, best illustrated in residents’ own words:

*Life would have been so different [when I arrived in the UK ] if I knew everything I know now.*

*I’m happy to call, meet with people in English. I would have avoided it or been really nervous before.*

*I’m really confident now, I never wanted to talk to people, now I do. I’ll talk to anyone about anything!*

*I had never used Word/PowerPoint/Excel before and now I use them frequently.*

## Plans for the future

There are a number of plans for the future. Some are near-term while others are aspirations or dreams. Near-term plans mentioned by interviewees include:

* Establish a digital information, news and music channel.
* Set up a communication channel on Facebook and Instagram called Amano Voice (a group of girls from the Young Leaders).
* Broadcast a ‘mish mash’ of new music blending English and Roma music, as well as play a live online gig (music group).
* Teach young people how to make a podcast and video.
* Trial an ‘upcycling’ project, in which residents put unwanted items on the pavement on a particular day for others to take, if they wish, and whatever remains by the end of the day would be put in skips and taken away. It works well in other countries.

More ambitious and longer-term plans include:

* Train and develop a core group of people to act as community connectors, providing them with the ability to share accurate information to others.
* Set up a small grants scheme to manage money via the Community Forum, or via specific groups such as the Men’s Group.
* Establish social enterprises that pay for themselves.
* Employ young people or arrange apprenticeships.
* Roma secure positions of authority, either on the City Council, the Community Development Trust or similar.
* Establish a cultural centre to meet, hold activities, and rent out space.
* Establish a Roma-run organisation to really live for Roma, by Roma. This hasn’t happened yet but we’re working towards it!

Lastly, reflecting on the process of the case study evaluation, interviewees said:

*It’s always valuable to be challenged on what we’re doing and why – it makes me think about it, takes me out of the everyday work, lift my eyes to the horizon.*

*I enjoy our evaluation conversations, I’m really happy to share how we’re doing as you know us and have in the past captured really well what we’re about.*

### Sustainability

One of the challenges to the sustainability of the Local Conversation in Govanhill is the residents’ perceived lack of financial autonomy and control. As reported in 2019, there is a risk that financial control and approval processes by the Trust undermine residents’ sense of community control. Put simply, the Community Forum does not feel in control because it still needs permission or approval from the Trust to proceed with certain activities.

For example, each time Community Renewal has to say in a Forum meeting “We’ll have to check with the Trust about that”, it makes it clear that residents are not really in control, which is undermining. The challenge is that residents generate ideas on a relatively short timescale, and enthusiasm waxes and wanes as people change their minds or personal circumstances change, which makes it difficult to plan six to twelve months ahead. This appears to present an otherwise unavoidable contradiction in the ToC, in which the lack of financial autonomy and control in using the budget detracts from the collective control that residents are building and is worthy of discussion between the Trust and the project.

To help maximise the sense of collective control that residents are building, the Trust could consider allowing an unallocated budget line of spend to be authorised. This would grant the Community Forum freedom to use the funds to deliver on their four agreed priorities. As long as it is a relatively moderate sum to minimise risks, this would help to put into practice the aim of delegating control to test how it is used and subsequently justified. It is important to nurture and increase residents’ developing sense of control in order to make the project more sustainable.

# Annex 2. Claremont Ten, Blackpool

Supported by the First Step Community Centre.

## Methods

Due to the restrictions around Covid-19, fieldwork was carried out virtually in August 2020. As a result, the usual diversity of research methods – including group discussions, observations, and informal conversations – was not possible and research was limited to one-to-one telephone interviews. These interviews, with staff and residents from the Claremont Ten Steering Group, lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. While interviews were not recorded, extensive notes were taken for analysis.

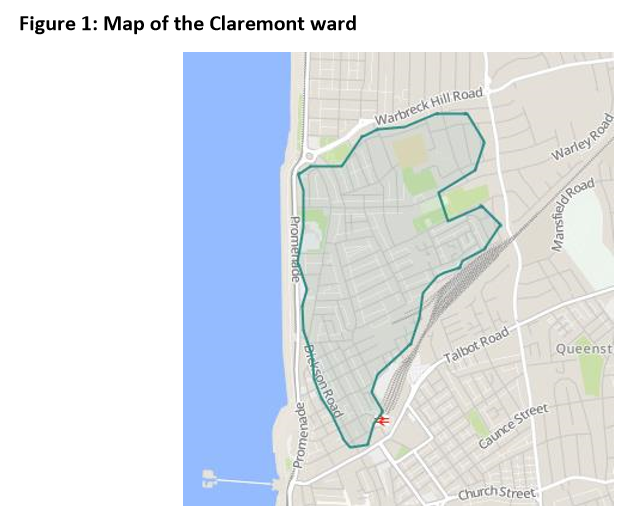
At the time of the interviews, the UK was slowly emerging from a nationwide lockdown. However, social distancing guidelines meant that the First Step Community Centre where the Local Conversation in Claremont is based was only tentatively beginning to re-open at this point. Additionally, there was an ongoing spate of local lockdowns in the North West which caused further uncertainty in the area as to when and under what conditions the Centre would be able to reopen. This is the operational context in which staff and residents reflected on the last year, and within which they were trying to think about the year ahead.

The impact of Covid-19 on our proposed fieldwork has been considerable and imposed some significant limitations to fieldwork this year. It has had several effects:

* A larger burden on lead organisation staff to arrange interviews with residents at a time when they are already stretched and in less frequent contact with residents, especially the Steering Group who are usually interviewed.
* Fewer interviews with residents than in previous years. This will likely exacerbate a limitation of previous years whereby only the more engaged residents are likely to take part in interviews.
* Difficulties in achieving the same level of engagement with residents through telephone interviews.
* Analysis is based solely on interviews this year, where in previous years it was based on multiple interactions throughout researchers’ site visits, such as (participant) observation, focus groups, and informal discussions.

## Context: About the Claremont Ten

Claremont is an area to the north of Blackpool city centre. It is a short walk from the sea, the promenade, and the North Pier. The Local Conversation is focused on ten streets in the centre of Claremont.



The Local Conversation is led by the Claremont First Step Community Centre, which is housed in a converted church, the ground floor of which was converted into a community centre in the late 1990s and which recently entirely ceased functioning as a church. The Centre has now been open for 20 years and provides a range of activities and services through different funding streams. There are two staff offices, a computer room, a meeting room (where the Steering Group meets, and which is also rented out to other community groups and for educational courses), a kitchen with a full-time chef, a café that is open to the public and frequented by residents, and a main hall where many activities take place throughout the week (including Local Conversation activities and others organised by First Step). The Centre was closed for a large portion of 2020 during the national lockdown.

The Claremont Ten is located in the top decile for the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019). Moreover, the five Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) which make up the surrounding neighbourhood include the third, ninth, and eleventh most deprived LSOAs in England.[[10]](#footnote-10) As noted in previous years’ reports, Claremont has an affluent past, where the thriving tourism trade presented many opportunities for residents.

*Going back historically, it was a very affluent area, going back a good few years […] because the hospitality trade was massive here in Blackpool as you probably imagine. A lot of tourism, a lot of hospitality opportunities for people.(Staff, 2017)*

However, the rise of cheap international flights and the long-term decline in domestic tourism drastically affected the local labour market. The city has lost its main source of employment because longer family holidays have been replaced by a shorter tourist season with an increase in stag and hen parties. As a result, the city’s tourist industry has floundered, unemployment remains very high, and poverty continues to be a huge problem in the Claremont Ten. One staff member described how Blackpool has “rested on its laurels” and has long lost its annual trade in party conferences. Labour last held party conference in 2002, the Conservatives in 2007. The last party to host a conference in Blackpool was the Monster Raving Loony Party in 2017.

The pattern of housing tenure in the Claremont Ten is unchanged since previous evaluations. The area contains a high rate of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs), largely owned by absentee landlords and converted from former guesthouses. This housing is affordable, often crowded, and poorly maintained by landlords. The Council and other local authorities use this affordable housing stock to fulfil their own statutory obligations, which has created a high concentration of very vulnerable people in the area who are often transient and perceived as not being invested in the area.

In addition to this long-term decline, the impact of Covid-19 has hit the town’s tourist industry on which many residents depend for seasonal work. Staff who were interviewed explained that the big leisure companies that typically do two rounds of recruitment for seasonal work each year – one in early spring and another in summer – have not done either this year. Hotels are struggling as the season has been cut extremely short due to the national lockdown.

A huge concern among staff was that the impact of this has yet to be seen in the area, as it is not uncommon for residents to work seasonally and save through the summer to support themselves through the winter. Staff reflected that this may be the first year for many workers in Blackpool to not work at all. In addition, staff discussed the probable job cuts by large retailers in Blackpool, the full impact of which will not be felt until the government’s furlough scheme ends. There was also a fear that any shops that closed may not be replaced, leaving the high streets and shopping centres offering fewer jobs and fewer services.

### Connections and community

Overall, staff and residents described the Local Conversation as providing more opportunities for building connections and community in the area. The 2019 interim evaluation report mentioned the two pubs in the neighbourhood, which operated as pockets of social capital. The pub was a common space where the community could gather; it provided infrastructure to enable and support collective activities, both as the site of the annual gala and the base for litter picks.

In the research this year, staff and residents described the Local Conversation as an important social infrastructure for local residents. The Claremont Ten’s activities are embedded throughout the local community – at the First Step Community Centre but also in a local pub (the pool team), the park (walking football), and the community garden. This visibility allows a sense of community, a sense that the Claremont Ten is a place in itself to be strengthened. One resident described this by differentiating his activities in the Claremont Ten from other social activities.

*It’s nice to be able to do something completely different on a social level – not just meeting up with friends, doing something as a team. (Resident, 2020)*

Another resident reflected:

*You feel like you’re getting that community back because of getting more involved in things that are happening in the area. (Resident, 2020)*

Both reflections show how doing things together has created a sense of belonging for residents involved in the Claremont Ten. The project itself, branching into numerous spaces in the local area, has created more opportunities for that. This is particularly important in an area which otherwise lacks the variety of such spaces where a strong social fabric and sense of community can develop.

Residents in the Steering Group framed their involvement in the Claremont Ten in terms of helping others. Such a framing tends to rely on some kind of recognised collective where there is a responsibility to help; this can be a local connection, a religious community, a community that shares a language or customs, or a shared political vision. That residents framed their involvement in this way suggests that they feel themselves to be part of a local community which brings with it a responsibility to help others.

*I like helping people, it’s the way I got brought up. I’d rather help them than help myself because I know I can do things. (Resident, 2020)*

However, there was also a recognition from both staff and residents that not everyone in the neighbourhood felt that sense of community or, if they did, it did not translate into a willingness to be involved and give back. The housing situation in Claremont and the transience of a lot of its population was also felt to contribute to some people, particularly vulnerable residents, being isolated.

*They don’t want to get involved because it requires effort, commitment, and I think a lot of people aren’t prepared to commit to go every week to the centre. People have their own lives to lead. They’re quite busy, and they’re quite happy for other people to do it. (Resident, 2020)*

*People move around a lot, they fall through kind of… nets, in support systems. It often means that they don’t have local connections or networks within areas that they move to. (Community partner, 2020)*

### Services and amenities

Staff did not describe significant changes from previous years’ evaluations in terms of services and amenities. The area is well-served by public transport, with two bus routes and easy access to the tram which runs along the promenade. The park at the edge of the Claremont Ten has had some work done on it this year. In the park there is a multi-use games area (MUGA) where the Claremont Ten runs walking football sessions and a community garden where some residents volunteer under the banner of the Claremont Growers. There are two pubs within the neighbourhood – The Corner House and The Mount – which are popular with locals. Otherwise, Claremont is a largely residential area.

For its size, Claremont has a large number of community-oriented organisations, including the Magic Club (a local youth club) and the Claremont Park Community Centre. There is a local primary school in the area, and Better Start is also present in Blackpool (although Claremont has not had its own Better Start centre for several years now). Prior to the pandemic, services and amenities in the area were largely unchanged from last year. Staff reflected at length, however, on the rapid closure of services for residents during the national lockdown. In this way, the lockdown has particularly impacted those who rely a lot on public and voluntary services, despite organisations’ best efforts to support their service users.

*For the elderly in Blackpool, there’s been a massive shortage, a shock[ing] shortage, of services. (Staff, 2020)*

Interestingly, staff described a much longer period of shut-down than the national lockdown which lasted from late March into June. They mentioned that elderly residents in particular were becoming increasingly anxious and reluctant to come in from late January onwards, and that many services began shutting their doors by the end of February. When the interviews for this report were conducted, in August, staff were only just beginning to meet with residents face-to-face (outdoors). This suggests that many residents were isolated and without access to their usual support services – in-person interactions with various services and professionals, as well as activities that encouraged them to leave the house and socialise – for at least six months in 2020.

Furthermore, staff recognised that it would still take some time for residents – particularly older residents and others particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 – to feel able to return to activities at the Centre even once they were allowed. That said, the First Step Community Centre and the Claremont Ten worked throughout the lockdown to continue providing support – both social and material – to vulnerable residents (see *Activities*).

### Power and control

The 2019 report discussed a sense of apathy in the area, which was felt to come from a lack of trust in authority, and a lack of confidence, time, and resources for volunteering. In 2020, staff and residents reflected on this long-standing problem in similar terms. Staff highlighted a historic practice by charities/services in which projects had been dropped in/on local residents for a short time and then removed (for further discussion see *Barriers and enablers*).

*Residents over the years have been promised loads in Claremont, and nothing has happened, and that’s demoralising. And when other things take place, they initially hang back because they think it’s another fly-by scheme. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff also reflected, however, that the ethos of project and its longevity has started to shift this reluctance:

*So they’ve become quite distrusting because of bigpromises and it hasn’t happened. We promise little and deliver big.” (Staff, 2020)*

## Process: About the Local Conversation in the Claremont Ten

### Local priorities

Since last year’s report, the Local Conversation in Claremont Ten has kept the same three priority areas:

* Brush it up: improve the local environment and quality of place.
* Youth provision: provide spaces, activities, and projects for young people.
* Inclusion for all: develop spaces and activities for a variety of adults in the community to ensure that the neighbourhood is working and acting together.

Staff are very aware that the impact of Covid-19 may cause these priorities to shift. They feel this is the result of two things: new local needs (particularly around mental health) and a changed health and safety context which would make some previous activities (eg the big group activities that were common in ‘Brush it up’) impossible for the foreseeable future. At the time of the virtual fieldwork, face-to-face meetings were just starting to resume, albeit very tentatively given the spate of local lockdowns in the North West. As such, this discussion about shifting priorities between staff, the Steering Group, and the wider community was at an early stage.

#### Brush it up

* Claremont Growers (a group of residents who volunteer at the community garden at Claremont Park) – 10 residents per week.
* Environment team whose activities included litter picks and alleyway clean ups – 20 residents per month.
* Walkabouts with the local housing association to identify issues around maintenance or anti-social behaviour that need attention – 12 residents every 6 to 8 weeks.

#### Youth provision

* Children's Wednesday Club (a weekly afterschool club for children) –18 children per week.

#### Inclusion for all

* Pool team (based in a local pub, the team also runs fundraisers for the Claremont Ten at the pub) – 20 residents per week.
* Raid the Larder (a foodbank that operates out of the First Steps Community Centre, on a non-referral basis) – 40 residents per week.
* Men's Club (a social space for older men­) – 12 residents per month.
* Adults with complex needs club (a lunch club for adults with disabilities) – 25 residents per week.
* Elderly residents lunch club and social days – 40 residents per week.
* Knit and Natter (a knitting group) – 10 residents per week.
* Fitness classes – 12 residents per week.

### Activities in response to Covid-19

The national lockdown ended the normal activities of the Claremont Ten. However, during the lockdown many got involved in the crisis response that the Claremont First Step Centre was organising.

First Step exists in an ecosystem with other public and third sector organisations and services in the area. As such, there were many opportunities for Claremont Ten residents to receive and give help within their community:

* Staff arranged a partnership with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) to create a telephone buddy scheme, which paired ten elderly residents with students who called regularly through the lockdown.
* The Centre worked hard to stay in touch with residents. Residents were involved in these efforts, which included sending cards and letters (approximately 1640 sent), making phone calls (approximately 600), and – when it became possible – visiting residents in their gardens (approximately 90 visits).
* The Centre also arranged for residents to have some treats or entertainment delivered, including 100 afternoon teas, 200 tins of shortbread, and 100 children’s activity packs.
* Emergency food distribution: 500 emergency food parcels were delivered locally.

### Projects in development

The Claremont Ten also had some projects in development. Some of these were developing prior to the lockdown and have been put on hold, while others are developing out of needs arising from the pandemic.

* Several Claremont Ten Steering Group members have agreed to become telephone buddies in a scheme with Blackpool Council to provide support for homeless people the Council is trying to move into permanent accommodation.
* World Culture Day to celebrate the cultural diversity in the wider area was postponed.

### Local participation in, and control over, the project

#### Steering Group

The Steering Group for the Claremont Ten has become slightly smaller in the last year, reducing from nine members to eight. This small change aside, the group remains very stable, with most members having been part of the Steering Group for several years now. Those involved are usually heavily so, taking part in numerous activities. Of the residents interviewed for this year’s fieldwork, all were involved in two or more projects/activities that sit within the Claremont Ten.

*[A few]… years ago there was a lot more people on Steering Group. Now it has whittled itself down to a hardcore of members. Five hardcore members now, and a couple of others who come along. (Resident, 2020).*

For most Claremont Ten activities there is a sub-group of residents who are responsible for delivering them on a week-to-week basis. Usually these sub-groups contain a member of the Steering Group, who is therefore able to relay the needs/concerns of individual projects to the wider Steering Group at its monthly meetings.

Similarly to last year, the residents described a very respectful, functional Steering Group where members work well together. They all described a process of making decisions where consensus was usually achieved, and conflict was rare. This seemed to be related to a perception that members shared a common purpose that drove their participation.

*We just can’t make decisions off our own back – as a group we make them. (Resident, 2020)*

*If I have got something that I can think of, then obviously I’ll talk to Joe [project lead] about it. But obviously it’s also about what other people [the Steering Group] think, but mostly people don’t disagree. They think it’s a good idea cos we like helping people. (Resident, 2020)*

Residents also spoke positively about trying new ideas in the group, which suggests a well-functioning sense of collective decision-making and shared responsibility.

*People would probably wanna try something, and if it didn’t work then they could say ’we’ve tried, is there anything else we can think of?’ (Resident, 2020)*

Although residents did not reflect on their own work in this way, staff discussed how the Steering Group’s confidence and capacity for decision-making has grown over time.

*They’ve become more responsible, more vocal. Them being more confident in what they can and cannot do, having training, them knowing the area… They’ve grown with the projects and with the Local Conversation. They’ve got more confidence. (Staff, 2020)*

As well as a positive working relationship with one another, the residents interviewed from the Steering Group also described a positive working relationship with staff. As they are heavily involved in the weekly projects of the Local Conversations, the Steering Group usually has a lot of face-to-face and informal interaction with staff.

#### Who leads, and how?

When asked about leadership, staff and residents offered somewhat different perspectives. It seems that these visions can be squared by exploring two issues: the question of “who” leads and is perceived to have control, and the question of what the ideas of “leadership” and “control” actually mean in the context of the Local Conversation.

Staff described themselves as facilitators, offering the Steering Group guidance particularly around issues of governance, health and safety, and risk assessments.

*First and foremost we’re facilitators, and we’re there as guidance as well. I think I’m part of the team, not known as a leader, and that team involves my colleagues and residents. (Staff, 2020)*

When residents discussed control and leadership, it was in a way that was often contradictory. This is perhaps not surprising since there are many layers to, and ways of, understanding something as complicated as leadership. On the one hand, they consistently described the Steering Group as making decisions independently. Indeed, they largely discussed control and influence in these terms, as the ability to say yes or no to a proposed project. And in this way, they felt consistently in control. There was no sense from residents that staff would pressure them into things or be dismissive of their ideas. Indeed, residents spoke very positively about the role that staff play.

*They take our ideas down. If we’ve got an idea we go and speak to them about it and they say ’no problem‘ and go and check if other people [this seemed to mean other organisations or bodies who might need to sign off on, for example, the use of a space] agree with it. (Resident, 2020)*

Similarly, staff described residents as increasingly able to make decisions themselves and reject staff proposals where they didn’t agree with them.

On the other hand, residents also often described staff as leaders, generating a lot of ideas and momentum. Residents recognised their autonomy, as a group, to act on their own to carry out smaller actions – for example, arranging a litter-pick – whilst also acknowledging that staff brought structure, drive, and a lot of leadership.

*I think they [the projects] require a bit more support from [staff], but with our help so they’re not doing it by themselves. (Resident, 2020)*

*[Staff] takes the lead really; we’re the helpers if you like. (Resident, 2020)*

Residents and staff also described a functional group that is capable of, and regularly makes, decisions. In residents’ descriptions, these decisions would be prompted by suggestions made by both staff and residents. The suggestions that come from staff, including the phone buddy schemes with both UCLan and the Council, as well as Raid the Larder in a previous year, are often around partnership working developing out of professional experience, a way of working, and networks that residents simply do not have.

Although these proposals could be seen to be led by staff particularly in the short-term, it is important to consider the effects of this as a type of facilitation in the longer-term. One staff member spoke about a long-term challenge in the area of an atmosphere of distrust between residents and professionals working in the area, which she framed as a long-term barrier to residents having a real voice locally.

*The residents don’t trust the professionals and some professionals think the residents are out for what they can get […] . It takes time for residents to build up relationships with local councillors and other local agencies. We have started that now – some of our residents go to the local neighbourhood partnership which is a multi-agency group. (Staff, 2020)*

Within this context, the lead organisation’s proposal of partnership projects can be understood as part of a longer-term vision of expanding residents’ influence beyond the Local Conversation, by embedding them within other important institutions in the area. This helps to expands residents’ scope for potential leadership opportunities throughout their community.

*When there were face-to-face meetings [before lockdown], we encouraged them to get involved with other things in the community – neighbourhood watch, rubbish amnesties, the school. So they’re finding out more about what’s going on in the wider community, strengthening their own skills, and their voices can be heard at meetings. (Staff, 2020)*

Overall, the issue of leadership and control is a complex one in the Claremont Ten. In some way, residents feel themselves to be in control, and in others they still see the staff as leaders. However, this mixture should not be surprising; staff membership inevitably comes with status, and staff also have the professional knowledge and networks residents lack.

#### Degrees of participation in action

Previous years’ evaluations recorded a pattern of a small core group of active participants, and a wider group of passive participants, who attended projects and community events organised through the Claremont Ten but would be unlikely to take on a volunteer role or join the Steering Group themselves. This pattern of participation seems to have continued in the last year. In terms of increasing the depth of participation from residents, staff described a need to be attentive to where residents’ interests lay and focus on developing opportunities for them to be involved more within those areas.

*[We’re] learning to stop trying to get people to interact in different things where the interest isn’t there, so just helping to expand on the interaction they already do. (Staff, 2020)*

There was a sense from several of those interviewed that more needed to be done to reach out to residents who were not yet involved. While it was recognised that this is not easy in an area where people are transient and have very difficult circumstances, it was felt to be important to widen participation. This was framed by one resident in terms of the benefits to residents of participating, which she feels many other people needed to access.

*I think we need quite a few more people to come. We’ve not got as many as we should have. People are coming now, but it’d make their lives easier by doing things. (Resident, 2020)*

### Barriers

Although staff feel that overall participation in the Local Conversation activities had been increasing in the six months before lockdown, both they and residents still express a desire to engage more people. However, they feel there are several barriers to this. One simple example is insufficient local advertising for their activities. Aside from this, some barriers are structural, and others arise from past experience.

#### Structural barriers

The LSOAs within which the Claremont Ten sits have a high proportion of disabled residents: 17% of over-65s in the area claim Attendance Allowance, compared to 12% overall in England and Wales, while 23% of under-65s claim Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payment compared to 9% in England and Wales overall. One resident commented that high levels of ill-health and disability in the area meant that many residents could not attend projects and groups, because they didn’t have the necessary support/care to actually get there.

*Most people [in the area] do have a lot of health problems. We don’t know whether they’d be able to get out of the house and actually get involved. I know millions of people who are home 24/7 and can’t get out because they don’t have anyone to bring them. (Resident, 2020)*

Transience, another demographic characteristic of the area, was also seen as a barrier to participation. As discussed extensively in previous years’ reports, Claremont Ten contains a lot of temporary accommodation, and has a high level of transience as a result. Staff explained that this tends to mean that residents do not have an incentive to get involved in projects. They also suggested that transient residents lack the stability in their lives, the embeddedness in the area, to really engage.

#### Experiential barriers

There was a strong feeling from staff, expressed in previous years, that poor experiences with previous interventions and organisations also created a barrier to engaging many residents in Claremont Ten. Staff described the area as one where, over the years, there has been a huge amount of external intervention, including programmes that parachuted in for six months and then disappeared without trace. They feel that this has led to residents becoming distrustful and unwilling to engage. They also suggested that many residents have had poor experiences with other public services in the past, which creates a similar reticence.

*Other services they’ve engaged with in the past work very differently… maybe they’ve been made to feel less than welcome there. (Staff, 2020)*

### Enablers

Interviews with staff suggest that two important factors to enable more residents to participate, and participate more fully, in the Local Conversation are trust and longer time frames.

#### Trust

To overcome these poor experiences and engage residents, building up trust is crucial. Staff feel that this is enabled by the positive reputation of the First Step Community Centre, which is well regarded by both residents and by other services/organisations. This has been particularly important for engaging some of the most vulnerable residents, such as those who attend Raid the Larder. In this way, the ethos of staff and the Steering Group has allowed trust to be developed.

*We were never intrusive. We built trust up with them, not bombarding them with forms. If they wanted to talk to us they could. If they wanted to come in, get the food and go, that was fine. (Staff, 2020)*

#### Long time frames

To develop these relationships has taken a lot of time. The reputation of the Centre has been built over 20 years, and individual relationships with residents have also required regular and carefully considered contact. Time was also considered crucial for allowing projects to grow organically and become more ambitious. Initial work clearing alleyways has, over time, developed into residents volunteering at the community garden, which has in turn, and again over time, expanded to include learning about hydroponics.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As well as projects expanding, changes for individuals need time to take root. Staff reflected that residents have seen positive impacts of the project – both in their own lives and in the area, for example its appearance. Seeing these positive changes sustain over a longer time frame has increased their trust and willingness to commit time and energy to the project. Therefore, they were able to develop more sustainable, longer-term outcomes. The endurance of Local Conversations funding was seen by staff as key to this, and quite unusual as most sources of funding do not commit to the area over this, very necessary, time span.

#### Impact of Covid-19 on enabling environment

In addition to the barriers/enablers discussed, which resonate strongly with those in previous years and reflect the long-term situation in Claremont Ten, Covid-19 has also massively affected the enabling environment in the area.

Staff described reorienting their work to crisis work by necessity, and shifting away from the longer-term, more socially oriented, work. Given the important role already discussed that staff play in guiding the Claremont Ten, it seems likely that the group will also have to pivot in this direction. This is all the more inevitable since many of the activities that they previously did are no longer possible.

The pandemic has dramatically changed the opportunities that the group has for engaging new residents. Presence at large community events, like fun days and fairs, was a key way of letting residents know about the Claremont Ten in a way that was fun and required minimal commitment to get them in the door. One resident interviewed discussed a community fair as part of her introduction to the project. With the ongoing social distancing and local lockdowns, such events are impossible now.

*[Responding to a question about how projects could be improved] To be honest I don’t know with what’s going on at the minute. [We] can’t really do a lot at the moment can we? People can’t come into the church so we can’t get them involved. (Resident, 2020)*

New residents are coming into contact with the Claremont Ten and the First Step Community Centre. Staff described how many residents are contacting them now because they’re facing difficult times after losing employment. The positive ways in which new residents might be engaged are indefinitely on hold, and the new avenues for introduction are largely coming through residents being in crisis situations.

Staff burnout is another important consideration when considering the wider context within which the Claremont Ten is operating. One staff member described an increase in emotionally taxing crisis work, and the toll of an increase in such work. While such work has always been a part of the job, staff described a particular toll on their own mental health as a result of home-working, during which they have less support from colleagues when dealing with these cases. Further, it seems that the proportion of their time being accounted for by this kind of work has increased considerably, as many residents have had problems accumulating and escalating during lockdown when they were at home and isolated from services that might have intervened earlier. These cases were only starting to come to the surface at the time of the fieldwork.

Finally, staff morale has been affected by the changed ways in which they can/cannot interact with residents. One staff member described the difficulty of supporting distressed residents when normal tactics for doing that – such as giving someone a hug – were now impossible. As well as new restrictions, staff also discussed the lack of clear guidance from government as impacting their ability to adjust their work to the new context. One staff member described government guidance as “clear as mud”.

## Ooutcomes: What has changed in the Claremont Ten?

### Impact on those involved

Residents who have taken part in the Claremont Ten have developed **knowledge** and **skills** as a result. These are often specific to the project that they take part in. One example is the Claremont Growers where residents have learned increasingly advanced gardening skills, including hydroponics. The Steering Group has also taken two courses in community development, which has built their skills to continue to help and advocate for their area. It is hoped that this training will be available to other residents soon.

In addition to skills and knowledge gained through specific projects, residents get access to useful knowledge and skills around accessing services and other support through their contact with staff. Many people are not getting the support services they need because they don’t know what is available, or how to access it. As staff become engaged with residents who attend Claremont Ten projects, they can pass this relevant knowledge on. One resident, for example, explained that staff had helped her deal with her son’s school, and putting things in place to ensure he got the support he needed.

Residents and staff both spoke about how being involved in the Local Conversation has made residents more engaged, which has improved their **mental health**. They feel that this happened by giving people more structure, stimulation, and positive activities to concentrate on. The perceived effect of this was that it motivates residents and helps them get out of more negative patterns and ways of thinking.

*It makes them feel so much better. They have more energy, more life to give. (Staff, 2020)*

Residents described the Claremont Ten as helping their mental health in serious and less serious ways. One described this simply: “It makes you feel good.” Another described how being involved in the Claremont Ten had helped her deal with quite serious anxiety that often made it difficult for her to get out, by offering a comfortable environment where she became more used to being in groups.

Residents also described developing a sense of **meaning and purpose** through the Claremont Ten. Again, they described the importance of having positive activities to focus on and seeing the positive changes in the area over time. Closely related to this was a sense of **pride**, as people saw themselves as having contributed to these positive changes in the area. One community leader described this as particularly important in an area like Claremont, where residents have a long history of having things done *to* them, rather than being the ones doing things themselves in their community.

*[I]t gives you the general feeling that life is worthwhile to get out there and do something. (Resident, 2020)*

*You can see it in their faces, that smile of achievement when they’re helping people. (Staff, 2020)*

From seeing their own successes, residents have also gained more **confidence**. Staff and residents all feel that for many residents, attending projects is a big step and gives them more confidence.

*When people start to see something come to life that they’ve been a part of, I think it’s really empowering and there’s a real sense of achievement. (Staff, 2020)*

The increased confidence of the Steering Group has manifested in their ability to take on higher levels of responsibility for the Local Conversation, and their increased willingness to advocate for themselves and their community with other services and professionals in the area. This includes housing officers and local councillors.

*They have the confidence and knowledge to go and stand and talk to people and influence change. (Staff, 2020)*

Increased confidence has also led to outcomes for residents outside the world of the Claremont Ten. One Steering Group resident is now taking steps to retrain as a carer, which staff feel was supported by a growth in her self-confidence acquired through the many opportunities that the Local Conversation has given the Steering Group to stretch themselves and take on new things.

*She’s done that through the belief she’s grown in her own capabilities [that] she’s got from going and talking to people at different levels. (Staff, 2020)*

However, it is not only the Steering Group’s intensive activity that has led to increases in confidence. Staff describe a big part of their own role as building the confidence of residents who attend the projects in the Claremont Ten. One staff member noted particular success with some residents attending Raid the Larder, who have been helped to move into training and work.

Increased **social connectedness** was another key outcome for many residents taking part, at different levels, in the Claremont Ten. Turning up to any project is an opportunity for residents to meet new people, which is especially important for many who are otherwise quite isolated.

*They turn up ‘cause they enjoy it. They enjoy the company, getting out and seeing their friends who they’ve met through them [Raid the Larder], or even known them before. (Resident, 2020)*

*When people are waiting around, they made a couple more friends than they had before. They don’t feel like they’re on their own anymore. (Resident, 2020)*

For those most heavily involved, numerous friendships – which were described as supportive during difficult times – have been formed.

*We all get on well together and have become good friends. We enjoy each other’s company. (Resident, 2020)*

Over time, the increased connectedness has also led to a strengthened **social fabric,** a network of neighbours who are better able to look out for each other. By bringing people into the First Step Community Centre – perhaps for the first time – people become visible to their neighbours and to other services. They come onto the radar and can get linked with other projects and services in a way that would be impossible had they remained hidden at home.

One Steering Group member, when talking about food distribution after the lockdown, reflected that the group had been able to provide food to “people we know are needy”. Another mentioned speaking to more people in the community through her involvement in the group, and therefore coming to know more about what was going on for people. What these comments reflect is that people are developing more awareness of and sensitivity to their neighbours’ needs and are therefore in a better position to support them.

*Cos basically I [usually] speak to people I know very well, but it’s different when you’re getting to know other people, knowing what their lives are like, how they’re coping and stuff. (Resident, 2020)*

Through the activities of the Claremont Ten, there are now more people in the area who are able to keep an eye out for their neighbours and see who might need some help. This works to expand social support beyond people’s immediate social or family circles and is more likely to reach more isolated residents.

One community leader described the lack of opportunities that most Claremont residents have to take part in structured activities and pursue interests and hobbies, and thus the importance of the sorts of activities that the Claremont Ten offers.

*[P]eople don’t go and play golf on a weekend with their friends or go for a weekend away somewhere. It doesn’t happen. So the activities you do need [have] to happen quite close to your house. I think these connections with other people, especially when we have quite limited networks – or people move into Claremont with quite limited networks – are important. (Staff, 2020)*

The theme of a strengthened social fabric was also discussed in terms of a longer-term outcome in relation to the Steering Group’s capacity for collective action. Residents and staff spoke about how the members had formed strong, supportive relationships with one another over the years. One staff member described how the group’s strengthened social fabric increased its capacity for collective action. Because people are more socially connected and able to look out for each other, they are now more used to, willing, and able to take action together, which did not exist in the area before.

This reflects how residents are developing a sense of ownership in their community. This is an asset for the whole community and was reflected when residents spoke about the things that they now feel able to do as a group without the support of staff.

### Impact on the wider community

It was perceived that the presence of the Claremont Ten, felt through the activities and events which it was putting on until lockdown, contributed to a growing **sense of community** in the area. Although the residents interviewed were those who are quite heavily involved, staff suggested that this sense of community is also felt by residents who are involved quite minimally, perhaps occasionally attending a project, fair, or fun day. This is because these events, held locally, make the neighbourhood feel like a place where things happen, rather than being a place that you have to leave to access anything.

*It gives them a sense of community, that something is happening at their front door and they don’t have to go anywhere. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff and residents also discussed the improved quality of placethat has been accomplished under the ‘Brush it up’ programme, through a reduction in litter, the clearing of debris in alleyways, and in previous years the presence of hanging baskets in the streets. There was a consensus that the look of the area has improved through this work, and that other residents recognised and appreciated those improvements. It seems that this may be the most visible work that the Claremont Ten has done. Overall, activities such as clearing alleyways and clearing litter improve overall morale in the area.

Another source of improved local morale also comes from the stability and continuity of the project over the past four years. One staff member described how residents in the area were fatigued by short-term projects coming in and then leaving the area, and that local morale has benefitted from the presence of a project that has actually stayed with them rather than vanishing. This long-term presence has also meant that there is an increasingly engaged community of local residents. This is not just about being engaged in the Local Conversation, but about people becoming more engaged and motivated. This, too, is an asset to the whole community which will benefit over time from this increased motivation and engagement, as it can help to sustain momentum and drive more collective action.

*It’s changed it in a way cos people want to do things. They’re not sitting in and being bored. They know they’ve got something to look forward to in the week which gets them out and gets them motivated. (Resident, 2020)*

Indeed, one immediate manifestation of this engagement is the Claremont Ten project, which suggest there are currently more types of support available for residents, which were absent before. Some of this is support to pursue leisure activities – such as gardening and the exercise class – and some of it is a lot more crisis oriented, like Raid the Larder. Residents are very aware of the issue of food poverty in the area and feel that Raid the Larder in particular is a huge benefit to the neighbourhood by giving people another source of support. This is especially important since Raid the Larder does not operate a referral system, like most food banks, and therefore a greater range of residents in need can access it.

### Impact on the lead organisation and other services/organisations in the area

Staff feel that the Local Conversation has been positive both for themselves as a lead organisation, and for other services/organisations in the area with whom they work.

As noted in previous years’ reports, receiving Trust funding continues to provide a reputational benefit to the First Step Centre. They explained that having such a well-known funder added to their own credibility as an organisation. This was particularly useful when making applications to funders with whom they had not worked before, and who were therefore not familiar with their own history and reputation.

*It shows that we have good standing, to say that you have funding from people like [the] People’s Health Trust […] it goes a long way. (Staff, 2020)*

The Local Conversation has further entrenched the First Step Community Centre in the local ecosystem of services and third sector organisations. While staff reflected that partner working is usually slow, being embedded in this ecosystem was still seen as a very good thing. Not only does it prevent the duplication of work and encourage cooperation, but it also means that staff know what is going on in the area – what other services and organisations are up to. This opens up opportunities to work together, to identify gaps, and to plan within that ecosystem.

Although much less explicit, it seems that the Claremont Ten has also made the First Step Community Centre a more desirable partner in the area, adding a new dimension to its work. For example, the success of Raid the Larder was attributed to the decision by the Council to approach the Centre to work as a hub for some of its Covid-19 outreach. Similarly, the telephone buddy scheme where the Steering Group will support local homeless people being rehoused by the Council shows that the Centre has perhaps become a more attractive partner as it houses this group of reputable and respected volunteers.

Indeed, the visibility of the Steering Group and its successes has also begun to shift how other services think about and relate to residents. Staff reflected that professionals’ distrust towards residents has begun to shift, and they are slowly becoming more responsive to residents. This suggests that the Claremont Ten Local Conversation has increasing visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the Council and other local stakeholders.

#### Influencing

The influencing work of the Claremont Ten has been going slowly and has been on hold since lockdown. Staff reflected that individual residents were becoming more assertive, and more able to engage with services/officials confidently. This ranged from being properly able to engage with, for example, health professionals, to speaking to a local councillor. This is a crucial foundation for residents being able to influence these organisations. Staff also described how some were now confident enough to see the Council as an institution that is within their reach, which they can try to influence. Residents were also doing this more independently, without needing staff beside them to advocate for their community.

*Some from the Steering Group are going to Council in their own right for meetings, and they’re finding they can try and influence the Council. They have the confidence and knowledge to go and stand and talk to people and influence change. (Staff, 2020)*

However, staff recognised that this kind of change, while an important priority, is also very slow to realise in part because – both for residents and for other organisations/services – it is a really new way of working. Most service providers, it was explained, are simply not used to working with residents as collaborators and often there is a sense of distrust on both sides, which has developed over years of under-delivered promises. Similarly, residents largely have not had the life experiences that would make them think they could influence change. This makes the process a very long one.

*People need to know that people like them, and people in their situations, can do that. And I think that’s the gap that we’ve got at the moment: you don’t know what you don’t know. (Staff, 2020)*

Although systemic influencing was considered difficult and a long-term goal, staff described another way in which residents are actively influencing local institutions. Residents are increasingly interacting with the local housing association and local enforcement teams, for example, taking them around the neighbourhood and identifying issues, which they think need addressing. In this sense, they are beginning to influence these organisations – both by influencing their way of working to include residents more as partners, and by having a say in which issues do become visible and, to an extent, get prioritised.

The partnership working that the First Step Community Centre has proposed to the Steering Group, and which the Steering Group has agreed to take up, is also an avenue to increasing residents’ influence in local institutions. By encouraging residents to get involved in things outside the Local Conversation, or by adopting ideas from outside for the Local Conversation, the Steering Group are getting access to other organisations. In this way, residents are in contact with the organisations they might want to influence, and they are becoming recognised and established within them. Although partnership projects may be less resident-led, they also build opportunities for influencing: residents build relationships with people who they might want to influence, and the project builds their credibility when they do that. In the long-term, this seems to prepare the ground for more successful influencing.

According to a Staff, as a group, the Claremont Ten is also thinking about how to expand on their successful work with local environmental issues into influencing. While the group has been effective clearing the local area by itself, they are now discussing petitioning the Council to address some of the wider issues related to rubbish in the area.

#### Inclusion

When asked about diversity and inclusion within the Claremont Ten, people often responded that the area is ethnically homogenous. However, there was also a recognition from staff that the wider area is not uniformly White British. Prior to Covid-19, they had planned to hold a World Culture Day as part of the celebrations of the Centre’s twentieth anniversary in 2020, involving local Chinese, Italian, and Jamaican communities. One staff member also mentioned a project – still being developed – to bring together local children and refugee children who had recently moved to the area.

As well as ethnicity, there are other ways to think about diversity and inclusion. In previous years’ reports, transient residents of HMOs were considered a group that was very isolated and very difficult to engage in the Local Conversation. Raid the Larder was intended, in part, to reach this group. It has been quite successful in this, with residents attending consistently and engaging with staff when they do, while some have even gone on to volunteering for the project. Staff estimated that 95% of those coming to Raid the Larder, prior to Covid-19, were out of work, and that many had probably never worked. They are also considered to be largely off the radar of the local authority or other services. Engaging the most economically marginalised residents is considered an important part of inclusion in Claremont. One area where diversity was felt to be lacking was in terms of age. Staff reflected that local kids/youth had been particularly difficult to engage.

Covid-19 may also have inadvertently increased the diversity of the Local Conversation in Claremont. Staff explained that lay-offs and the furlough scheme, in combination with their role in emergency food distribution during lockdown, meant that many residents were coming into contact with the group for the first time. This included residents who had never needed similar support before. It remains to be seen whether these residents, who – due to being in work before – may have more social, economic, and cultural capital than those currently involved, will continue to engage with the group.

### Plans for the future

Staff and residents both found it difficult to talk about the future. Staff were very aware that Covid-19 will continue to dramatically affect the local area, which may be faced with new needs and priorities. Any forward-thinking that they had done has been completely disrupted by the last six months and the urgent need to reorient towards crisis management. They also reflected that thinking about the future was still difficult as the future is still very unclear; many issues that have been building throughout the pandemic are only now starting to emerge, and new ones will continue to take shape. The landscape of the Claremont Ten is constantly shifting, and as already discussed, the health and safety regulations for the First Step Community Centre remain unclear.

Despite all these difficulties, staff also spoke positively about some plans for the next year which they hope will still be possible. They are excited at the prospect of being able to hold the World Cultures Day in the hope of engaging a more ethnically diverse group of residents. They are also keen to expand the community development training beyond the Steering Group to a wider group of residents.

While staff, in spite of all the difficulties, were still able to talk about future plans, residents seemed to struggle a lot more with this. Some said that they were still thinking about what they’d like to do, while others expressed a desire to get their old projects back on track when that became possible. This again suggests the important ongoing role of staff in facilitating the Claremont Ten’s growth and change in the longer term.

### Sustainability

Overall, staff and residents both reflected a mixed picture of the sustainability of the Claremont Ten. There was a sense from several that, to sustain outcomes, residents’ participation in activities also needed to continue. There was also a consensus that some funding was still necessary. In an area like Claremont, where high numbers of households are either on very low pay or reliant on benefits, residents simply do not have enough spare money to fund much themselves. However, this year the group has started charging residents for some activities to make them more self-sustaining. The lunch clubs, for example, used to be provided free but attendees now pay. The difficult with this, of course, is that it may deter some residents from attending.

When asked about sustainability and the future, residents said that they would probably continue with some of their no-cost activities. Staff also reflected that residents are starting to take on more responsibility for project delivery and that this would hopefully continue. While residents suggested that they would be able to continue some no-cost projects, they very much focussed on continuing existing activities and did not reflect on the possibility of starting new activities. Staff explained that they still play an important role in getting new projects off the ground, and it seems that without that paid role the Steering Group may lose the capacity that it still relies on to respond to *new* needs in the community and develop *new* projects.

However, staff have made efforts to ensure the sustainability of the positive changes that have happened through the Local Conversation. One key effort has been their efforts to engage residents in other organisations, to encourage them to attend other things as well as the Claremont Ten. This means that the Steering Group is anchored in multiple parts of the community making it more resilient to funding (or other) changes in any one specific organisation.

When thinking about sustainability, it is important to reflect on the scale of change that is sought in the Trust’s Theory of Change. As one community leader explained:

*It’s never gonna be a quick fix in Claremont. We’ve got many years of people feeling quite isolated and unempowered…* *[Influencing is] definitely achievable, but this isn’t a 3-year project, it isn’t a 5-year project. This is about changing the culture within an area over the next 10, 15, 20 years. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff feel that a lead organisation is still a very important part of the sustainability of the Claremont Ten, to act as a “buddy” for the community. This was very much reflected in the way that residents talked about staff and their role. As discussed already, residents consider staff as leaders and figureheads. Staff also consider their role towards residents to be a nurturing one. Maintaining this role in a professional capacity may be very much needed to engage *new* residents in the future.

Several interviewees felt this was important to enable the project to reach a wider range of residents, rather than continuing to rely only a very committed core. Although residents are increasingly supporting each other emotionally, staff still describe spending a lot of time supporting residents on complex, inter-agency issues which residents do not have the expertise to help others navigate. Further, staff provide a lot of practical support in issues around governance, health and safety, and risk assessments. This context is likely to become increasingly complex with the ongoing impact of Covid-19, and as such this expertise will become even more crucial to residents’ ability to get new projects started.

### Conclusion

The impact of Covid-19 on perpetuating and exacerbating structural inequalities across the UK continue to make the work of the Claremont Ten extremely challenging. In line with the scope of the Claremont Ten Local Conversation, the outcomes are largely personal, experienced by individuals, rather than experienced more widely and leading to structural change. Interviewees identified areas for improvement, such as increasing participation from a more diverse range of residents. However, the ongoing pandemic situation and associated uncertainties cast doubt on how achievable this is in the near future.

That said, the interviews conducted in 2020 suggest that the Claremont Ten Local Conversation continues to make an important difference in the lives of residents who are engaging with it. Interviewees reflected that the project had helped to strengthen the social fabric in the area, which enabled the project to serve as a lifeline for many vulnerable residents during the first national lockdown in the spring. Indeed, over the four years the project has existed, it has become entrenched in the area, and is now recognised by staff and residents as a source of continuity and stability that other voluntary sector projects in the area rarely achieve. This merits recognition and provides hope that the Local Conversation in Claremont Ten will play a positive role in helping residents through the second wave of the pandemic.

# Annex 3. Lozells, Birmingham

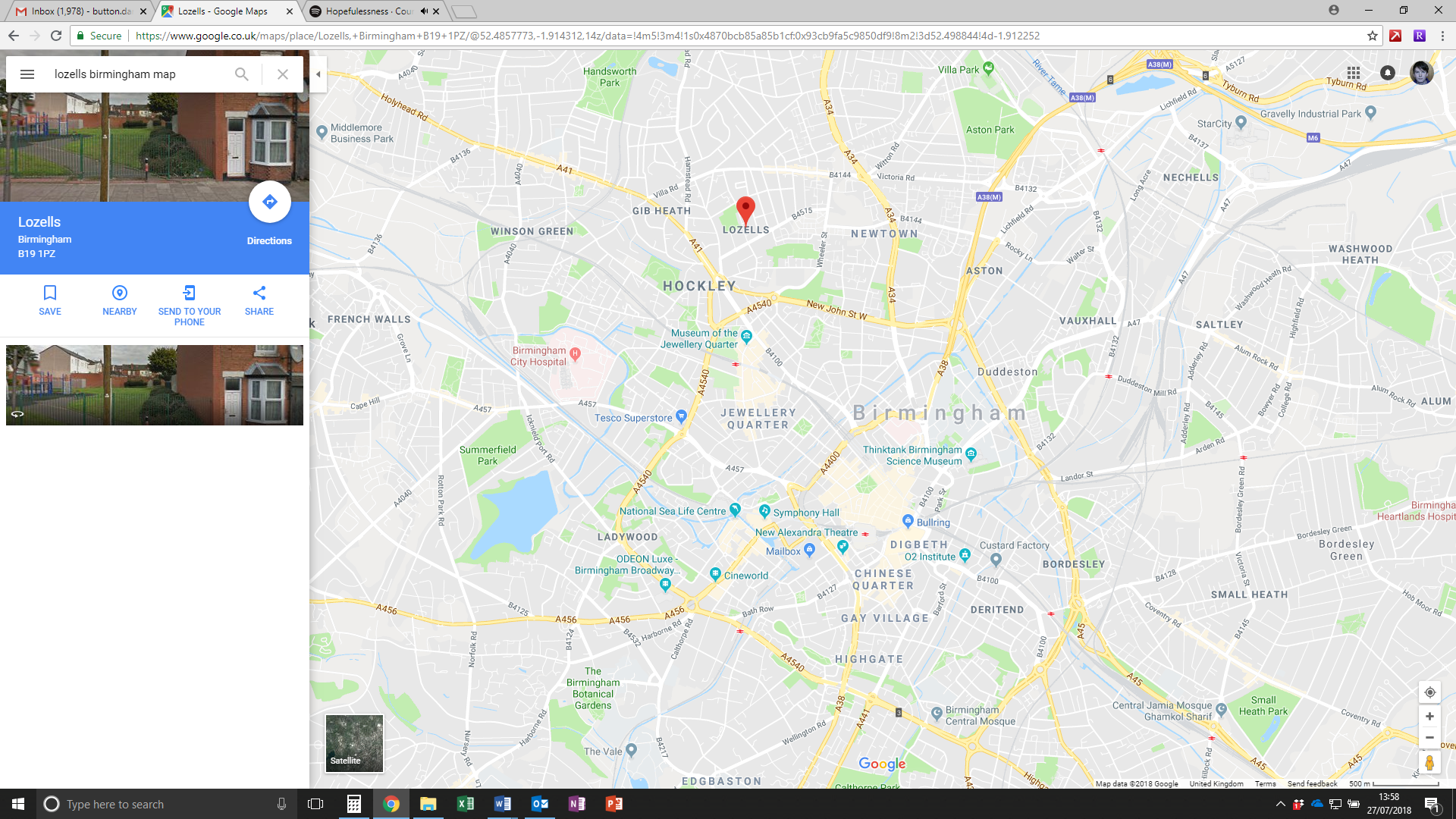
Supported by Aspire and Succeed.

### Methods

This case study examines the ways in which the Local Conversation in Lozells has contributed to changes in the neighbourhood of Lozells. It builds on and refers to previous years’ research findings but focuses on what has changed in the last year and why. This report relies primarily on fieldwork conducted in September/October 2020. Methods include one-to-one interviews conducted over the phone; due to Covid-19, group discussions and observation were not possible. Those interviewed included local leads facilitating the Local Conversation project and volunteers. Unlike previous years, this year’s case study relies heavily on testimony from the lead organiser, given the difficulties in interviewing a wider range of residents during the Covid-19 context.

### Context: About Lozells

Lozells is an inner-city area West Birmingham. The Local Conversation projectis located in a rectangle of streets between the B4144 and the B4515 (North to South), and from Hamstead Road to Berners Street (West to East).



In 2019, early needs identified by the community included support with housing and benefits. This was particularly acute among those who were not confident speaking or understanding English, many of whom were socially isolated, which meant that their needs often remained undetected. Older women in the community were reportedly at higher risk of social isolation and hidden mental health problems.

Fieldwork in 2020 identified that these needs had worsened in the area. Issues like isolation and loneliness have increased among the population due to lockdown measures; even after the first national lockdown was lifted, many residents were still shielding due to their age and underlying health issues. In some instances, young people had to isolate for fear of passing on Covid-19 to the elderly members of their families who often lived in the same household. There are fears that mental health problems will rise in the Lozells area in the aftermath of Covid-19.

Residents were severely affected by Covid-19, with many losing their lives and others losing multiple members of their families and friends due to the virus. A combination of factors is believed to have led to a high death rate in Lozells. First, Lozells has a high level of health inequalities, as many residents have underlying health conditions that are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. Second, Lozells is affected by a lack of adequate services, including health care, housing, and benefits. Third, most residents are in low-paid jobs and there is an absence of lack of quality, secure, well-paid work in the local area.

Universal Credit was introduced in the area in late 2018, and in 2020 there was an increased need to access Universal Credit as well as other types of benefits because many people lost their livelihoods and jobs as a result of the pandemic. Although there are still acute housing needs in the area, many of those interviewed said that during the lockdown months, many people were able to access safe housing at a much quicker rate compared to previous years.

For example, Aspire and Succeed told us that they supported seven families to access safe accommodation, which mostly included temporary accommodation, during the pandemic; usually, it would have taken them two to three years to house a similar number of families:

*One of the great results we’ve had recently is on [helping people access] social housing, which is really difficult, Whereas in Birmingham, the Council has a stock of about 2000 or 3000 houses, I think there are about 15,000 or 16,000 people on the waiting list. Since March, we managed to get seven new families into homes. Normally that would have taken about two to three years because it’s a very, very slow process. We’re just trying to identify how is that possible, because that’s like a two/three year kind of goal for us, usually, (Lead organiser 2020)*

Since 2018, the local environment has become noticeably tidier and there are more local tyre gardens being tended to in the streets covered by the Local Conversation project. However, during the pandemic, progress that was made over the past few years regressed, with a sharp increase in fly-tipping in some parts of Lozells. However, members of the community are getting together and resuming environment-related activities, albeit in smaller numbers, and starting to show presence in different areas of Lozells to ensure the positive achievements over the years are not lost.

### Connections and community

Lozells is a vibrant community with a strong community spirit. People know their neighbours, help one another, and have strong networks. Many of those interviewed described Lozells as close knit and supportive, and this is seen as a great strength.

Lozells is made up of people from a range of ethnic groups. Prevalent among them are established Bengali and Pakistani communities; there are much smaller numbers of Caribbean, Irish, and White British communities, who are living alongside more recently settled migrants from places such as Yemen and Syria as well as people of Bangladeshi background who recently arrived from Italy. In 2020, respondents reported that people from Eritrean and Somali backgrounds were also new to the area.

This year, Lozells was one of the areas hardest hit by Covid-19, with many being infected from the virus and a high number of deaths. Overall, the community pulled together during this difficult time. For example, volunteering among the community increased and people supported each another during the pandemic. However, the pandemic has also had some negative impacts on the community, as many in Lozells were very fearful particularly during the months of April and May when local people were dying from Covid-19. Several of the respondents told us they knew many people who had passed away due to it being a very tight knit community.

*And because Lozells was one of the hardest hit neighbourhoods in the beginning during the Coronavirus period, it scared a lot of people because, you know, we would wake up during April and May and a lot of the people that we knew [had] passed away. I think, during April and May, in the three-week period we had about 11 deaths that were Coronavirus related in our neighbourhood, and we knew every single one of them in person. Because it’s a very close-knit neighbourhood, and we all grew up around each other and everyone [lost] an uncle, or auntie, or a friend, or a brother, it kind of really, really hit home. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Fear meant that at times some people were frustrated with others who they perceived as not following Covid-19 guidelines. Others reported that government guidelines were unclear, which further added to the fear and confusion.

*At the beginning [people] were really [careful] they took everything seriously. But now [September/October 2020] they’re just not bothered, and it really, really hurts me because I'm thinking, at the end of the day, we want a better community. They’re confused with the government guidelines, but [a second reason is] because nothing’s happened in their family. The families that are bothered…a tragedy happened in that family. Those people are taking it seriously because it has affected their lives because of somebody that has died of Covid in their family. [People who are not taking Covid seriously] are just ruining everything. (Volunteer, 2020)*

Prior to Covid-19, more people were taking part in the project’s activities and more connections were being made both within the community (eg between women of different ethnic backgrounds), as well as outside the community with the local authority and its waste management contractor. However, during the pandemic all project activities had to stop for several months. Even after the first national lockdown ended, it was only possible to resume activities in a reduced capacity to follow public health guidelines. There was a huge increase of residents who were affected by the crisis and needed immediate support. Many people came forward to volunteer and support their community during this time.

### Services and amenities

At the inception of the Local Conversation project, it was identified that there was a need for accessible, affordable activities for young people and women that provided a nurturing, encouraging environment. At the time, the lead organiser reported that men were the main users of most existing services in the area and that there were few activities for girls and young women. The Lozells Local Conversation’s activities were designed to ensure that the most marginalised residents in the area could benefit the most.

In 2020, many of those interviewed said that about 70–75% of those who participate in the Local Conversation activities are now women and girls, which reflects how the project has responded to the need for social activities and programming for them. In 2019, Aspire and Succeed supported the local youth by providing space in its building and through partnerships with local football clubs and a local community centre. However, these activities, like many other Local Conversation activities, stopped during the pandemic.

Services and amenities, including those the Local Conversation provided, were hit hard in Lozells during the pandemic, as most had to close. When lockdown measures were lifted, many local support services, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, remained closed. Others lost funding and had to close. For example, two youth and community centres as well as the Methodist Church that used to provide support had to remain closed due to national guidelines. This left local people without many essential support services, despite a high need for support given the impact of the loss of livelihoods, lack of jobs and other needs, ranging from housing to accessing benefits.

*All these centres are closed, and people are finding it difficult to gain so many things, [for example] benefits. A lot of people are coming at the moment for some kind of help. I used to go to advice centres, CAB [Citizen’s Advice Bureau] for help and now everything’s gone, everything, and just people are so confused. (Resident, 2020)*

Aspire and Succeed had to come to grips with the changes caused by the pandemic and its impacts in 2020. More people who previously never needed support suddenly found themselves in hardship crisis but unable to access any available support services. Aspire and Succeed was one of the few community organisations that re-opened and had to fill the vacuum left by the closure of many local services. As a result, Aspire and Succeed had to provide more support to more people, despite reduced staff members, in order to comply with Covid-19 guidelines.

*We’ve never had to deal with this number of queues. Over the space of two weeks and four days, we’ve seen nearly 250 people in that same time. The numbers were just crazy. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Additionally, Aspire and Succeed was also clarifying government guidelines, which were often confusing; sharing information within the community; as well as translating the guidelines into other languages to help keep everyone safe. Most of the messages were shared through WhatsApp, the principal forum used to keep people informed and engaged.

*The increase in people wanting support has gone [through] the roof because we’re getting new people that have never ever sought our support previously, but through the pandemic they’ve lost either their businesses or their livelihoods, and don’t know how to navigate any system in terms of benefits or housing. Then you’ve also got all the other centres that used to do similar work to us [have] closed. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*The City Council’s policy is anything that’s City-Council-based, their policy is they can’t open. So, everyone in our neighbourhood has been closed and we’ve been open. We’ve been getting the people that would have accessed their services and also there’s a new group of people who require help. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Digital access and usage have improved in the area partly because of the training offered to residents as part of the Local Conversation project in previous years. IT training was provided to some older people, which went alongside English classes for some residents. Several of those interviewed believe the social impacts of Covid-19, such as social isolation, would have been much worse were it not for the IT training for residents.

*Some of us went through a period where we were infected, and we had to stay home and isolate in the initial period. There was a bit of that fear about “What do we do?” But we constantly tried to send a message out and we did that through the forum We did that through the WhatsApp and because pre-Covid we were doing a lot of training with a lot of our groups around technology, around IT systems, around WhatsApp calls…so [residents] had a bit of experience of how to use some of the technology. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

The pandemic highlighted and further exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly the severe health inequalities that exist within the Lozells area. It also highlighted the absence of quality, well-paid work, as well as the inadequacy of services, such as health care and housing, to address these existing health inequalities in the area. Residents interviewed said that it typically takes over two to three weeks to get an appointment with their GP.

*Coronary heart disease, cholesterol, diabetes, all of these are massive issues in our neighbourhood, but there are no specific services for that in Lozells. These are common illnesses in South Asian communities and being an 80% South Asian community and with about eight or nine different GP services here, the majority of the GPs here are South Asian as well, but they don’t want to tackle these kinds of issues. They don’t want to commission services that deal with that. They don’t believe in social prescribing... God knows why. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*You can’t get a GP appointment in our neighbourhood for about two or three weeks. What’s the use of getting someone in on the third week? We’ve got really bad housing. A lot of the private ones are really damp. The landlords don’t fix them. Most houses got three generations living there: grandparents, children, the [parents]. All of these [have] some kind of effect to all of this [Covid-related impact on health]. (Resident, 2020)*

Through the Local Conversation project, Aspire and Succeed is commissioning research with University of Warwick to investigate the health services and health inequalities in the area, particularly in light of Covid-19 (see *Plans for the future*).

### Power and control

The community continues to take collective action despite the challenges presented by the pandemic.

#### Pre-Covid-19

Prior to March 2020, residents continued to hold meetings with the local councillor and used the Neighbourhood Forums to raise concerns with public services to hold them accountable, as they had in 2019. The Neighbourhood Forum is a regularly convened meeting, chaired by the Local Conversation lead, where residents can raise issues with local councillors and decision-makers at other agencies. Each meeting has a theme, which is determined in advance by participants. One means of communicating the Forum meetings is through a dedicated WhatsApp group, which had over 1,000 local users in May 2019. As in 2019, young people were also holding the local councillor to account through the Youth Manifesto programme, and the Environment Steering Group liaised closely with the local waste management contractor, which has a positive impact in Lozells.

*Pre-Covid there was a lot of things happening, a lot of people coming for activities. We had a young people’s forum where they would come and discuss ideas and try and move it forward, and get involved with local politicians, local decision-makers, statutory bodies. Women [are] learning how to speak the language [English] to try and be more independent to try and get on local boards and panels; people feel really free and they feel like it’s their own place. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*‘I remember just before Covid, we gave all our views about what can be done to improve Lozells area. How to improve the Lozells area and the crime, people dumping rubbish everywhere and things like that. (Resident, 2020)*

Residents have already identified gaps in their ability to influence local leaders in positions of power and the need to turn their attention to areas where they have yet to build relationships and trust. One example is the Jobcentre Plus. Residents had made multiple attempts to build relationships with staff to help improve opportunities for local people to get jobs, but this has been difficult due to high turnover at the Jobcentre Plus. People who were interviewed explained that the moment a trusting relationship has been established with a particular staff member or decision-maker, that person leaves and the relationship building process has to start again.

*We tried to get some relationships in the Jobcentre, but it didn’t work because every three months the person there would change and they’d have a lot of people shifting, coming back and forth. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Post-Covid-19

During the pandemic, in June 2020, the Steering Group started to have online meetings every three or four weeks, running independently of Aspire and Succeed. Small action groups were also created, each focusing on one of the Local Conversation’s priority areas (children and young people, jobs and money, and the environment), to enable residents to discuss issues more thoroughly on WhatsApp groups. The community continues to take collective action, hold discussions, and raise concerns in their local area despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. Most of the discussions have been and continue taking place over WhatsApp.

For example, a group of mothers raised a safety concern around parking and traffic near their children’s schools. They wanted to make it a one-way road to reduce traffic. A few of them raised these issues on the WhatsApp group and got together to then share their concerns with the councillor. There has been some success with residents, particularly women, becoming more independent and getting on the Neighbourhood Forums, elevating issues, and organising community activities.

*You’ll get people who are very vocal and very confident, who are very passionate about something. [They will say] “I want to lead on this because this issue affects me.” [One example is the] issue around parking around schools that we’re trying to make a one way because the mums are really passionate about it because they’ve been in the position where their kids have nearly been run over on different occasions or [the road has] been gridlocked and they can’t move, and people horning and beeping, [the mothers said] “I feel really passionate about that. This is my project. This is our project and we’re going to move this forward.” (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Leadership qualities continue to thrive in Lozells; more and more residents are volunteering and giving their time to support others in the area. One resident who started Zumba classes is now one of the most popular and highly respected people in the area. She has been described as a caring leader who listens to and encourages people. Just before Covid-19 hit, she was awarded a community award, which reflects the gratitude and admiration people hold for her.

*Everybody knows her now. She’s there to help everybody. She will just call some people in her own time and, ask “So how are you?” They come for any kind of problems to her and then she’ll say, “Okay, I’ll see you at this time.” She will involve everyone and say “And bring your families, bring everybody, I've got this session here, I've got this Zumba class here, bring anybody that you know.” (Resident, 2020)*

People often feel “at home” when they take part in the Local Conversation activities; this then leads them to want to assume leadership roles through designing activities of their own and wanting to give back to the community. When people show interest in participating somehow, they are immediately added to one of the WhatsApp groups so that they are aware of timescales and have access to information about the type of activities they want to take part in. On these WhatsApp groups, they are able to share their ideas and new plans for starting activities, plan together, and learn from one another.

During the most difficult times in the pandemic, many people started volunteering to support Aspire and Succeed in dealing with the huge influx of people in need of support. Without the volunteers, it would not have been possible to address the needs of many of the residents.

## Process: About the Local Conversation in Lozells

Local Conversation priority areas in Lozells, which have been consistent from the project’s inception, are:

* Children and young people.
* Jobs and money.
* Cleaner, greener, and safer environment.

### Activities

Each of the three priority areas has a Steering Group to review progress. Prior to the pandemic, each priority area ran around six to eight activities. However, since the pandemic, a decision was made to focus only on one or two activities per priority area because of reduced staff capacity and restrictions of large group activities. For example, Zumba classes are only hosting t people as opposed to 30 per lesson and outdoor activities for the elderly or vulnerable people have stopped, as they needed to shield even after lockdown.

Before Covid-19, the Local Conversation project in Lozells was vibrant, with lots of activities taking place and many people accessing and enjoying the variety of activities on offer, including Zumba classes, a flower bloom project, cycling, cooking sessions, English lessons, environment-related activities like putting up hanging baskets, planting tyres, and so forth. Just before Covid-19 hit, an activity called Happy Healthy Holidays aimed at the children 6–16-years-old was organised, which involved taking out children for outdoor activities in the park.

*We used to go to the park. They used to do arts and crafts here. They used to play football. There’s a tennis table and, and they used to do a lot of food activities, so food tech, and many more. (Resident, 2020)*

Covid-19 brought these activities to a halt in March 2020, which deeply affected residents of all ages, but particularly older women who relied on these activities to connect with friends and reduce their social isolation. Following the lifting of lockdown measures in the summer, a trip to the Peak District was organised for the women who usually attended Zumba and English lessons, as well as other female residents in recognition of the impact of Covid-19 on women.

*The trip [to Peak District] was a big change. I went to that trip too and it really was nice. It was a nice daytrip talking to some of the ladies again. We talked about what they did in the last couple of months and they were just telling them how the kids were stuck at home… they were really happy cos when you talked to them, they [said] they had missed everything [about Local Conversation activities]. (Resident, 2020)*

Additionally, outdoor activities such as walks in the park also took place. Some groups that were taking part in activities, such as Zumba lessons, started organising other activities independently and connecting with each other safely outdoors, like in parks and going for walks in the local area.

*The mums started…the walk-in groups themselves, they thought, “You know what, we need to get out. We need to walk out in small groups.” And then what they managed to do is say, “Oh, you know afterwards, we want to just come and have a cup of tea somewhere.” And they started coming here [Aspire and Succeed]. And that grew and grew, so now we’ve got about four or five different groups with about six people that go out on different routes and they come back, and they have a cup of tea, make some breakfast and just have a [chat]. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Currently, indoor activities like Zumba have resumed, but with reduced participation. Health-related activities, such as workshops on nutrition, have also resumed.

*We’ve got a specialist nutritionist that comes in and runs all the kind of diabetes workshops about what they should eat, what they shouldn’t eat, how to cook, cos we’ve got our own kitchen as well. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Children and young people

Many of those who were interviewed shared their concerns about the future, which included fears about losing the momentum with certain groups of people, particularly the youth. Covid-19 has impacted people of different age groups differently. While those who are in their fifties or over wanted to return to activities they used to participate in and are currently doing so, the number of children attending the activities, such as Happy Healthy Holiday, has plummeted and participation has not returned to normal numbers.

This could be temporary due to the impact of Covid-19. Families worrying about children transmitting Covid-19 to elderly members of the family could be a factor for children’s low participation in the activities that have resumed. Another factor could be the required reduction in the number of participants since usually children and young people want to come with their friends, which is currently restricted under the Covid-19 guidelines.

*The number of children started to reduce and now they don’t really come at the moment. I think that’s [Covid] impacted them a lot. (Resident, 2020)*

*When it’s around young people doing activities, they want to take their whole group with them. They want to take 15/16/17 people with them, so activities are a bit more difficult at the moment. (Lead organiser 2020)*

The lead organiser said that he feared children and young people would lose out the most in this crisis. In Lozells, there is a high population of people with low levels of skills and low qualifications. One of the Local Conversation’s priority areas is to focus on young people and children and tackle the educational attainment gap. According to respondents, during the lockdown children and young people have continued their education online, often without adequate support. They have already lost a year of education and will be left behind, the impact of which will be felt for years to come.

*My daughter has got her GCSE and she has missed so much, she has done her best at home, but is that enough for her GCSEs? (Resident, 2020)*

*There are young people who went from primary school to secondary school [during the pandemic]. Same with people who did their GCSEs, they had to move on to A Levels. They [all] had no support, no transitional support. It is a daunting task anyway, when you are going from one school to another, and the prospect of moving from a really small school to something really massive then really moving from like a state, from a comprehensive school or something, like a college which is very, very independent also… [but] they had no transitional support and that’s the kind of support that a lot of young people are telling us that they require. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

As a result of the Local Conversation project, staff are focusing on mentoring activities for children and young people. They started brokering opportunities for young people with the aim of upskilling them and enabling them to gain work experience. Prior to Covid-19, the Local Conversation project only had one mentor; since then, two more people have been recruited to work as part-time mentors for the next 18 months. Currently, there is a young people’s forum and girls’ forums taking place online every Sunday. Additionally, there are group mentoring sessions with three or four people over Zoom.

*Through the pandemic we managed to tap into some other resources through other funders and we recruited another two part-time mentors, because the need was really massive. So will be working over Zoom, and once the schools manage to [open] we will work in the school as well. We do a lot of work when it comes to mentoring, there’s a 50/50 balance in terms of the boys and girls that we work with. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Jobs and money

The second priority area is jobs and money. Since the pandemic, residents have lost their livelihoods and businesses that kept them afloat for many years. People who previously never accessed support were suddenly queuing for benefits or requesting help from Aspire and Succeed. The main focus of this priority area, therefore, has been on helping residents to secure a sufficient income (via benefits or jobs). The main activity has been maintaining advice sessions and managing the flow of people seeking help from Aspire and Succeed to access benefits and housing. The Lozells Local Conversation aims to ensure that residents are able to stay financially stable and see through these difficult times. The project’s positive relationship with the local councillor ensured that residents were able to access adequate support through Aspire and Succeed.

*[We decided] to stick to our welfare rights because that’s the biggest issue probably in the country at the moment, because people are losing out in terms of their businesses, so people wanted to access the business rates grants, and we didn’t know how to do it. [During]the pandemic, we were finding a lot of the families that we worked with – and this, I think, was a theme throughout the country – people were just getting ripped off left, right and centre. But we were very fortunate. We never had the relationship at the time with someone in the Council department in the business rates team who dealt with that, but through our local councillor we managed to get the direct contact for the head of that department who worked with us really closely and we were getting some really good results on that. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Several people needed support and protection from their employers because they were being prevented from accessing their wages despite being on furlough. This was a new territory for both local residents and Aspire and Succeed, as many had never heard of the word “furlough” before the pandemic. Aspire and Succeed had to quickly learn how to support this new group of people. Aspire and Succeed took advantage of its network and the relationships it had with local experts like accountants and lawyers, requesting their support to learn how to navigate and support residents with the furlough scheme. There were qualified lawyers and accountants, including residents in these professions, in the Youth Forums who supported them.

*People weren’t getting paid furlough and the businesses they were working for were saying, “Oh, they never gave us the money for you,” even though they were on the books. So, we were finding more and more people getting scammed, which is a legal kind of issue. So, we were just reaching out to some of these businesses and saying, “Look, we know what’s happening, then we’ll have to just go to the authorities.” (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*Some of the members of our student group are qualified lawyers and accountants...and a lot of our residents are lawyers, teachers, accountants, so we were able to tap into all of these resources to find out exactly how it [furlough payments] worked. And as an organisation, and as staff, we read up a lot. So we tried to educate [ourselves], we didn’t know what ‘furlough’ was before March. We had never heard of the word in our lives. (Lead organiser 2020)*

Women have been hit particularly hard by Covid-19. During the early part of the pandemic, there was a sharp increase in the need for care workers. Many of the care workers in Lozells, who are predominantly female, dramatically increased their hours when Covid-19 deaths peaked. However, the same care workers, who are mostly on zero-hours contracts, are currently struggling to find adequate hours of work to support their family. They went from working 40 hours a week to barely 5 hours per week.

*During Covid, it was like they needed them [female care workers]. They were their top priority. They worked very hard. And then now they’re just saying, “Okay, sorry, you’ve got five hours this week.” From say, 40 hour week they’ve reduced their hours to five hours…now they have reduced income, but they’ve got families to support. (Resident, 2020)*

The Local Conversation in Lozells has continued to support adults in finding work opportunities by helping them with CVs and interview skills.

*[On Tuesdays] we’ll help people with brushing up their CV. A lot of people don’t even have a CV. A lot of people have never been on an interview, never done a whole interview. So it’s really basic skills we’re trying to get people brushed up on. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Cleaner and greener areas

The Local Conversation activities focused on creating a cleaner and nicer environment in Lozells have helped significantly improve the area. Activities such as the flower bloom project, tyre planting, and liaising with the local waste contractor to clean up the area has positively affected Lozells, making it one of the areas in Birmingham with the lowest rates of fly-tipping.

*We have got action groups set up around fly-tipping and starting some of the smaller gardening projects just to have a bit more visibility around the neighbourhood; we have about six different truck tyres that we’ve made planters in the neighbourhood. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

However, Covid-19 has negatively affected some aspects of the local environment, as fly-tipping rates in the area have worsened again. This has been mainly because people were out of sight during lockdown measures, which encouraged bad behaviour among some residents. Residents and the forums have raised concerns about this, as they do not want to lose the progress made over the past few years. To that end, they have decided to organise and increase their visibility in the area to maintain momentum for creating a cleaner environment.

*We want to stop it before [momentum for resident action] dies out. So, around the fly-tipping, we were very conscious, and [asked ourselves] “Oh, is it in Lozells that it’s only happening?” Then you read reports that, it’s throughout the country, [fly tipping] has gone up by 300%! We don’t want to be that place that goes all the way back to how it used to be prior to when we started off and we put a lot of hard work into it’. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*So hence why we set up a new action group [now]. More people have got time on their hands because a lot of people are working from home. Presence is really important, cos the moment people think that nothing is happening with a specific space or a place, that’s when they think they can take advantage of it. So hence why you get fly-tipping areas because people will go past and think, “Okay, this looks very derelict and very secluded, it looks like no one’s paying attention to it. I can just leave it here,” and they get away with it. But the moment that they see there’s a flower, there’s a park, there’s a hanging basket, they’ll think, “Okay, someone’s giving this space some attention, which also means they might be looking right now […] they might get my number plate. I don’t want to be named and shamed and all of that.” So, I think presence is really, really important. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

### Local participation in, and control over, the project

Aspire and Succeed, the anchor organisation in Lozells, is staffed by local residents. The Local Conversation in Lozells continues to generate activities for local people. It also continues to have close connections with the local councillor, who has provided an avenue to access several other decision-makers. In 2019, the Local Conversation project was successfully involving people across areas in a range of roles, from governance of the project and designing activities, to leading activities or simply attending, taking part, and benefitting from activities.

This was difficult in 2020 due to the pandemic, although the engagement levels remained high in the various WhatsApp groups. Activities are slowly restarting, but with a reduced number of participants in line with national public health guidelines.

#### Steering group

The Steering Group for the Local Conversation comprises local professionals, community leaders, and other residents, including both women and men. All members of this group are people who live in the Lozells project area or in adjacent neighbourhoods. The Steering Group's role is to provide strategic management, financial oversight, and support to the project workers.

During the pandemic, the meetings stopped but have now resumed mainly over WhatsApp and sometimes on Zoom, where residents can raise their concerns. One example was residents raising concerns about the lack of parking spaces due to high traffic volumes, which is an ongoing issue that residents are collectively trying to resolve. However, overall it has been challenging for the Steering Group to continue to have regular meetings, even if just virtual.

#### Who participates and how?

The Local Conversation project is representative of Lozells’ various social and ethnic groups and has engaged with more diverse residents in 2020, including migrants of Bangladeshi origin who recently arrived from Milan, as well as people of Eritrean and Somali descent. Since 2019, recent migrants from Yemen and Somalia have also been participating in Local Conversation activities. The Local Conversation activities provide newly arrived migrants with an opportunity not only to take part in activities, but also to co-organise new activities, such as cooking programmes. According to one of the interviewees, the Polish community are hard to reach, and have not been as involved as residents of other ethnic backgrounds.

Currently, most residents who participate in the Local Conversation, including volunteers, Steering Group members, forum members, and those who attend activities, are mostly women, which is consistent with previous years. There was a deliberate effort to ensure the Local Conversation project serves the needs of those who have traditionally been marginalized and excluded. Women have traditionally lacked access to services in Lozells, and so Aspire and Succeed strategically aimed to change this and enable women to be more autonomous, independent and able to enjoy opportunities in public space.

*‘[Previously] probably 80% [of services were] male orientated. But we consciously made a decision in terms of employing more women, having more women and volunteers because we mapped the neighbourhood and there was a lot of services that young boys and men were accessing. So, men would often congregate, whether it’s in the mosques, or in the local barbershop, or the grocery store, they’ll have places where they can sit and discuss and do things together. The youth clubs were open for the boys, but there were no specific services for the girls. [Now], I’d say, about 70/75% of our user group is women and girls. (Lead organiser, 2020).*

While most participants of the Local Conversation are women, the pandemic seems to have created a few opportunities for older men to get involved, primarily because other local activities and services had to shut.

*I think the pandemic has opened up opportunities for [older men]. So we’re just in a conversation with a group of, 50+ men in terms of coming in. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Who leads and how?

Since 2019, residents continue to control parts of the Local Conversation by taking on formal or informal leadership roles. For example, residents have organised group activities, like cooking programmes and walks in the park. They have also made their views heard through the Neighbourhood Forums (eg the lack of parking, and issues around road safety and fly-tipping). The local woman who has been organising the Zumba class has since become a paid staff member of the Local Conversation.

New residents from Yemeni or Somali backgrounds are increasingly getting involved in organising activities and taking ownership over the project, alongside the more established South Asian communities. According to the lead organiser, residents of Yemeni or Somali backgrounds had higher levels of autonomy or internal resources, such as confidence, which enabled them to integrate and take part in the Local Conversation more quickly compared to South Asian communities. Women from Yemeni and Somali backgrounds were not only rapidly participating in the Local Conversation, but also suggesting new ideas and volunteering.

*We found that the Somali [and] Yemeni communities that we work with are much more confident in terms of when they come and take part in the exercise, the high intensity training, in the Zumba, whereas South Asian communities are much more held back a bit, because culturally they’re a bit more, “Should I do this? Shouldn’t I do that?” “I’ve never ever done this.” Whereas we get the Somali [and] the Yemeni community [who] are very, very confident when it comes to that. They want to take part. They’re much more vocal as well… they [also] know the [English] language a bit better. So when we have our summer programmes, they all volunteer. They lead in the cooking programmes that we do. They come together and they come up with ideas. They [decide] to do the cooking and together they decide “this week we will cook Somali cuisine”, “this week Yemeni cuisine”, “this week Bangladeshi”, “this week Pakistani”. So because of that, it gets a nice balance of people from all different backgrounds. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

The lead organiser explained that the reason for these differences is differences in people’s lived experiences upon arriving in the UK:

*Since the Somali community and the Yemeni community settled in the neighbourhood, they [have] had a bit more access in terms of information. They got a grasp of it quicker. They had to find their own feet [when they arrived as migrants]. Whereas the South Asian communities, they had settled as housewives and their kids had grown up and they had everything kind of done for them. And I’m speaking really from experience from our household as well, everything was done for them, whereas, the other communities, they had to do a lot of the things for themselves, hence why they’re a bit more confident when they’re outside......and they want to do things and they’re a bit more vocal about their needs. It’s, it’s nice for us, as an organisation, when we look into the whys “Why does this happen?” And then they’ll tell you their stories. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Engagement methods

The ethos of the Local Conversation project is to enable local people to engage in various ways and develop leadership so they can run and organise their own activities. In 2019, engagement methods included the Neighbourhood Forum and councillor’s surgeries, which were held in the Aspire and Succeed office. During the first few months of lockdown, these meetings migrated to online forums, such as Zoom, FaceTime, and WhatsApp. Engagement via WhatsApp continues, as residents use WhatsApp groups to discuss whether to resume certain Local Conversation activities, clarify changing public health guidelines and raise concerns about the neighbourhood, like increased fly-tipping.

Whilst most residents were able to continue conversations on WhatsApp, other digital platforms such as Zoom and Facetime presented challenges for some residents, particularly older ones due to lack of skills. Some of the engagement methods, such as WhatsApp groups, were also not entirely effective. For example, when it was evident that most residents knew how to use WhatsApp (as opposed to Zoom), residents tried to use it for a group call; however, WhatsApp only allows up to six people on a group call. As most discussions and engagement were taking place on various WhatsApp groups, decisions took longer to reach and “everything was slower”.

This was also the case for staff members at Aspire and Succeed, who felt that it was taking longer to identify effective and immediate support once everything moved online or over the phone. Staff could no longer pick up on physical, emotional or behavioural cues to identify people’s needs, and this was particularly important with people who did not traditionally voice their needs. Furthermore, staff and volunteers were experiencing greater burnout due to the high volumes of people who needed support, in addition to the method of support (Zoom or phone), which created fatigue.

*Some of the people didn’t know how to use Facetime and Zoom. We were still getting results, but, where it would take us two/three days to get something done, it would take about ten days [since Covid]. Things just took a bit longer because we can’t understand the full extent [of the problem. And, people were also getting burnt out, you know, just one call after another call after another call. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

When lockdown was lifted in the summer, an increasing number of residents engaging over WhatsApp were sharing their feelings of loneliness and needing activities to resume. However, this was difficult because it was unsafe to meet in large groups. As such, some residents agreed to arrange walks in the park in small groups so that they are able to connect and engage with friends. There were about five or six groups of women who organised morning walks in the park.

*People were disappointed that they couldn’t do things in big groups. And we have to be firm sometimes, you know. We have to say, “Look, it’s for your safety, for our safety, for everyone’s safety.” It’s hard for some families. For some of the people, they don’t grasp it because what they think, “Oh, I want to be with the bigger group, bigger laugh and a joke.” And it’s really nice when there’s a group of 20, 25 likeminded people rather than a group of 5 or 6... it’s been six/seven/eight months and it’s continuing and you can tell for some of them, this puts their mood down…because like with all neighbourhoods, mental health is a massive issue in our neighbourhood. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

### Barriers

Since the pandemic, the main barrier for the Local Conversation has been striking a balance between bringing people together and obeying safety guidelines, such as social distancing and restrictions on group gatherings.

*The current barrier is trying to get people together in one place; that is our biggest obstacle at the moment. It’s when people are together, you know, people feel a bit more confident in taking control and doing a lot of things. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Overstretched staff and lack of resources

Adapting to social distancing rules meant reducing the number of people accessing activities but increasing the number of activities per week, so that everyone could have the chance to attend activities they used to participate in. For example, prior to Covid-19, Zumba sessions occurred twice a week and accommodated up to 30 women each session. However, currently one session can only accommodate 10 women, and three weekly sessions are run to accommodate all attendees.

This has created a lot of strain on the staff and volunteers, even with an increased number of volunteers. Staff and volunteers work part-time and have also taken time off to care for members of their family or themselves due to Covid-19. In addition to staffing, it requires a free room to host the activities, and finding adequate space to run sessions more frequently has been challenging. This has raised concerns about the stability of the Local Conversation project and its long-term impact.

*A lot of our staff are part-time, whereas we used to get 30 people in [one] Zumba class, we can’t [now]. That means that trainers have got to do six hours of Zumba per a week, and then you’ve got HIIT training and all of these different kinds of things. Then when you’ve got other kind of activities going on as well, our Wednesdays and Thursdays are taken up because we need the space for our advice surgeries. So I think the biggest risk for us as an organisation is stability - where we stand in terms of the guidance for the [pandemic]. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Unclear government guidelines

Another barrier that the lead organiser identified was that the government’s messaging was unclear, contradictory, and sometimes even non-existent for some communities due to language barriers. There was a concern that this negatively affected people’s physical and mental health.

*I think the biggest disappointment for everybody is around [government] messaging [on Covid-19], you know, about what’s coming out. You know, “Okay, what’s going to happen next?” (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Challenges with digital platforms

Although interviewees said that engagement on WhatsApp has been high, there are concerns about some people lacking the digital skills with some platforms, like Zoom or Facetime, and therefore being unable to connect and engage virtually. Additionally, there are concerns about losing momentum as everything takes much longer on digital platforms.

### Enablers

#### Strong community spirit and strong relationships and networks

All people interviewed feel that Lozells has a vibrant community spirit with many residents who share a commitment to improving their community. Many of the South Asian communities were born and raised there. People know their neighbours. Small businesses around the area have ample networks they can tap into to bring change to themselves and the wider community.

Aspire and Succeed has also been in the area long enough to develop very strong networks with the surrounding organisations, such as the local church and Muslim faith centres, other community organisations and schools, as well as people within the local authority.

#### Openness to new ideas and leaderships

The project continues to be open to new ideas and to a range of people taking the lead. Current project leaders are keen to have others lead and innovate; this is part of a longer-term strategy to ensure the resilience of the community.

#### Improved IT skills

Some interviewees felt that having provided IT training to several members of the community, particularly those over the age of 50, had ensured that more people were able to stay involved in discussions and decision-making processes within the Local Conversation project during lockdown. Aspire and Succeed staff felt they were able to train people on how to use technology, such as WhatsApp, which made a difference in terms of residents’ ability to stay connected and share information with each other.

*We still would have managed [to share information within the network], but it would have been a bit more difficult. A bit more difficult. So that was a blessing in disguise in a way, we were doing language classes and I thought, “Let’s do an IT class,” because everyone’s on laptops and iPads now. Even people who don’t know how to use phones, you know, just for basic calls, they’ve still got a smartphone. So we just started doing all of these little things...and it made a difference. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

### Outcomes: What has changed in Lozells?

Fieldwork in 2020 paints a picture of Lozells as a thriving place with strong networks and community spirit. Although the pandemic has presented challenges in relation to people’s ability to physically come together, engagement is continuing, activities tailored to residents’ needs are being sustained and increased, and more people from different backgrounds are taking part and assuming leadership roles.

Similar to the 2019 findings, many interviewees talked about how participation in activities improved their confidence, skills, and social connectedness. However, many residents also discussed experiencing loneliness and social isolation during the early days of the lockdown measures. In 2020, the Local Conversation project had to come to grips with sustaining activities and continuing its work with limited capacities, amidst a public health and economic crisis. People had to quickly adapt and learn new methods of engagement using technology.

### Impact on those involved

#### Increased skills, confidence, and social connectedness

Over the last three years, local residents’ participation in the Local Conversation has resulted in higher levels of social connectedness, not only among residents, but also between residents and local authority officials. The pandemic has meant that many residents had to isolate and socially distance this year, which has limited their ability to connect with one another. However, the trip to Peak District and the activities that resumed following the lifting of lockdown in the summer, have enabled residents, primarily women, to reconnect, increase their confidence, as well as improve their physical health through exercise, walking and dancing.

*The [trip] [enabled them to] walk, a few miles, two and a half miles. Some didn’t go anywhere in the last four/five months. They don’t know how to drive, and they look forward to going to these trips and these are the ladies that are always at home looking after their kids and some are on depression tablets and this [trip] made them really, really happy. That one day, that trip was, like, you can see all the smile on their faces. They look forward to going to these trips because everything’s taken away now [due to Covid-19]. Not a lot of people can go to these free trips. (Resident, 2020)*

*We get a lot of people that have been here for 40 years and have never been to the city centre, you know? So hence why we used to do a lot of trips here. They used to go to [the] Peak District. They’ll go to Wales to get a bit of that experience of what the outdoors is like. So, we see it a lot, in terms of personal growth where they’re a bit more confident, they feel a bit better. T they’ve not felt like they’re in the four walls of their house and they’ve never been able to come out or the old stereotypical views that they can’t talk, and they can’t make conversation…these barriers are long broken. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Women who have accessed Local Conversation activities are usually in their 40s and older. Historically, they have been isolated from the community and several women had previously never ventured out of the Lozells area. The Local Conversation activities had ensured that the women who participated became more confident and more autonomous through learning English. By organising trips, the Local Conversation has also enabled many women to go, see, and experience places outside the Lozells area, and encourage them to join local groups and forums to have their voices heard.

Through participation in the Local Conversation, residents have developed new skills, including leadership skills, and initiated ideas and activities. According to the lead organiser, residents’ increased autonomy and confidence has had a positive ripple effect on their children and families.

*You know, they’ll go to the shop by themselves [and] catch the bus. They can use the cashpoint, can read or write, know what their bank statements, all of these little things we see. They might seem like little, little changes, but they make a whole world of a difference for individuals. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*Confidence has been massive, being able to come out, being able to speak up, being able to take lead roles, which they’ve previously never ever done. We’ve mapped the journeys of when people used to come in first and how shy and timid and fragile they used to be to where they are now. And they want to do things. This also means they can go back and be confident with their own family and children when they go out. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Many residents had the opportunity to increase their skills through volunteering during the pandemic. They have also increased their social connections in the area and their wellbeing, as they gain stimulation and experience positive feelings by helping out.

*This volunteering will help me greatly [to access jobs], and it’s just interesting to work with kids and help them improve their lives and make a change to their lives. (Resident, 2020)*

*When I come and help these ladies, I feel happy myself because you know you’re helping them and, I'm not doing anything so it’s just nice [feeling]. (Resident, 2020)*

#### Increased leadership and collective action

A number of the activities that had started as part of the Local Conversation project, with the support of volunteers, are now completely independently led by residents. Residents feel an increased sense of ownership of their community and responsibility to organise and lead activities for themselves and the wider community. This was strongly evident during the pandemic, when a group of residents organised safe outdoors activities, such as walks in the park, to address social isolation and loneliness while waiting for the Local Conversation activities to resume.

*Certain aspects of the Local Conversation have become very autonomous; they’ve got their own place to run. So some of these, the exercise classes, or the walking groups and all of this that started as part of this Local Conversation to tackle some of the health issues have got legs to kind of just be their own fully fledged projects. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

### Impact on the wider community

#### Improved intergenerational cohesion

Prior to Covid-19, Local Conversation activities aimed to encourage and support intergenerational discussion and interactions. There may be different cultures and viewpoints within one household, and so intergenerational work promotes more understanding and stronger community ties.

*We do a lot of intergenerational work because, previously we’d have young people who would never have a full-blown conversation with somebody over 60 years old. We encourage people, hear their stories of when they came to this country, some of the issues and barriers and how they tackled it and what they did when they grew up and where they come from, all of these kinds of things and it got really fun and really interactive. And then what happens is people get on their wavelength, and families and parents [become] understanding of where their children are coming from...because it’s, it’s a different generation. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

#### Improved local reputation

Lozells had a bad reputation due to the riots that took place in the 1980s and again in 2005. However, over the last few years this has changed, which many believe the Local Conversation has played a key role in. Lozells has become an example of good practice for other parts of Birmingham, particularly in relation to the cleaner and greener activities that the Local Conversation project did over the past few years. In 2020, residents have been aiming for Lozells to become a low-traffic neighbourhood in Birmingham, so it is safer for people to walk and cycle. It will be important to follow up in the future to assess the impact of the residents’ efforts.

*We had a riot in ‘85 in this neighbourhood. It was really well known, so there has always been a bad reputation around Lozells. [However ] when the local authority’s talking about what [we have] done in the neighbourhood around [our] planting, rubbish dumping has gone [down]…[Lozells has become ] one of the best [areas] in the city. People say, “Oh, you want to see a really good project? Go to Lozells.”“You want to speak to really active residents? Go to Lozells.” In the [local authority] circles we’ve got a really good reputation. Universities are always sending groups here, “Oh, you want to do some research? [go here]. In the academic circle we’re really well known as an active kind of neighbourhood and active community. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Lozells has not only improved its reputation, but also has a more organised community whose interests are more aligned than before, with an understanding of how to work together to meet their needs and hold people in powerful positions locally to account.

*It also sends a message that you can’t come and mess around in Lozells. So whether you are a clinical commissioning group [or] you’re the local authority and you think you’re going to just drop any service in the neighbourhood, no, we’re going to hold you accountable because there’s a lot of people in this neighbourhood, young and old, that are going to question you about it. And that’s the message that is out there that, “Don’t try and mess around with this neighbourhood because the residents know what they’re talking about here, mate.” (Lead organiser, 2020)*

### Negative outcomes

Despite these positive changes, the pandemic has brought negative changes to the area. This ranged from people losing their livelihoods and businesses, to new forms of exploitation where people were not accessing their wages despite being on furlough. Children and young people’s education have been negatively affected, as they have missed at least one year of education, which may have significant repercussions on their prospects for years to come. Because of lockdown measures, rates of fly-tipping have increased and there are concerns that the progress made over the years will be lost.

Covid-19 has highlighted and exacerbated existing health inequalities in Lozells. The pandemic has had a severe impact on residents’ physical and mental health, as many residents either lost their own lives or lost loved ones, friends, and people they knew. This has negatively affected the community, as many are fearful of what is to come. Many residents were also suffering from loneliness and social isolation, and there are concerns that mental health issues will likely become a bigger problem in the area in the aftermath of the pandemic.

### Plans for the future

Most of the plans for the future are immediate – how to find safe ways to resume activities for the community and how to be creative in navigating and adapting to new challenges in the coming months, particularly in terms of addressing issues around capacity and lack of resources.

*We need to know where we stand with this pandemic. The biggest fear for us is if we go into a two-week circuit breaker, where does that leave us? What do we do? So we’re just trying to get everybody on the phones for that. We’ve never worried about getting people in because of where we’re based; our centre is so centrally located that it’s easy to get people in when they’re really confident to come in. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Currently, the Local Conversation project has financial stability for another year or year-and-a-half. Thus, although there is a need to secure more funding, the immediate concern among staff and volunteers is managing the flow of people.

*We’ve got financial stability for another year/year-and-a-half easily, but it’s more about the flow of people in terms of how we can manage because people want to come to us. You know, ours is a good and bad thing because people want to come in big groups, but we can’t manage the big groups. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*‘We’re worried about the restrictions that are going to kick in...and how we deal with it because we’ve had to manage our staff shielding and people falling ill and then [for] a period in August, we had about three members of staff off because they had family members that were positive, so they had to stay away. So that becomes a big issue as well, so you lose a bit of skills and expertise. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Staff and volunteers also shared their fears of activities losing momentum and things slowing down due to the pandemic, particularly among certain demographics like children and young people.

*There’s a lot of work to be done in schools, because we used to deliver parents’ workshops, classes for kids, and we really wanted to be mentors in there, but I’ve got a feeling that’s not going to happen until the new year. So I just think, a lot of things that we want to push on will slow down. We’ll still continue, but we’ll slow down, that’s our biggest fear. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

One longer-term plan is to conduct research on health inequalities in the local area. Many residents in Lozells find that local services are not appropriate and do not meet the needs of the residents. To better understand the root causes of health inequalities in the area and its impact on residents, Aspire and Succeed has commissioned a piece of work with Warwick University as part of the Local Conversation project. The humanities professor at the university is a local person from Lozells who understands the neighbourhood well, as are the commissioners. This research will further study local health inequalities and make recommendations about the appropriate health services that are needed in Lozells. The final report will be published in April 2021.

*Currently, we have just commissioned a piece of work with Warwick University. It’s called the Lozells Health Commission. During April and May, we’ve realised that a lot of the services that were delivered and commissioned in this neighbourhood weren’t the services that we wanted. So we’ve set out [to do research]. We’re going to go around mapping what’s been delivered here historically and then put something together, [an] academic piece of paper, together and then try and push that forward. People from the clinical commission groups, the GPs, [and] public health will all come and give evidence around what they commissioned, why they commissioned it, and then [the researchers] will put a report together and a set of actions [plans]. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*I think it’s going to be a big piece of work, nationally, I’ve got a feeling […]because having a Russell Group University, having the local authority, and then having, in terms of dissemination the backing of the People’s Health Trust it’ll go really, really far. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

As part of this research, several local young people will benefit through upskilling and training. Warwick University is going to train young people from the local area to help gather primary evidence and conduct research. Furthermore, the university agreed to let members of the Local Conversation visit and talk to the students at the university and to let some young people from Lozells visit and tour the university.

*Warwick University, it’s a Russell Group University, one of the best universities in the region… the professor was local, he understood what we’re trying to do. The people who are sitting down as commissioners are local residents, people who live in this area. The people that are taking part in the research are [experts] in community research, training, all of the things that tick the boxes. And then you’ve got researchers who are going to be trained by the university are also local young people […] And we’re hoping that that piece of work influences a lot of the changes, in our neighbourhood. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

Despite progress and positive steps towards the project’s sustainability, many residents are worried about the impact of Covid-19 and the imminent economic recession. While some residents voiced concerns that Covid-19 might undo some of the progress the Local Conversation has already achieved in Lozells, for many, it is still unclear how things will unfold.

*I think the pandemic has put a lot [of pressure] not just our work but just generally; throughout the country a lot of things are up in the air. (Lead organiser, 2020).*

### Sustainability

The sustainability of the Local Conversation project has been a key priority over the years, and this has been achieved through investing in people, ensuring local people are trained and upskilled so that they can assume leadership roles, and allowing residents to design and run activities themselves. In fact, many residents took it upon themselves to meet up and organise activities during the pandemic, such as small group walks in the park. Training local people means more residents will have the confidence, knowledge,and skills to sustain many of the services provided, so that they will remain available and accessible for the community.

*So we always say that you have to invest in people, you know? If you want something to sustain itself, a project or an idea, you have to train the people that live in that neighbourhood. So we’ve been going nonstop and training hundreds of people getting them more upskilled. Even if it’s a small thing or a large thing, you’re going to get a high number of people that have come through and have developed even if it’s confidence. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*Our starting point to anything was: If, as an organisation, we didn’t exist, how do these activities continue? People and organisations prior to us were [not sustainable]. So if the funding was there, you’d see a whole heap of different activities. But the moment it stopped, the activities stopped because they weren’t training local people; local people didn’t have the power to make the changes […] so you just, kind of, get the usual faces that make the decisions on all these different kind of platforms […]so even from our inception in 2008, our social enterprise model is: How do we move this forward without people relying on grants and things? So even if that means the activities that people [access] have to pay a small subsidy for the trainer or whatever. A lot of our activity-based things are sustainable; we look at some of the activities and think, “You know what? This has got a body of its own. This can move forward.” (Lead organiser, 2020)*

*‘So our Zumba instructor, our high-intensity trainer, our language class [teachers] are people who live in this neighbourhood. So we’ve upskilled a lot of people in this neighbourhood, and we don’t have to outsource for a really high price. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

The Local Conversation obtained its own transport, which saves money in the long term for the community and increases stability for the near future.

*Three years ago we had to rely on coaches and transport, but now we’ve got our own minibus and we calculated the other day we probably save about £6000 or £7000 a year on transport costs alone. That minibus is going to be with us for a long time and people are able to do things for themselves and continue to do things for themselves. Now we’ve got our own transport we can look at what’s free out there. If it comes to the situation where we’ve got no money, it’s a diesel minibus, people can pay for it and they can go and manage these things themselves. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

The lead organiser told us that the level of skills residents have, has developed since the inception of the Lozells Local Conversation in 2008 has led to stronger networks, better procedures, new funders, and a higher profile, all of which contribute towards making the project more sustainable.

*And we understand the funding for this project isn’t always going to be here. The People’s Health Trust aren’t going to fund this forever. Somewhere down the line we have to do it ourselves and, if it wasn’t for the Local Conversation, we wouldn’t be able to tap into other resources…and other funders. [With] the support we’ve had in terms of governance, in terms of all the other things that they’ve helped us with, we’ve grown as an organisation. We’re able to manage bigger budgets, bigger workloads, bigger teams. (Lead organiser, 2020)*

# Annex 4. Merstham, Surrey

Supported by the Merstham Community Facility Trust.

The Local Conversation in Merstham is a new case study that is being included for the first time in the fieldwork carried out in 2020.

## Methods

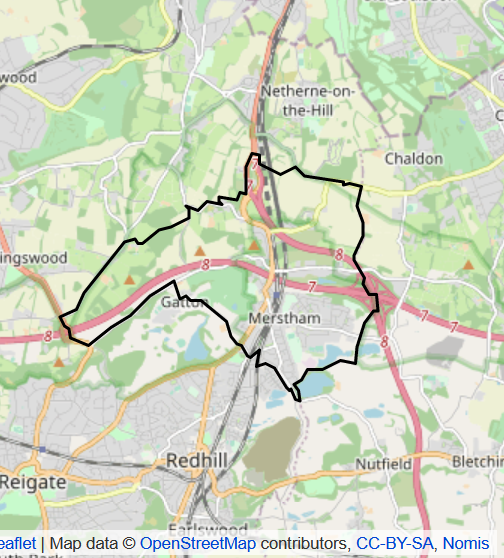
Due to the restrictions around Covid-19, fieldwork was carried out virtually in August 2020. As a result, the usual diversity of research methods – including group discussions, participant observation, and informal conversations – were not possible and research was limited to one-to-one telephone interviews. These interviews, with staff and residents who are involved in the Local Conversation in Merstham, lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. Interviews were largely not recorded, with the exception of one, which was recorded for practical purposes. Extensive notes were taken for analysis.

At the time of the interviews, the UK was slowly emerging from nationwide lockdown. However, social distancing guidelines meant that the Merstham Community Facility Trust where the Local Conversation is based had not yet re-opened at this point. This is the operational context in which staff and residents reflected on the last year, and within which they were trying to think about the year ahead.

The impact of Covid-19 on our fieldwork has been significant and imposed some important limitations to fieldwork this year. The situation nationally meant that fieldwork had to be carried out virtually. This had several effects:

* A larger burden on lead organisation staff to arrange interviews with residents at a time when they are already stretched and in less frequent contact with the Steering Group residents.
* Fewer interviews with residents than previous years. This will likely exacerbate a limitation of previous years whereby only the more engaged residents are likely to take part in interviews.
* Difficulties of fully engaging with residents through telephone interviews in contrast with the in-person interviews that took place in previous years.
* Analysis is based solely on interviews this year, where in previous years it was based on multiple interactions throughout researchers’ site visits, such as (participant) observation, focus groups, and informal discussions.

## Context: About Merstham



The Merstham ward is located in the Borough of Reigate & Banstead in Surrey, south of London. The Merstham Estate is in the east of the ward, and is bounded by the M25 to the north, and the railway tracks of the Brighton Mainline to the west. A village has long existed at Merstham, but the estate is more recent, built after World War II as part of national slum-clearance schemes and wider patterns of relocation outside cities that had been damaged during the war.

Initially built by the London County Council, ownership of the estate was transferred to the local authority in the 1980s, before being transferred again to the Raven Housing Trust in 2002. Due to Right to Buy legislation, the estate is now a mixture of housing association tenants and owner-occupiers. Much of the social housing in the area is also used as temporary accommodation, meaning families are more likely to live in cramped conditions and with a high level of transience.

Above the estate – to the north and northwest – is an area known as Top Merstham. This is where the original village centre was located and is where Merstham’s wealthiest residents live. Top Merstham is leafy and hugely affluent. To the south of the estate is South Merstham. While not as wealthy as Top Merstham, it is still quite affluent with good quality Victorian and Edwardian housing stock. These three areas together make up Merstham, and one staff member reflected that they are quite segregated.

Despite its affluent surroundings, the Merstham Estate contains pockets of severe deprivation. The 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation placed one of the Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) that comprises the estate (there are, roughly, four), as being in the top 20% most deprived LSOAs in terms of income, employment, education/skills/training, health and disability, and crime. One community leader reflected that, while the estate had initially been built as an opportunity for people to have better lives outside London, that promise had not carried through, describing instead patterns of entrenched deprivation.

*The older generation here are kind of, very London-like. They've got their London accents, and that, kind of, “This is the countryside, we've moved out here, we were really lucky, but then we didn't have the connections.” There's a lot of unemployment after that. And the result of that is that their children and their grandchildren haven't reaped the rewards of being connected to London. (Staff, 2020)*

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the area’s economy, creating problems for both the working and non-working population. Many of those who do work in the area are employed as agency workers at Gatwick Airport, or work at a nearby industrial estate that supplies food for the airport. As agency workers, most of these people lost their jobs quickly during the pandemic. Although non-working residents – of which there are many – have not seen reduced incomes during the pandemic, many have faced higher expenditure (particularly on food) as a result of having kids home from school. Lockdown also saw a significant increase in family conflict referrals at the Red Oak Family Centre, suggesting the damaging effect of lockdown on vulnerable families.

### Connections and community

Interviewees feel a strong sense of community in Merstham. The local school and community fun days (which have in previous years been organised by Friends of Merstham with the support of other partners) are important parts of this sense of community, as are personal ties between residents. Another factor contributing to a sense of community within the estate, albeit for less positive reasons, is the feeling of isolation from other areas.

*The bus routes make it very hard for people in Merstham to get jobs elsewhere. So it is very much like a place unto itself that's not well connected. (Staff, 2020)*

The area of Merstham where the Hub is located has historically had a bad reputation and is perceived particularly badly by the more affluent parts of the area.

*Portland Drive [where the Hub is located] has a pretty bad reputation for drug dealing, anti-social behaviour, general bad news to someone who would live in a glass house at the top of the village. (Staff, 2020)*

However, staff also explained that this reputation is changing slowly, and this was something that residents also recognised. One resident explained that while the area still had a bad external reputation, the community was starting to feel that these things were no longer true about their own neighbourhood.

In recent years, the local authority and Raven have been developing new-build housing in Merstham aimed at commuters. This is linked to the loss of local shops and issues of gentrification; a recent regeneration project of the area included demolition of homes and shops on Portland Drive with residents being rehoused elsewhere and shops relocating or closing entirely. Although the residents interviewed did not mention this, it was an issue brought up by both staff and the community leader. They reflected a sense among residents that the community – residents, their homes, and their amenities – was being displaced for the benefit of those outside the community. One staff member described this as the Council focusing on attracting wealthier residents to the area, a focus that residents seemed aware of.

*They tore down those flats and moved those people into accommodation not of their choice, or [they] moved area. So, there is already "you've taken our community away." And the fact that these houses, people in the community can tell that those houses are not gonna be for people like them. (Staff, 2020)*

### Services and amenities

The Local Conversation – known locally as Friends of Merstham – is housed in the Merstham Hub, a community centre owned by Surrey County Council and run by the Merstham Community Facility Trust (MCFT), the lead organisation which facilitates the Local Conversation. MCFT has been running since 2006 and was initially housed in an empty shopfront before moving into the Hub in 2018. The Hub, located in the heart of the estate, houses a network of services and third sector organisations. As well as being the base of a Community Development Officer (funded through the local Council), the Hub houses the local library, a community cafe, and a YMCA pre-school project. It also contains the area’s foodbank (run by the charity Love Works), a community fridge, and has its own sports hall and kitchenette for residents and staff to use.

Staff describe the Hub as an “unorthodox office”, characterised by an informal relationship between staff and volunteers, many of whom often visit the office casually. The Hub supports a high number of residents who are very isolated and/or have mental health issues, and staff feel that the informality of the place makes many residents feel able to drop in for a cup of tea and a chat when they feel they need it. The national lockdown, and subsequent social distancing, has been hugely disruptive to this function, although staff have tried to continue giving that support in other ways (see *Activities*):

*There's good trust in the community hub as a place that the community can go. It's not connected to a local authority like, I don’t know, the town hall would be, or the building where Surrey Social Services are. It's kind of quite neutral, so I think people trust that they're gonna get good advice when they come down. (Staff, 2020)*

In addition to the organisations and services which share the Hub, Merstham also has a wider network of services for residents including several doctors’ surgeries (one of which is on the estate, and several others which are close by), a YMCA, a Red Oak Family Centre (which supports young families), and a space run by Age Concern.

In terms of commercial services, Merstham has very few. Although there are some village shops in the wealthier parts of Merstham, these are too expensive for most residents in the estate. The cheaper local shops which used to exist around the estate – including a bakery and a butcher –closed in recent years. The only supermarket easily accessible is a small Co-op.

Located in the Surrey Hills, residents and staff interviewed feel that there is a lot of beautiful green space easily accessible from Merstham. This is an asset that Friends of Merstham has been active in trying to improve and help the community make better use of.

*You can walk out of the Hub five minutes and you’re in the rolling hills of Surrey. We have access to amazing green space. (Staff, 2020)*

### Power and control

Relationships between local residents and many local institutions are poor and are characterised by a lack of trust. One community leader described a dual negativity for residents: not only are their contacts with institutions coming in the form of interventions that people feel as unwanted intrusions or punishments, but residents are also often very unclear as to which service they are actually dealing with. This confusion builds distrust, and residents largely do not perceive the Council, for example, as an institution, which could have things in place to support them. Therefore, residents feel disempowered and resentful towards local institutions. In this context, the perceived neutrality of the Hub is vital to encouraging residents’ initial participation.

*It's… this kind of feeling of "those that are in power tell me what to do, and I don't know who they are, I just know that they're making it very difficult for me." (Resident, 2020)*

## PROCESS: About the Local Conversation in Merstham

### Activities

Friends of Merstham runs activities in four priority areas. Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown, these were:

**Digital inclusion**. The goal in this area is to make the digital world available to all residents. The main activity is a drop-in IT club, which between two and ten residents attend per session. Prior to the national lockdown, sessions ran three times per week. Residents often come in for help sending emails, accessing things related to benefits, or researching things online.

**A Voice for Merstham**. Aiming to combat a feeling of disconnect between local people and decision-making in their area, the goal is to get a greater range of residents involved in shaping the community and to push local elected representatives to be more accountable to residents. Activities this year included:

* Councillors’ Q&A: Established during lockdown, this activity has 132 members and has always been online, livestreamed, facilitated by the Community Engagement Officer. Having collected questions from residents, he puts these to councillors and residents can clarify, comment, and respond on the livestream. In addition to local councillors, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey has also been on the Q&A. There is also a Facebook group where residents can put their questions to councillors, who reply on the group’s page.
* Residents liaising with Raven Housing Trust to identify areas of need.

**Parks and Greenspaces**. The goal is to increase residents’ use of Merstham’s proximity to the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and to improve the quality of green spaces within and around the Estate. Activities this year included:

* Conservation work: Projects have ranged from smaller tasks (such as litter picks and bramble cutting) to larger ones (such as planting hedgerows, orchards, and wildflowers). Depending on the activity and the time of year, these projects usually attract between six and ten residents, although for the larger ones up to 20-30 residents have participated.
* Allotment: Run by volunteers, the allotment’s produce goes into the Community Fridge at the Hub. Between 2 and 20 residents participate, depending on the season and the activity.
* Nature tours: A volunteer takes small groups on guided walks in the area.
* Fishing group: This group met until the end of the fishing season (October 2019). Unfortunately, it has not restarted due to the death of the lead volunteer since the last fishing season. Two to ten residents attended each session. There were sessions for adults as well as family sessions.

**Getting people together**. This area is designed to provide opportunities for residents to pursue new interests and build relationships with one another. Prior to the national lockdown, activities this year included:

* Rendezvous: This weekly social space for residents to come and have a cup of tea and a chat usually runs for about an hour and a half, with a fairly consistent group of between four and ten residents attending. One staff member described this as “bread and butter social connection.”
* Repair Café: Running four years, this monthly Repair Cafe provides a space where residents can bring broken household items – ranging from textiles to electronics – and get help fixing them as well as learning how to do it themselves in future. The Café is also seen as a social space, another opportunity for residents to come together. Between 6 and 25 residents attend, depending on the season and need.
* Youth club: Run in partnership with the YMCA, prior to lockdown, over 30 young people were attending weekly and there was talk of this club expanding.
* Hoarding support group: This peer support group for people who have issues around hoarding has between 2 and 6 residents attending monthly where members talk about the issues they have been facing with hoarding and decluttering, suggest coping strategies, and provide each other with support. Since moving online, the group has used video calls to keep one another company while tidying up, to provide company and motivation. There is also an active Facebook group where people post progress pictures of their efforts to declutter, and suggestions and tips. This helps maintain a sense of connectedness and mutual support.
* Liaising with Red Oak Family Centre to understand needs of young families. This work is led by the Community Engagement Officer.
* Sewing group: The group attracts between two and eight residents weekly.
* Annual day out for residents. Last year, 50 attended but this year the trip was cancelled due to the pandemic.

#### Activities in response to Covid-19

Many residents rely on the Hub through regular, informal visits, for company, support, and internet access. Throughout the national lockdown, staff were working to ensure that these people were able to stay connected to others by providing computer equipment where it was needed and also opening a phoneline for those who could not engage online. The phoneline was advertised through a leaflet campaign across the Estate. Keeping people socially connected is particularly important given the high number of local residents with mental health issues.

*They haven’t been allowed to be forgotten and fade away into whatever they might be going through. (Staff, 2020)*

Where possible, some of the regular projects have been moved online. The Repair Café and the hoarding support group both moved online, but the former did not adapt as well to an online setting. One staff member reflected that it seems residents lack the confidence to start poking around inside electronics, and that they need face-to-face support to learn those skills. Meanwhile, the hoarding group has successfully moved online, running group video chats and a Facebook group, and members have adapted quite well to supporting each other virtually.

The Community Engagement Officer began a wildlife sightings group on Facebook, and one volunteer produced online guides to local wildlife to encourage people to keep exploring their local area. The group is now moderated by volunteers rather than staff and is very active with 295 members and regular posting.

### Local participation in, and control over, the project

#### Steering group

The Steering Group has seven members, and usually meets monthly. During lockdown, however, the group met virtually on a weekly basis to keep people up to date and active. The Steering Group is entirely White British, but this is felt to reflect the ethnic make-up of the area. Otherwise, the group is quite mixed: members’ ages range from mid-20s to mid-70s; it is fairly evenly split between men and women, and between those who are in work or retired. The Steering Group also includes several members with mental health conditions (see *Diversity and inclusion*).

The small size of the group has been recognised as a problem, as some members are not always able to attend due to fluctuations in their mental health conditions. To ensure that this does not disrupt decision-making, staff are looking to recruit some additional members so that the group can achieve quorum when some residents cannot make it.

Sitting beside the Steering Group is a Community Cash Box, also funded by the Trust. This is a group responsible for dispensing a pool of money for which residents apply for to start new projects. One member of the Community Cash Box group sits on the Local Conversations Steering Group to facilitate communication between the two groups, but otherwise they are kept separate to enable scrutiny and fairness.

#### Who leads and how?

Staff describe their role as facilitating and enabling residents to pursue things that are important to them and speak to their skills. In general, the amount of support needed from staff varies by project, but this is often concentrated at the beginning of projects, providing the initial push and infrastructure needed to get things off the ground. Sometimes this infrastructure is physical and sometimes it is organisational/technical.

One staff member gave the example of the allotment. The group of volunteers had been struggling to agree how to proceed with it, and so staff provided some initial leadership and coordinated activities to get them going, as well as ordering the equipment that they needed. Now that the project is quite established, staff just visit once a week to check in with volunteers. Similarly, the online wildlife group was started by a member of staff who set up the Facebook page, and made the initial efforts to grow the group until it was established, and volunteers could take over as administrators.

*Once it [the online wildlife group] got to a certain level of engagement, I just stay for support. (Staff, 2020)*

*I was co-hosting it [a support group] with a key volunteer and supporting him with it – bringing leaflets, answering questions – and he now runs it completely on his own. That’s what we want for projects, for volunteers to take the reins and start running it alone with us as a support net if they need help. (Staff, 2020)*

Because of the role that the staff seem to retain in establishing infrastructure, periods of abrupt change require more involvement from staff. The national lockdown, for example, placed a heavy burden on staff to move projects online (where possible), as it generally takes time for volunteers to become confident in running projects in a new format.

*I set up the space online, try to get people to join. [We’re] up to about 60 people now, and gradually building up the confidence of the facilitators in transferring it online. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff are also more heavily involved in some projects where volunteers need support to facilitate. While the ultimate aim is for residents to be able to run projects independently, staff support is often still required. Sometimes this is just in the early stages, while volunteers build their confidence. However, many volunteers also have mental health conditions which means they are sometimes unable to fulfil their responsibilities and staff need to step in until people are well enough to continue. One resident described the importance of staff flexibility on this; their willingness to pick up slack where people needed the pressure taken off them was perceived to be an important part of their role.

While staff feel that their role is to support residents to take ownership of projects, one staff member also noted that previously, this had a sometimes-negative side effect where some residents took so much ownership of a project that it jeopardised the involvement of new people. Managing this and ensuring that projects are open to new residents is another part of the staff’s facilitation role.

In terms of their individual projects, the residents interviewed described the staff’s role as one of facilitation and support. One resident described the process of establishing a support group. Through his narrative, his sense of ownership of the project came across clearly, as he told a story where his own role was central: from identifying the need, to setting it up, to running it on an ongoing basis. He was appreciative of the role of staff, who he sees as a safety net now that he largely leads the project on his own.

Decisions within Friends of Merstham are taken both through formal Steering Group meetings and informally, through discussions between staff and volunteers who pop into the Hub regularly. Staff and residents generally brought up this ongoing, more casual, exchange and reflected on it positively. One resident interviewed feels it makes for good decision-making, as small decisions can be taken quickly where they do not need to be discussed by the whole group.

Despite the high value of residents’ easy and informal access to staff, it is important to note that this could lead to issues around accountability and transparency, especially about decision-making. It could also be a barrier to new people joining and assuming more leadership in the Local Conversation, as they may not feel they have established a close enough relationship with staff yet. This was not explored in the interviews with residents and staff but might be worth further consideration.

Residents interviewed feel that residents lead the Steering Group, whose role it is to represent the community and decide whether there is a local need for proposed activities/projects. One resident, who was involved in the Steering Group, felt that he was able to play an important and influential role there. Another described her own time constraints as the reason for not engaging more in a leadership role but seemed confident that the structure of the project would definitely enable her to if/when she has more time.

*They’re [staff] open to trying things. It’s all very much from the bottom. (Resident, 2020)*

The question of leadership is also related to access to money. In this, the proximity of the Community Cash Box to the Local Conversations enables more resident leadership. Staff reflected that although there are often various sources of funding available to the MCFT as an organisation, they are inaccessible to residents. The Community Cash Box has a simple application procedure, and staff can help residents with it if needed. This seems to be an important redistribution of power and resources; before, you needed to be in a certain (professional) position to obtain funding locally, whereas now residents can do it more independently.

#### Degrees of participation in action

Residents participate in the activities of Friends of Merstham in different ways. There is a small core group of volunteers including the Steering Group, the group who run the Community Cash Box, and residents who volunteer on/run projects. The largest group of residents are those who come to activities as participants, not volunteers. Staff feel that a key part of their role is to support residents who want to take on more responsibility. They describe doing this through encouraging people to move into volunteer roles when they have identified a skill that they have relating to a project and providing support as people grow into those roles.

For example, one resident who had skills in fixing computers had previously volunteered at the IT drop-in sessions, and staff encouraged him to join the Repair Café which he now helps run. Identifying a match between a resident’s skills and a project, and encouraging them to take on a new project, is seen as an important staff role.

### Barriers

When asked about barriers to growing participation in the Local Conversation in Merstham, both staff members interviewed talked about the high incidence of mental health conditions among volunteers and the challenges that this sometimes posed in engaging and sustaining resident involvement. One staff member also elaborated on the lack of appropriate mental health support services for residents, and the inevitably slow process of engaging residents and growing their roles in the project.

#### Mental health and access to appropriate support

Many residents who are part of the core volunteer group in Friends of Merstham have mental health conditions that can limit what they feel able to take on and sometimes whether they can consistently sustain those commitments. When a resident’s mental health takes a sudden downturn, staff are responsive and pick up their responsibilities until they can return.

Staff also reflected that many residents do not get appropriate support from local statutory services. These services, they explained, are under-resourced and have strict criteria for access. Where residents fail to meet the strict criteria for statutory services, they fall into a void where there is little provision and their conditions become more acute. One staff member feels that a greater range of more diverse support would greatly help residents and prevent the escalation that they often see.

*I'd love to be able to give people low-level access to counselling that would really support people and prevent them falling into higher needs. (Staff, 2020)*

Ultimately, this lack of appropriate support at the right time is damaging to residents and makes it harder for some to develop the sufficiently stable foundation that they need to become engaged in, or quickly increase their participation and responsibility in, projects like the Local Conversation.

Separately to this, staff described time as a barrier to increasing resident participation in the project. It was understood that encouraging people to get involved in something completely new takes a lot of time, as there is a need to build a sense of trust and to build people’s confidence. Many residents have never been in paid employment, and staff reflected that this meant they needed more support to become volunteers because they may not have had other opportunities to develop particular organisational skills.

Ultimately, a “softly-softly approach”, where staff support residents and help them very gradually build up their confidence and skills, is needed. Staff did not describe this approach in a negative way, but rather reflected on the reality of a situation where residents may require a lot of support and nurturing before they are able to feel confident enough to take on more responsibility within projects.

*A lot of people, if you try and chuck them in at the deep end, they’ll run a mile and you’ll never see them again. (Staff, 2020)*

#### Impact of Covid-19 and lockdown

Staff spoke about the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on their progress this year in terms of engagement and project delivery. Prior to lockdown a new engagement strategy was being implemented, which involved physical door-knocking around the neighbourhood, with particular “pockets” of residents identified as priorities for engagement. This work had begun shortly before lockdown with a nearby sheltered housing complex. With lockdown, this physical outreach work had to stop, and many residents – especially those most vulnerable to Covid-19 – were no longer seen.

The ongoing pandemic situation, the fear of a second wave, and the possibility of a second lockdown, continue to limit the kind of engagement that is possible in the coming months. Staff were also aware of the need to ensure that, when activities started again in person, they restarted safely to ensure residents retained trust in them.

*Our job was to get people together, out of their houses, and now they have to stay in them...If people lose trust, then things will fall apart. (Staff, 2020)*

As well as impacting engagement of residents, the lockdown also impacted project delivery. Some projects moved online where possible, and while this has worked well for some it has been less effective in others.

### Enablers

While interviewees discussed some aspects of the local context, which were barriers to developing the Local Conversation, they also discussed some interesting enabling strengths of the area.

#### The Hub

Staff noted that having the physical space of the Hub is very important. One staff member described it as an “unorthodox office”, where volunteers and residents would often drop in for informal chats with staff. Sometimes they discuss projects, and this informal communication enables staff and volunteers to agree adjustments quickly to ongoing projects. At other times, residents come in to talk about personal issues. Being able to access staff to discuss projects is something that residents value, and staff reflected that being available to residents for personal matters is also vital in being an organisation that is rooted in the community.

*It’s [popping in] a lifeline for lots of people who were extremely isolated and suffering from mental health issues. (Staff, 2020)*

Having a space that residents can freely access, which has facilities to sit and have a cup of tea, is vital to increasing the informal contact that is so crucial to the success of the Local Conversation. It gives residents support, but also gives them a sense of access and ownership: they are part of this and as such can drop by whenever it suits them.

The fact that the Local Conversation was housed with other organisations at the Hub was a positive enabler, according to staff. One staff member reflected that it enabled them to be more aware of what other organisations were doing, so they could avoid replicating work. This is something that organisations would try to do regardless but the proximity makes that work smoother.

One staff member also reflected that proximity to other organisations in the Hub helps them to keep an eye on particularly vulnerable residents, who tend to drift between groups and activities. Sharing a space in the Hub makes it easier for organisations to share responsibility for keeping an eye on residents who might encounter different organisations/services. Additionally, the combination of organisations at the Hub creates a feeling described by one interviewee as “neutrality”; while statutoryinstitutions are distrusted by residents (see *Power and control*), the Hub is regarded as separate from these networks and thus a site that residents trust to support them.

#### Good local partnerships

In addition to the benefits of proximity to other organisations in the Hub, interviewees described an ecosystem of local organisations which work well together. Relationships are felt to be collaborative, which prevents duplication of work and keeps morale high. This has also had the effect of organisations sharing resources; for example, the local YMCA has been providing youth workers to co-facilitate the youth club with staff. This support is particularly enabling here since, due to safeguarding, this is not a project that could easily be run by resident volunteers and where particular experience and skills are vital. Friends of Merstham also make use of other organisations’ spaces; for example, the Repair Café is run in a space lent by Age Concern.

As well as regular projects, organisations support each other on a more adhoc basis. Staff spoke about this in terms of organisations thinking together to identify new needs in the community and to keep an eye on vulnerable residents. For example, one resident described a recent bereavement which shook the community hard – particularly volunteers at the Hub. She explained how the local church, being made aware of this, provided its own bereavement councillors to support the volunteers through this difficult time. Both through official partnerships and through individuals, organisations seem well connected and willing to share skills/expertise and resources.

#### The internet and social media

One staff member highlighted the internet – and particularly social media – as a recent factor that has significantly changed the environment within which the Local Conversation operates. Overall, she felt it had been a positive change for residents, who were engaging more with institutions like the Council, which were becoming more accessible to them online.

Another interviewee noted that social media had also been helpful in terms of organisations disseminating information about their own activities and making it easier for people to access information about what was available locally. However, one interviewee noted that the internet and social media are actually a barrier. According to this interviewee, the proliferation of information and sources of information about Hub activities is sometimes confusing for residents; as there is no central source of information, understanding who is doing what can be bewildering. This interviewee reflected that the organisations at the Hub could better coordinate and clarify information and information sources for residents, and work is already underway to achieve this.

## Outcomes: What has changed in Merstham?

Interviews explored the outcomes of the Local Conversation for involved residents (those who volunteer or participate in activities), the wider community, and organisations in the area (both partners and the lead organisation). The outcomes identified for residents were consistent with other Local Conversations sites and included confidence in themselves and confidence to explore the local area, the feeling of making a worthwhile contribution, building roles and responsibility, a sense of control over their lives and improved mental health and increased social connection.

### Impact on those involved

Interviewees described a range of outcomes for residents who are involved in Friends of Merstham, including those attending projects and those volunteering for them, as well as those involved in the Steering Group.

Staff and residents spoke about building people’s personal resources and capacity across projects; these were outcomes which people spoke about in terms of both long-term, entrenched changes for residents, as well as short-term achievements. Confidenceis a key part of this, as the projects run by Friends of Merstham help people to see their own skills and knowledge, and to see that this is valued by others.

*[There is] one gentleman who’s very depressed but has a fantastic knowledge of flowers. I hope our interactions with him [through the allotment project] make him feel valued, and we want other people to feel that their input is important. (Resident, 2020)*

Another resident compared his experience in Friends of Merstham with past (negative) experiences volunteering in a charity shop. The difference he described was one of recognising his own, specific, worth. While at the charity shop, he felt he was doing tasks which anyone could do, whereas at Friends of Merstham he has found roles which suited his skillset, roles where it mattered that it was *him,* rather than someone else, doing it. He gained confidence by seeing his skills valued by others. What this story also highlights is the feeling of making a valuable contribution to the community, a theme that was echoed by staff. Because the projects are community-driven, or in response to community needs, volunteers feel their contribution is really worthwhile and valuable to their area.

*Because it [the project] has come from Steering Group, people know it’s something the community needs, so people know it’s connecting them, and they are filling a need and doing something tangibly beneficial. (Staff, 2020)*

One resident reflected that this was particularly important for residents who are unable to work. He explained that the stigma around unemployment and benefits can really damage someone’s self-esteem, and that volunteering for Friends of Merstham countered this.

*And I get [positive] feedback which is a real boon to those of us who feel terrible about not being employed. (Resident, 2020)*

Over time, this increased confidence has enabled residents to take on roles with more responsibility than they would have otherwise felt able to. Staff described one Steering Group member who had been very reluctant to join at all, due to their mental health, but has since grown in the role and has become more vocal in the group and taken up a leadership position. Staff also described this happening outside the Steering Group, as residents become more confident and willing to be vocal on local issues and challenge people in positions of authority.

*I think people who trust us, or trust the Hub, are able to open up more, and that all comes from them being more confident. So all those projects and all that grassroots stuff, then enables them to be more confident with their opinions. (Staff, 2020)*

As well as a sense of making a valuable contribution and increased confidence in their skills and expressing their views, residents also described how some aspects of the project – particularly the parks and greenspaces activities – gave people confidence to explore their local area**.** One resident described two families who had come on guided walks at a local lake. Although both families lived near the lake, neither family had really explored it before. One mother explained that she had been nervous to venture beyond the paths on the lakeshore, and the other family had not even known that the lake was there. Having a guided walk allowed them to find out what was there and feel more comfortable exploring it.

This seems particularly important during the continuing restrictions arising from Covid-19, especially for people with children at home, where people are more limited in terms of travelling outside of their immediate area (particularly in areas of low car ownership), and many indoor spaces are not accessible. Although it was not discussed in this way, it is possible that an increased confidence to explore their local area could contribute to residents feeling more ownership of it and thus being more likely to try to take action locally.

Another aspect of building personal resources was residents using the projects to build a routine for themselves and, subsequently, developing more sense of control over their lives. This comes through having activities that are regular and feel purposeful.

*[They’re] able to come here every day, get out the house, take back very basic control of their lives by being engaged with a routine. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff and residents identified improved mental healthas a key outcome for those involved in Friends of Merstham. Sometimes this was explained in terms of the mental health benefits of individual projects. One resident, for example, highlighted the link between being outdoors and mental health, and framed guided walks and the allotment project as improving people’s mental health through being outside and doing physical activity. At other times, the mental health benefits were not tied to a particular project but were related to reduced isolation and being more engaged and active. One staff member reflected that for residents with less severe mental health conditions, participating could prevent them from spiralling to a higher level of need.

*Sometimes knowing there's a contact on the phone, daily contact, going down to the allotment, is enough to keep them away from the statutory services. (Staff, 2020)*

One resident also described an atmosphere within projects where people were willing to listen to and support one another. This peer support, putting people into contact with a wider network of supportive peers, is one of the key ways that people have become less isolated.

*People are really listening to each other… and when somebody gets a bit down other people are able to say “Hey, I know how you feel, I’m here for you.” (Resident, 2020)*

As residents are involved in the project for a longer time, this feeling of reduced isolation seems to be growing into feeling more socially connected, with residents feeling more that there is a community where they are known, where they are welcome, and where they belong. One resident articulated a sense of embeddedness and connection through his ongoing volunteering:

*I became known in the community and it makes me feel part of something and feel welcome. It breaks down the isolation barriers, I think. (Resident, 2020)*

### Impact on the wider community

Friends of Merstham also seems to be having an impact on the wider community, as well as the residents who attend projects and volunteer in it. Residents and staff agreed that the project has created an increased sense of community by connecting people and increasing the activities that are available locally. This is particularly important since most residents cannot afford to access them elsewhere or privately. It seems that this leads to people feeling more positive about the area because it is more a place that allows them to pursue things they like and are interested in, rather than somewhere they have to leave in order to do those things.

*[M]akes me feel very positive for Merstham […] positive for myself. It has been nice to see how things have changed round here for the better. [...] Back in the day we had very little going on locally, but it’s wonderful to see things now. (Resident, 2020)*

This seemed important for the increased sense of aspiration for the area. As people see things happening locally, it becomes possible to imagine and expect more. If residents never see things happening in their area, it is hard to challenge the perception of an area as one where nothing happens. One resident commented that the area’s bad reputation did seem to be shifting, particularly among residents.

Related to residents feeling more positive and aspirational about the area is the increased control that interviewees described. Staff explained that people need a structure within which they can express their views and their wants, and that without someone asking them, many residents will not become vocal. The engagement work through the Friends of Merstham – particularly the Councillors’ Q&A – has given people that structure to be more vocal, while their increased confidence encourages people to speak up more.

*Sometimes people need to be asked – What would you like and what can you do? (Staff, 2020)*

### Impact on the lead organisation and other services/organisations in the area

#### The lead organisation

Staff described two ways in which the Local Conversation has shored up MCFT as an organisation. First, one staff member explained that securing funding from a well-known funder added to MCFT’s credibility, that the “kudos” associated with having Trust funding had enabled them to secure more funding from other sources. Second, the Local Conversation has strengthened MCFT’s presence in Merstham. Staff feel that the organisation has always been an important part of the local area, but that this has been strengthened. Because of the Local Conversation’s design as a community-led project, MCFT has increased its engagement with residents and other organisations. This is felt to have further anchored it in the community.

Staff also reflected that the Local Conversation provided a way of working that they really enjoyed. One staff member described MCFT’s history as an organisation that “did come up through grassroots anyway” and has always evolved through residents’ demands. However, this way of working is rarely supported by funders. The funding from the Trust is felt to be very different, “kind of backwards to how things usually work”, which one staff member described as “refreshing”.

Staff also reflected a lot on the nature of their interaction with residents, which is often quite intensive and demanding. However, staff seemed to enjoy it and consider it a benefit of the job. The design of the Local Conversation lets them work in this way. One staff member also reflected that it was easier to work in a project that was resident-led. Because projects began from wants articulated by residents, there was a lesser need to persuade people that they wanted to get involved. Overall, staff found the design of the Local Conversation an enjoyable way to work.

#### Partner organisations and other services in the area

Friends of Merstham has good working relationships with the organisations in the Hub and those located nearby. The ways in which this local ecosystem supports Friends of Merstham has already been discussed, but here it is important to consider also the impact that Friends of Merstham has had on other organisations and services in the area.

Staff reflected that third sector organisations in the area work well together, often working around the same complex issues facing residents, and therefore strengthen the ecosystem. One interviewee gave the example of food poverty. Staff signpost residents to the foodbank and distribute vouchers for it. They also direct people to the Community Fridge, which is run by the Council’s Community Development Officer but is also partly supplied by the allotment run by Friends of Merstham. The Community Fridge and the food bank are run by different charities, but staff described a system where they all work together to try to make sure people have what they need. There was a sense that it is easier to keep track of vulnerable people and address complex needs when there are more eyes out, and multiple avenues through which people can access the support they need.

Several interviewees feel that the ethos and actions of Friends of Merstham, centring on residents’ voices, have started to influence other institutions and services locally, by encouraging them to be more responsive to residents’ needs and wants. There was a sense from staff that the Councillors’ Q&A, as well as the Facebook group, have created contexts in which councillors feel more accountable to residents and engage more with their concerns. A potential reason for this change is that residents are now able to use channels that they feel comfortable with and are learning how to be heard, and because councillors are more responsive to the organisation than they have been to individual residents in the past.

In addition, Friends of Merstham has also led to a growing understanding of which local issues are important to residents, and the importance of resident engagement for public and third sector organisations. These insights are transmitted to other organisations in the area both through working together and through lobbying other institutions to do things differently.

One community leader gave the example of the local recreation centre (rec), which the Council had been planning to renovate extensively. From the six-monthly Local Conversation questionnaires, staff and partners were aware of how important this site is locally, how much residents care about it. They were able to use this awareness, as well as the ethos of the programme, to lobby the Council to ensure that their design process had more resident involvement. As a result, the plans for the rec have had far more resident input than would have been considered before. It is hoped that this will empower residents but also lead to a space better designed for them.

*[W]hat we had learnt from the Local Conversations stuff [like] engagement, is actually that we were able to say “as a borough, as a local authority, you need to do this.” And it has had implications for the wider community because so many more people are now involved in the rec plans and it hasn't kind of come down from the top. (Resident, 2020)*

The new Community Engagement Officer has been working with partners locally, drawing on insights from residents generated through Friends of Merstham and helping partners think about how to do their own engagement work. In this way, Friends of Merstham is operating as another connection between residents and other organisations to create an ecosystem of organisations that are together more responsive to residents’ needs and wants.

#### Influencing

The priority area A Voice for Merstham aims to combat a feeling of disconnect between local people and local decision-makers. The goal is both to get more residents involved in shaping the community and to push local elected representatives to be more accountable to residents.

When asked to reflect on progress in influencing over the last year, interviewees mentioned two local institutions where the bulk of this work had been directed. The first is the Raven Housing Trust, where the Local Conversation has facilitated residents liaising with housing officers to identify areas or residents who need support. This is sometimes done through residents and housing officers walking the estate together and identifying individuals or issues. In this way, the project exerts some influence over what becomes visible to an organisation with the power to make change, which in turn has a huge impact on the quality of residents’ lives.

The second institution where the Local Conversation has sought to extend residents’ influence is the local Council. Staff feel that there had been positive progress on this in the last year. The new engagement officer employed by the Local Conversation has started a livestreamed Q&A with local councillors and an active Facebook group (see *Activities*). These formats seem to be important, because they make it easier and less daunting for residents to voice their views and hold their local leaders to account.

One promising outcome from this work has been around transport links in the area. As described under *Services and amenities*, food shopping is very limited in Merstham. Until last year there was a free bus from Merstham, which ran to a Tesco superstore that is inaccessible by public transport. Since the bus was cut, the superstore became off limits for many residents who do not drive; poorer and elderly residents were cut off from the wider range of food and cheaper prices offered. The Steering Group has taken up this issue, running a petition and liaising with councillors. Through one of the councillors, they were connected to a nearby village that runs a community bus to the same superstore, and the engagement officer and chair of the Steering Group are now working with them to see if that service could be shared.

Staff reflected how local councillors also seemed increasingly to feel more accountable to residents, and to be more responsive to their concerns. For example, although they will not be reinstating the bus service from Merstham they have been pushed into finding an alternative solution. This was partly because resident-led action in the Local Conversation also comes under the banner of MCFT, an organisation that has credibility in the eyes of the Council.

*I think councillors sit up and listen if they know that we’re involved in things. (Staff, 2020)*

When asked about residents’ capacity for influencing, staff noted positive changes. Through Friends of Merstham they have gained confidence from an environment where their opinions and contributions are valued and bring about visible change, Staff feel this enables them to develop a healthy sense of entitlement, a conviction that they do not have to put up with things, and that they are “learning how to be heard”.

*More people are realising they don’t have to just take it, that they have the right and power to ask for things to change. (Staff, 2020)*

#### Inclusion

Overall, staff feel that the residents who participated in the Local Conversation are a fair reflection of the area’s demographics in terms of ethnicity and gender, and that the project is working well to engage more challenging groups.

Staff reflected that young people between the ages of 14 and 24 were particularly difficult to reach. One staff member commented that young people who were likely to get engaged with projects were already engaged in time-consuming schemes like the Duke of Edinburgh award. Those who were not already involved in these existing projects were unlikely to want to get involved in similar ones.

However, the partnership with the YMCA has been fruitful. The YMCA sends a youth bus to the Hub weekly, where young people can hang out after school and socialise and play computer games. This brings them into contact with the YMCA and the MCFT. The weekly youth club has grown a lot and was on the brink of expanding before it was forced to close during lockdown.

As noted, the Local Conversation in Merstham works with a lot of residents with mental health issues, many of whom constitute the core group of volunteers and relatively few of whom receive the support that they need from statutory services. Staff reflected that this group can be difficult to work with, since some people’s conditions make social mixing harder for them, or they require a high level of support to be able to take part. However, staff and residents both explained that staff’s willingness to be flexible makes it easier for residents to take part in spite of these challenges, as staff provided people with emotional support and are willing to support people in their roles as volunteers when their mental health makes that more challenging.

This year, the project employed a Community Engagement Officer. A central part of his role has been to gather opinions and views from a much wider group of residents, to reach out beyond the group of residents who visit the Hub. He has expanded the youth club and has also been working with the Red Oak Family Centre to engage with and understand the needs of the young families they support. This is considered very important as it allows Friends of Merstham to start engaging with, and understanding the needs of, a group of residents with whom they would otherwise rarely engage.

## Plans for the future

When asked about the year ahead, staff were unable to articulate a clear plan for Friends of Merstham, due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. At the time of interviews, the UK was just emerging from lockdown and Covid-19 cases were very low. As such, the Hub was reopening and some projects – those that could be relocated outdoors – were beginning to restart. However, staff described the situation as “all a bit up in the air”, because of rapidly changing government guidelines and a rapidly changing public health situation.

Staff were aware that residents needed to *feel* safe to return to activities, and time was needed to figure out how to create this sense of safety that may require something additional to following government guidance. In addition to a lack of stability in government guidance and perceptions of safety, staff were also very aware that the local context – the needs of Merstham residents – would change as a result of the pandemic. They feel that these new needs were only just beginning to emerge, and that as people resurfaced after lockdown this would become a lot clearer.

Overall, staff were not in a position to think about plans far into the future since the public health situation and government guidance were (rightly) assumed to be likely to change, and they had not yet had enough time to fully develop an understanding of how the pandemic has affected Merstham residents and their needs. At the time of interviews, staff were working on a plan for how to enable Friends of Merstham to continue functioning through an expected second wave of Covid-19 cases.

### Sustainability

When asked about the sustainability of Friends of Merstham’s work, staff and residents described a mixed picture. The residents interviewed both feel that some projects would probably be able to continue without financial resources and staff support (both in terms of organising/facilitating, and supporting volunteers’ mental health), but that other projects would fall off the radar. One resident described this in terms of staff running some projects, and another described it in terms of the loss of staff infrastructure to accommodate and support volunteers with mental health conditions. While some projects are led almost entirely by residents and are low or no cost, others require more facilitation from staff and more financial resources.

The projects that require more facilitation from staff tend to be those that involve other organisations or those with safeguarding requirements (e.g. working with young people). Both of these types of project are key to keeping the project engaged with the most marginalised groups in the community and functioning well in an ecosystem of third sector organisations. While some projects could probably sustain themselves, the development of new projects still requires a lot of support from staff.

As discussed under *Who leads and how*, staff seem to support projects most intensively in the early days, arranging the infrastructure/equipment needed, and providing the initial impetus and support for volunteers until they become comfortable leading it. For new projects to continue to emerge and meet new needs identified in the community, the presence of staff is vital. Staff also continue to play a key role in supporting residents who volunteer, both in their volunteer roles and beyond, which helps maintain stability and continuity for everyone involved.

Staff also reflected on sustainability in the context of the pandemic. As previously mentioned, the lockdown and the ongoing impact of the pandemic have made impossible many activities that were previously undertaken, or at least meant they have needed to radically change form. Staff were thinking about sustainability in terms of how to weather this current crisis. They recognised a need to keep projects running in some form so that residents do not become disengaged, and to try to provide continuity for people. This was vital for keeping residents’ trust in the project and its staff, and particularly important in the current context since the usual atmosphere of openness and transparency – fostered by the availability of the Hub and staff to residents – is not currently possible.

*We need to keep the trust... If people lose trust, then things will fall apart. (Staff, 2020)*

### Conclusion

As Merstham is a new case study site that has only been included in the final year of the evaluation, any comments on how the Merstham Local Conversation has progressed over the past four years are retrospective. It was challenging for staff and residents to reflect on the early days and developments of the Local Conversation, in which they were largely uninvolved. Even those who had longer engagement found it easier to recall and reflect on developments in the last 12 months. Many interviewees also reflected on the impact of Covid-19 on the project, which was expected and understandable.

The Local Conversation in Merstham seems to be active across its priority areas, with reducing isolation understood by staff and residents to be a core concern that shapes all of its priorities. The new role of the engagement officer has made it possible to conduct the ‘Voice for Merstham’ work, which seems to have developed further in the past year. However, it is important to note that it is not within the scope of such projects to create the kind of systemic change and local transformation that is needed in the area more thoroughly to improve residents’ quality of life and the local social determinants of health. This was reflected in the outcomes that staff and residents described, all of which, including those around influencing, were experienced at a highly local and individual level.

While it is clear that the Local Conversation in Merstham makes a difference in residents’ lives and offers a lot to local people, the scale at which it operates remains relatively small. Both staff and residents harbour aspirations for wider and more systemic change in the community so that they can build on and amplify the successes of the Local Conversation.

# Annex 5. Caia Park, Wrexham

Supported by the Caia Park Partnership.

The Local Conversation in Caia Park is a new case study that is being included for the first time in the fieldwork carried out in 2020.

## Methods

Fieldwork was carried out remotely during September and October 2020. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted by a mixture of telephone and video calls; two with staff and six with local residents involved in the Local Conversation project. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded with the participants’ permission to allow for accurate analysis. The in-depth interviews were followed by a series of more informal follow-up email exchanges and calls with staff.

The research team was also given access to some of the Local Conversation’s paperwork, such as minutes from Steering Group meetings. Covid-19 restrictions meant that researchers were unable to visit the area in person and so it was not possible to undertake the usual range of more informal interactions and observations as part of the research process.

## Context: About Caia Park

The Caia Park estate sits on the South East edge of Wrexham town in North Wales. With around 14,000 residents in 5,500 homes, Caia Park is one of the largest estates in Wales.



The Local Conversation project is delivered by the Caia Park Partnership, a longstanding community development organisation which runs a variety of services in the area, including three nurseries, an adult day care centre, and youth provision. The Partnership hub, which includes a community centre and a café, is located in the heart of the Caia Park area and is therefore a natural home for the Local Conversation.

### Connections and community

The Caia Park area has a semi-independent identity to the rest of Wrexham despite being only 15 minutes’ walking distance from the town centre. The estate historically had a bad reputation. In an attempt to refresh the area’s image, its name was changed from Queen’s Park to Caia Park in the 1980s, though longer standing residents still refer to the neighbourhood as Queen’s Park. Despite an ongoing stigma attached to the area, there is a notable sense of pride among residents, with many families having an enduring association with the estate. Some of the local pride stems from the resident-led football club, FC Queens Park, which was mentioned by residents we spoke to as a positive community focus that helps to regularly bring local residents together with turnout at matches sometimes exceeding 200 spectators.

The community in Caia Park is predominantly White Welsh or British and there is limited ethnic diversity. The area houses small Polish and Portuguese populations which have reduced in recent years partly because of Brexit, and there is generally very little mixing between different ethnic groups. Staff we spoke to indicated that reaching minority communities in the area is a real challenge, but residents suggested that the Local Conversation has helped to slowly start to break down cultural barriers. Events such as Portuguese cookery and crafts were described as well attended by a mix of residents and had resulted in people saying hello on the street to neighbours from different communities.

While the estate has always had a strong history of fundraising and community ethos, historically there have been limited opportunities for the community to forge new connections. There is a clear sense that the Local Conversation is effectively starting to tap into that latent community spirit and provide opportunities for residents to connect in a way that has not happened before.

*The real outcome of this programme is having a well-connected community; people have built relationships for the first time with people they didn't know, or they didn't like for whatever reason... but actually getting things done together they're sharing a space with each other they're sharing stories... those relationships are timeless. (Staff, 2020)*

### Services and amenities

The estate’s proximity to Wrexham town centre means that it has relatively few amenities of its own. Retail is limited to a handful of fast-food outlets, betting shops, convenience stores, and a chemist. Staff interviewed indicated that although there are primary schools, churches, and a building for the Community Council, there are few pubs or spaces that might lend themselves to community gatherings or activities. The Caia Park Partnership therefore plays a central role in the community, as it not only has a café and a community centre with rooms for hire, but also provides a range of services for the community, including a tenancy support service and services targeted at skills and employment.

The Caia Park estate is unique in its layout, as it was designed by a town planner and architect who focused on the importance of green space for physical and mental wellbeing. He designed the estate so that it was both surrounded by countryside and had plenty of green space within it. However, while the green spaces of Caia Park have the potential to lift the estate, ongoing problems with waste, fly-tipping, and drug use mean they are not considered safe by everyone and are therefore not as well used as they could be.

### Power and control

As an area that suffers from considerable deprivation, Caia Park has been the focus of numerous grants and regeneration schemes over the years, including the Communities First programme. Despite some substantial investment and positive work in the area, there is ongoing multiple deprivation. This has left some of the local residents feeling slightly jaded and disengaged as they have watched new funding come through the estate and seemingly little change as a result. Many residents have also felt very disempowered, a feeling that is exacerbated by the poor reputation of the estate within the local area. Staff reported how residents would sometimes withhold their full address because of the stigma it carries.

However, there are indications that things are starting to change as a result of the Local Conversation. The resident-led focus is encouraging even previously jaded residents to get involved and the consistent emphasis on residents taking charge, identifying challenges, and forming their own responses to them is slowly having an impact on the local narrative and helping residents to feel as though they have an element of empowerment or control, however small.

### Housing

Housing was identified by staff we spoke to as one of the biggest issues in the area. The estate itself is still largely social housing with the exception of a few homes where residents took advantage of the Right to Buy scheme. However, the quality of the stock is variable. Maintenance has been poor over the years, although more recently there has been more investment with some houses receiving new kitchens, bathrooms and windows. Caia Park is often where local residents are placed when they reach the top of the priority housing list, but there is a paucity of space available and seeing houses empty for a long time can frustrate residents who are waiting. The Caia Park Partnership regularly works with residents and the local authority to tackle housing issues.

## Process: About the Local Conversation in Caia Park

The residents we interviewed generally had a sound understanding of what the Local Conversation was and the fact that this was funded separately to the Caia Park Partnership’s other services (even though there was some confusion about where the Partnership’s activities ended, and the Local Conversation’s began). This understanding has been aided, at least in part, by communications from the staff supporting the project including the use of a very active Facebook account dedicated to the Caia Park Local Conversation.

### Local priorities

A new Community Development Worker was appointed to facilitate the Local Conversation in 2018. Following his appointment there were two large strategy events in April 2019. These were attended by around 50 residents who built on discussions that had taken place over the preceding six months and identified the following priority areas for the Caia Park Local Conversation:

* Safety and the environment
* Older people
* Young people

Cutting across these three areas, the Local Conversation also has a focus on community participation and amplifying the voice of Caia Park residents. The Local Conversation has been far more active since the new Community Development Worker took over in August 2018. The following sections outline some of the activities that have taken place both within the Local Conversation’s priority areas and beyond.

#### Safety and the environment

Safety and the environment were chosen because the estate experiences high levels of crime and vandalism, including drug dealing, motor theft, and arson, with rubbish and fly-tipping also posing problems. Residents have worked hard to deliver a range of activities to improve the local environment. Much of this work has centred on building strong partnerships with other local organisations such as the Caia Park Environmental Group.

Residents have formed connections with Tidy Wales and have participated in clean-up days and litter picks alongside them. Tidy Wales has also given the Local Conversation a grant to develop a garden wildlife sanctuary and local residents will work with Tidy Wales to design and create it. Staff attributed the area’s success in gaining the award to the genuinely resident-led approach that the Local Conversation is taking and the strength of the connections the Conversation has created with organisations like Tidy Wales. The hope is that this project will provide an opportunity for residents to get involved in environmental work in a safe and socially distanced way.

A strong relationship has also been forged with the Local Green Infrastructure project, which works with local communities to carry out environmental improvements to local green spaces. Members of the Local Conversation Steering Group have attended the project’s own Steering Group meetings and have ongoing contact with the Improvements Development Worker for the project. Caia Park residents have also been involved in litter picks arranged by the project.

#### Older people

Local residents recognised that social isolation was a huge issue on the estate for people of all ages, but particularly older people, and chose to make activities for older people a priority. The Local Conversation appointed an Older People’s Activity Worker in December 2019 in a part-time paid role, to establish an older people’s forum and help facilitate a range of activities. The aim was to have regular forum drop-in meetings and a luncheon club, as well as other activities to be decided by the forum. Sadly, lockdown restrictions have prevented many of the planned activities from going ahead.

However, the Activity Worker has used the time during Covid-19 lockdowns to build relationships with older local people, distribute activity packs to some older residents, and do as much as possible to bring older people together. The Local Conversation has also invested in some gazebos so that activities can take place outside in all weathers and for older people this has included running outside sessions such as mindfulness and afternoon tea with a bonfire and a singer. Staff we spoke to mentioned that for some older people, the activities that they have managed to run during lockdown have been the only opportunity to leave the house and mix with others in months.

The Local Conversation has also had a focus on intergenerational activities to support connection and reduce isolation within the community. A range of activities has been planned or delivered, including the Caia Park Craft ‘n’ Chat group, a resident-led weekly group that is open to the local community to drop in and learn some crafting activities or simply have a chat. The group has a number of regular members but also invites groups, such as the local Girl Guides and members of the local Portuguese community to come and join, which encourages the intergenerational element. Residents spoke about how the group has provided a haven for the people who use it as somewhere they can go and spend time with no expectations.

*[It’s about] the companionship really, knowing you can come and there's always something to do and nobody judges.(Resident, 2020)*

When Covid-19 hit, the group had to disband but has kept in regular contact through Facebook and shares ideas for craft activities that they can do at home. While the group has played a significant role in connecting people, it is clear that the current restrictions have left a real vacuum in some group members’ lives.

*They're missing coming out and meeting people. Some people only come out on that day. That's what they've been looking forward to since they found the group. We just miss being together. It makes you look forward to something once a week.(Resident, 2020)*

#### Young people

The early Local Conversation discussions and listening exercises highlighted that, although there is some playground provision for younger children on the estate, there was limited space for older children to convene and relatively few activities for them to participate in. Young people were therefore designated as a priority and a part-time Youth Activity Worker was appointed to support the strand. In addition, a Youth Forum was established to lead activities for young people. The Youth Forum elected its own chair and agreed to have monthly meetings, holding its first official session in November 2019. The forum has also run regular weekly drop-in sessions for young people to come together and share ideas.

Young people involved in the forum created a list of activities to focus on and got involved in a range of events that have taken place through the Local Conversation, such as arranging a series of discos for local young people, including a New Year’s Eve disco that was designed to cater for local young people who might be at risk of holiday hunger over the school Christmas holidays.

Much of the focus of the youth activities has been on providing a place for young people to connect with each other and build relationships. Residents we spoke to suggested that even being able to provide this space for young people was proving extremely powerful and something that they were proud to be involved with:

*When I see the kids bonding and talking to each other, it makes me feel really good inside because I could then say... I helped them do that... I helped them make friends.(Resident, 2020)*

The Local Conversation has a strong focus on resident participation, and as part of this, members of the Youth Forum have been building relationships with the Caia Park Community Council. Some local young people also attended the Youth Parliament in Wrexham, based in the Council chambers, to build relationships and support the work of the Parliament. The Local Conversation has agreed to support a local adventure playground, Gwenfro Valley, by giving the playground a grant to enable it to open on a Sunday for local children; some Caia Park residents volunteer at the playground.

The strategy day and Youth Forum generated a large number of other ideas to support young people in the area, some of which cut across the other priorities or encouraged intergenerational mixing. However, many of these plans have had to be put on hold because of the pandemic.

When the Covid-19 lockdown started, the Youth Forum quickly moved online and established a weekly group video chat to stay connected with each other and the forum staff. They also initiated a range of online activities including quizzes and weekly cooking and craft sessions in an attempt to keep much needed contact between local young people during the pandemic. The Youth Activity Worker was also given permission to continue some limited distanced youth work on the estate to stay connected with some young people and their families in order to provide support and try to keep up morale.

Community participationBeyond the three priority areas, the residents have initiated a range of activities to get the community to come together more. Some of these have focused on mental health, which is a very live topic for the Local Conversation, as many local residents experience isolation and mental health issues. One example is a new weekly Men’s Mental Health Groupwhich encourages men to come together for a chat. This group is seen as a huge benefit by some members who feel that it gives them a purpose and focus that has been missing previously and in one case has even reduced the need for medication:

*“Now that's massive for me as I've had nowhere to go for years. All I get offered is medication. Now I don't want to take medication.(Resident, 2020)*

*It's got the feel-good factor about it and I don't have any experience of that in my life, to be honest. (Resident, 2020)*

There has also been a range of activities related to the local football club, FC Queen’s Park, which is seen by many of the residents we spoke to as a central part of the local community. Founded in 2013, it has enjoyed success in the Welsh National League Premier division and is a huge source of pride to the estate. When the club faced being removed from the league because it lacked the right facilities, the Local Conversation voted to give the club a grant to enable it to concrete around the pitch to help get it up to scratch.

Residents described how although the Local Conversation project paid for the materials, all the labour was carried out on a voluntary basis by local residents – around 70 of them in total – which saved a lot of money and represented a brilliant opportunity for the community to come together and achieve something. Some of those who volunteered labour had played with the club previously and as a result of them coming together to Resident, a new veterans’ team was established. The Local Conversation has also contributed towards training for coaches so the club can get more children involved, as well as paying for some of the kits the club needed.

A number of community events and groups have also been delivered or planned, ranging from the establishment of an independent, resident-led LGBT+ youth group which has weekly drop-in sessions, a parents’ group, and weekly meditation and mindfulness sessions for residents, to fundraising for a local Morris dancing troupe and a Christmas Eve community session. One of the big plans for 2020 was to have a community music festival July. It was hoped this would bring large numbers of local residents together with the majority of the performers coming from the estate. A resident-led working group was formed to deliver the event on behalf of the Local Conversation. Planning for the event started at the end of 2019 and the Local Conversation Steering Group voted to give the festival a sizeable budget, but the event has been postponed due to Covid-19 restrictions. The team delivering it remains hopeful that it will go ahead at some point.

### Actions in response to Covid-19

When the Covid-19 crisis started, the local community was keen to support residents who were most in need. The Local Conversation Steering Group supported the use of the Conversation’s Community Development Worker’s time to lead a Covid-19 crisis response initiative. Following approval from the Trust, the local community raised around £3,000 and drew on the structures, partnerships, and relationships that both the Local Conversation and the Caia Park Partnership had already developed to reach and support the most vulnerable members of the Caia Park community.

Activities included delivering food and other essential items to those most in need, based on referrals from partner agencies such as Social Services, the Community Council, and North Wales Police, as well as shopping and collecting prescriptions for residents who were shielding. The Partnership estimates that in the early days of the crisis they delivered emergency food and goods to over 250 households and delivered nearly 400 prescriptions. The majority of the work was done by local volunteers, some of whom had been furloughed from work, and much was done in partnership with other local organisations including Wrexham County Borough Council, local churches, the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham (AVOW) as well as foodbanks and national organisations like FareShare.

The Community Development Worker leading the activities was keen to ensure that the response was timely but also time-limited so that the support they offered did not undermine what was on offer from other local organisations. The community also wanted to ensure that resources would continue to be directed to the Local Conversation, as its activities have a large role to play in supporting residents’ mental, emotional, and physical health during the pandemic.

### Local participation in, and control over, the project

#### Mechanisms for influence

There are multiple ways in which residents can get involved in and have control over the Local Conversation.

**Steering group** The Steering Group, which was set up when the latest project development worker started in 2018, is central to Caia Park’s Local Conversation. The group usually meets once a month although it has moved many of its activities online during the pandemic. Steering group meetings are used to raise ideas about how to deliver on the Local Conversation’s priorities, to check in about ongoing activities and to provide support to fellow residents with activities they are involved in. Up to 80 residents are registered as being involved with the Steering Group at any one time and turnout is usually around 15 people, a mix of committed regulars and residents who take part on a more ad hoc basis to contribute to specific projects that are relevant to them.

Residents and staff we spoke to were keen to point out the diversity of residents who get involved in the Steering Group in various ways. Although some of the residents involved have a history of engaging in community activities, there are many who have never been involved in community activities before. The group comprises different ages and genders and although the majority of the residents involved are either retired or unemployed, there are a number of residents with mental health issues who get involved.

*It's quite broad - people with no experience of Steering Groups or community work or citizenry you know to people who have been councillors.(Staff, 2020)*

Steering group meetings have formal agendas and minutes, and residents are encouraged to take on specific roles within the group. The meetings are seen as a good forum for residents to share their views, be heard, build confidence, and develop a more detailed understanding of others’ perspectives.

*Every time I've been to a meeting I’ve been able to have my say. And sometimes I might have been persuaded different, which is a good thing.(Resident, 2020)*

One resident we spoke to described how they had initially felt as though some younger and more inexperienced residents’ voices were not being heard as well.

*I reckon they should let everyone's voice be heard and actually take the ideas on board that they're given and actually do something about it. There were some young kids who were there, and they gave some ideas about football and stuff and they just didn't really take it on board. I think they thought about it but didn't actually do anything to solve it.(Resident, 2020)*

However, the same resident indicated that over time they had come to realise that the Steering Group was having to prioritise and focus on the bigger issues first before turning its attention to the smaller details, though they did not specify which issues they considered to be big or small. This suggests that one of the challenges that the Steering Group faces is how best to communicate with residents who are engaged but not continually present at meetings and activities.

In 2019, there were also two strategy sessions to which local residents were invited to have their say about the priorities and focus for the ongoing Local Conversation. The agenda for the day was set by the Steering Group and based on conversations and ideas that had been raised by local residents in the previous six months. The sessions, which took place during the day and evening to accommodate different residents’ needs, included group discussions and tasks as well as plenary sessions. Turnout for the sessions was high with around 50 residents in total. Staff reported high levels of engagement and described the atmosphere as one of community spirit, respect, leadership, and dedication to the estate.

**Grants panel.** The grants panel is separate from the Steering Group although many residents sit on both. The purpose of the panel is to vote on activities and applications for funding that are submitted from residents. The voting is a formal process with each member asked to consider the proposed activities against an agreed set of criteria and to vote anonymously. Majority support is required for funding to be approved. On smaller grants of £500 and under, residents involved with the Steering Group feel they have high levels of control. Those we spoke to said they would feel comfortable raising an idea for funding and that the criteria that residents applied to decide which projects go through are clear.

*On the smaller pots, we've definitely got a lot of control on that.(Resident, 2020)*

There was also a sense that the Local Conversation was different from other grant-funded initiatives that residents had been involved with because the funding is genuinely there for the community to use.

*For us that get involved, I'd say it’s a lot stronger than anything else that I've ever been involved in on a similar level. (Resident, 2020)*

However, residents spoke about an instance of applying for a larger-scale grant and finding that process more opaque and less straightforward. From the residents' perspective, they had agreed as a group to fund the project but later received a push back from the Caia Park Partnership and were unclear why. Some residents we interviewed indicated that they were unsure exactly what happened when decisions about larger grants were escalated and could not be sure whether it was senior managers within the Caia Park Partnership or staff at the Trust who needed to sign-off bigger plans. While some residents recognise that requests for larger sums of money have to go through a more rigorous sign-off process, others find the lack of influence they have on larger decisions frustrating and feel that it undermines the premise of the programme if residents are not able to take the final decision.

*I think we have a lot of influence but there is somebody above all of that isn't there? (Resident, 2020)*

However, staff pointed out that this larger grant application represented a learning curve for everyone involved. The Caia Park Partnership had not administered a grant of this size for the Local Conversation project before, and residents and staff were unfamiliar with the process. The first request that residents had put forward for the grant had been informal, and so it could not be signed off. However, residents were then advised to submit a formal proposal, which could be reviewed against the Trust’s criteria. This was done to a high standard and the proposal was approved. Staff reflected on what they had learnt from this experience and how they hoped to make residents more comfortable with the processes required both by the Trust and within the Caia Park Partnership so that residents feel more in control of future grant requests.

**Active roles in forums and funded activities** The various activities delivered by the Local Conversation represent opportunities for residents to get involved and have control. The Youth Forum and older person’s forum are designed to allow participating residents to steer those priority areas. One member of the Youth Forum told us how they feel very comfortable sharing their views with the youth activity worker and confident that any suggestions they make will be both heard and considered by the wider group. They spoke about how it becomes easier to share and bounce ideas off each other as the group grows bigger.

*The more people joined, the more the ideas started to flow between us. We all got more creative when we talked. (Resident, 2020)*

Residents involved in other activities described them as being very democratic and resident-led. Where activities had a nominated leader, this role was often seen as being more facilitative than anything else, and residents were keen to stress that everyone’s view carried equal weight.

*We all sit down and talk about it: “What would you like to do next week? Would anybody like to do anything?”(Resident, 2020)*

#### Partnerships and influence

The Caia Park Local Conversation is very focused on developing partnerships and networks. Staff and residents have built on connections that the Caia Park Partnership already held but also sought to make new ones. Residents or the Project Development Worker identify possible local partners and have informal conversations with them to introduce them to the Local Conversation. These potential partners are then invited to a Steering Group meeting where they can hear more about what the group is doing and exchange ideas about the potential for mutual support, so that residents can decide if they want to partner with them. Staff described the partnerships that have been formed so far as very “relational”.

Partnerships have been forged with a range of organisations and public sector bodies including the Green Infrastructure Programme, Tidy Wales, the local adventure playground Gwenfro Valley, a local Brownies group, Caia Park Enterprise Project, and the North East Wales Community Cohesion team. There is also a strong relationship with the local Community Council and a group of residents presented their Local Conversation strategy to the Council and have since partnered with them on a few activities including community clean-up weeks and Youth Forum sessions.

Partnerships are driven both by the Conversation’s priorities and by ideas from residents. For example, the Steering Group has a big focus on mental health and so invited a local branch of Mind to come to see them and share details of local activities. The group is also working with the local Community Council to help the community find a much-needed mental health worker who could be available to local residents.

There are mixed views about the level of influence that the partnerships formed so far give the Local Conversation. Residents we spoke to identified how many local organisations want to partner with the group because the Local Conversation is perceived as being successful locally. However, there is some scepticism about how much these partnerships will lead to change, and some feel that residents currently only really have any influence within the Local Conversation itself. Staff understand this view and recognise that the highly involved way of arriving at decisions that the Local Conversation offers often cannot be matched by either public sector or other third sector partners. They feel that although there are local organisations that do want to listen to and involve residents, overall, this process will take time.

At the same time, staff feel that there is a lot of potential in the partnerships that are being formed and are keen to ensure that the relationships that are established are truly reciprocal where possible, so that residents can feel as though they have genuine influence.

*When you're doing this kind of model, people seldom come knocking to work with you unless you've got something they want. (Staff, 2020)*

They feel that their unique offer to local organisations and decision-makers is their easy access to large numbers of local residents and their ability to mobilise quickly.

The Local Conversation was at a critical point with forming new partnerships when the Covid crisis hit. Residents had just made some real breakthroughs with initiating relationships with potential partners who were not in their usual local networks and who had expressed interest because of the resident-led model. The plan had been to review the emerging potential partnerships against the group’s strategy and make informed decisions about which relationships to pursue. The process had to be put on hold, but staff remain hopeful that these efforts will be resumed in the future.

*I would hope that the big achievement that we could look back on the Conversation as a whole achieving when we reach the end point of it, is that it will have seen a real cementing of these relationships. (Staff, 2020)*

#### Leadership

There is a very clear aspiration for the Caia Park Local Conversation to be as genuinely resident-led as possible. However, there is also a recognition that getting to the point where activities are fully led by residents will take time, support, and upskilling. Staff identified that training would be required for local residents to become civic leaders and indicated that they are currently exploring the potential for some of the Local Conversations funding to be invested in leadership training for residents who are interested.

In the meantime, staff are aiming to provide residents with the confidence and tools they need to take ownership and responsibility of the activities they’re involved with.

*I'm getting them to budget it. I'm getting them to publicly discuss the pros and the cons and evaluate and also to accept responsibility. “This is your work, this is what you wanted, this is what we're doing.”(Staff, 2020)*

This message was echoed by residents who understood clearly that things would only happen if they delivered them themselves. However, there is a clear sense that staff are very much there to support residents in delivering activities. Staff also identified that because residents are unpaid volunteers, there is sometimes a need for the staff in paid roles to do some of the “donkey work”. This ongoing input from paid staff is also likely to be important for the sustainability of activities.

Many of the residents who are involved in Caia Park’s Local Conversation are unemployed, but their engagement with the project is helping them to build skills and confidence. The hope is that this could ultimately lead to employment for some of those seeking it. It is possible, therefore, that in the future there will be more churn in the residents involved in the project, meaning that the consistent role that paid staff play in the background could become even more important.

In an effort to make the Steering Group genuinely resident-led, the Project Development Worker has been trying to persuade Steering Group members to take on formal leadership roles within the group. While there has been some notable success with this, at the time of writing no residents had yet been willing to take on the role of chair.

### Enablers

Our research suggests that successes in the Caia Park Local Conversation have been enabled by four key factors.

Staffing  
Residents and staff were very keen to point out the huge role that the current Community Development Worker is playing in the success of the Local Conversation. The previous Community Development Worker had taken a very different approach, which was seen as being less strategic and reaching fewer residents. Residents expressed their respect for and trust in the current programme lead – who is trained in community organising – and described his open, inclusive, supportive, and energetic approach as being fundamental to both motivating them to get involved in the Conversation and persuading them to stay involved.

*The one thing I would say to the Trust is you can have all the greatest policies in the world…but if the delivery organisations aren't employing the right type of people it's a waste of time. (Resident, 2020)*

There is a clear sense that the Local Conversation staff in general are working on behalf of the community and not for their own ends. That approach is really valued by residents who are then more disposed to get involved in activities.

Staff clearly work hard to build residents’ trust and told us that the best way to do this was through effective delivery, so that residents could see the results. In some cases, this meant staff making difficult choices and not delivering anything, rather than doing a bad job. Staff also recognise that having paid staff members to support the delivery of the programme is essential to ensure that the heavy lifting, for which volunteer residents may not have time, is completed.

#### Caia Park Partnership as the delivery organisation

Having the Caia Park Partnership as the anchor organisation for the Local Conversation actively facilitates the programme in three key ways. First, the physical infrastructure of the Partnership, which includes a community centre with rooms to hire as well as a community café, provides much needed space for the various activities to meet. Second, since the Partnership is a long-standing community development organisation, which houses services such as nurseries and an adult day care centre that many residents will have used, there is an existing relationship between the Partnership and the community which engenders trust. Finally, it is clear that there is real cross-pollination between the activities that are being delivered as part of the Local Conversation and those delivered by the Partnership.

When residents engage with Local Conversation activities, they become more familiar with the Partnership itself. Through spending time in the building and the café, speaking to staff and other residents and seeing posters and leaflets they are introduced to the range of services that the Partnership offers. During interviews with residents, we were given several examples of residents getting involved with the Local Conversation and then finding out about and taking part in some of the training that the Partnership offers. Likewise, those already engaging with the Partnership are encouraged by staff to get involved in Local Conversation activities and so the reach of both the Partnership and the Local Conversation becomes wider.

#### A committed and functional Steering Group

The Steering Group is seen by staff and residents as being central to the success of the Local Conversation. Many of the Steering Group members are well-known members of the local community who not only attend Steering Group activities, but also get involved in other events and effectively act as ambassadors for the Local Conversation.

The inclusive approach of the Steering Group is another factor. Residents are actively encouraged to join the Steering Group and to engage when they can, even if it is not consistent, meaning that the group has a wider reach and membership than it might otherwise. Steering group engagement is often a gateway to other activities. By being part of the group, residents gain a better understanding of the potential for the Local Conversation, build connections and confidence, and often either put forward a suggestion for an activity or get involved in other events that are taking place.

The structure of the Local Conversation   
The unique resident-led approach of the Local Conversations programme is considered one the factors that makes it a success in Caia Park, in terms of both residents’ engagement and the quality of the project’s outputs.

*People's Health Trust have really allowed the grassroots thing to happen, if you can handle that.(Staff, 2020)*

While there is a natural community spirit in Caia Park, we spoke to several residents who described how they had been involved with community activities previously but had become disillusioned, as they felt that their voices were not listened to and there was limited scope for real change. When asked why they got involved with the Local Conversation, residents cited the range of people involved, the opportunity that the Local Conversation provided to meet new people in the area, as well as the genuinely resident-led approach and the ability to choose where funding went.

*[The Project development Worker] keeps telling us “it's your money, you make the decisions” which I found very refreshing.(Resident, 2020)*

While residents described the community budgeting element of the programme as being a real benefit, this was particularly the case with smaller grants as larger funding decisions were seen to require more process.

Staff also praised the structure of the programme as being more facilitative and participatory than many others they had been involved in, and suggested that despite the challenges with larger grants, the community budgeting element represented a real shift of power to residents.

*I think that budgetary control sense is really deep and that is so different from virtually every other form of community expenditure. (Staff, 2020)*

The residents we spoke to mentioned the process they went through to get funding approved for the large community music event that had been planned for summer 2020. Initially the funding they had requested was refused by senior managers at the Partnership, but the Steering Group re-grouped and submitted a formal proposal and managed to get the full amount required. They attribute this success, at least in part, to the resident-led focus of the programme.

*It was the power of the Local Conversation rules and the way that that's structured - it's one of the very few projects I've come across which is structured with the community first.(Resident, 2020)*

### Barriers

While residents and staff both identified some barriers to the successful delivery of the Local Conversations programme, it is important to note that there is an underlying positivity to the Caia Park Local Conversation. Staff and residents alike spoke about overcoming challenges together and finding ways around problems and saw this process as a route to building resilience as a community.

Three specific barriers to delivery were identified.

#### Engaging residents

While the Local Conversation has developed numerous activities and is perceived locally to be a success, the numbers of residents involved represent a small percentage of the estate. Challenges with wider engagement are attributed to three main factors. First, there is a sense that more needs to be done to communicate the Local Conversation’s activities. This is something that the Steering Group has been working on and discussions about a local newsletter or something similar had begun when activities were paused for lockdown.

*Obviously, you need to be able to get the information out to the community, ‘cos otherwise if people don't know you can have everything there and if people don't come it doesn't work does it?(Resident, 2020)*

Second, staff and residents feel that it takes time for residents to build confidence in themselves and the process, and that as confidence and momentum builds, they will be in a stronger position to get the word out. Finally, staff point out that there will always be sections of the community that are harder to engage. They spoke about the specific challenges involved in reaching the local Polish community and how cultural barriers meant that even Polish colleagues in other organisations were struggling to make inroads. But the staff remain optimistic that if the Conversation continues to deliver important activities and events, and if they continue to encourage residents to get involved, then more people will feel empowered and word will spread.

#### Bureaucracy

While the structure of the Local Conversation programme is broadly considered to be a facilitator, there is also a sense among residents and staff that bureaucratic processes within the Partnership and in partner organisations can act as a barrier to the programme’s success.

**Internal bureaucracy.**As already discussed, some residents are frustrated by the lack of transparency about the decision-making process for larger grants, which have to be escalated to the Partnership’s senior management team before being agreed. Some of the residents interviewed feel that taking these decisions out of residents’ hands undermines the premise of the programme.

This view was echoed by staff who both recognise the need for checks and balances while being frustrated by the more cumbersome elements of delivering the programme. They attributed the additional barriers to an internal reticence to let go of historical approaches to community development and concerns about allowing the programme to be truly resident-led.

*There's been times when I've had to fight tooth and nail for what the residents have asked for. Letting go of power and control and giving it to residents scares people. (Staff, 2020)*

The fact that the Local Conversation was starting to deliver and make changes was seen to be helping to overcome this challenge. Staff indicated that over time the internal barriers to residents’ influence had reduced slightly as everyone became more familiar with the processes. Staff expressed a hope that ultimately, processes and “bureaucracy” would come to be seen as a positive challenge and checkpoint rather than a negative barrier.

**External bureaucracy.**While residents feel that they have a degree of influence within the Local Conversation project, there is notable frustration about the challenges that they come up against from external bodies. One example is the experience of the resident-led local football club, which was told by the Football Association of Wales that in order to qualify for the league, the club needed to concrete around the pitch and install a spectator stand. A grant that would have covered this work was available but required the local Council to write a letter confirming that it would give the club a renewed lease for the ground. The club requested the letter which never materialised and consequently the club missed out on the grant.

Residents described how the experience highlighted that while Local Conversation has the potential to deliver change, it could only take them so far, and that real structural change to the local community requires support and a shift in approach from local and national government too.

*What I've not seen with the Health Trust so far is anything that will elicit any long-term change. (Resident, 2020)*

However, while residents questioned how much structural change the programme could create on its own, this did not represent a criticism of the programme, which overall was viewed very positively. Staff also recognise that there are limitations to what the programme could achieve if the system in which the programme operates remains unchanged. Still, they feel strongly that if Caia Park could be a beacon of good practice and demonstrate that some change is possible, then others may follow suit.

**Covid-19 restrictions.** While the local community has risen to the challenge of the Covid crisis and successfully used the networks and relationships that have been strengthened by the Local Conversation to support the most vulnerable, the pandemic has inevitably come as a huge blow. There is a sense among staff and residents that the Local Conversation’s activities, engagement, and partnerships were reaching a tipping point when the crisis took hold. The restrictions have impacted on the momentum that had been built around the three priority areas, as well as around specific activities, such as the community music event which had already undergone months of planning.

There have also been notable impacts on the community that was benefitting from the Local Conversation. Residents who are involved in the various groups and activities spoke about how they are missing the connection and mental health benefits of getting together, and how the impact of the lockdown is most pronounced for the more vulnerable residents.

### Outcomes: What has changed in Caia Park?

### Impact on those involved

#### Social connectedness

The theme of residents becoming more socially connected was strong among all the staff and residents we spoke to. Social isolation is a big problem for many residents on the estate. There is evidence that the Local Conversation is acting as a catalyst for new relationships among residents and helping to reduce that sense of isolation for some of the residents involved. Residents we spoke to articulated how, for them or others they knew, attending Local Conversation events or activities was the highlight of their week. Some residents spoke about how they had struggled with their mental health in various ways, and how just being involved with other residents as part of the Local Conversation had helped them because it brought a real sense of social purpose and an opportunity to connect with the wider community.

*It gets me out of the house and sometimes it gives you a purpose and if there's anything that's going on that benefits me, I can take advantage because I'm there and I know what's going on.(Resident, 2020)*

Staff echoed this view and reflected on the fact that the Local Conversation had introduced them to residents they had not met before, and in some cases provided much needed structure to residents’ weeks.

*We've got people who don't go out. The only thing they do is the Local Conversation. That's a direct result.(Staff, 2020)*

For some residents, simply chatting with others once or twice a week is clearly having a huge impact. Staff and residents alike spoke about how these new connections had not only reduced isolation, but also improved mental health and wellbeing and introduced residents to new opportunities.

*We're bringing people out of homes, we're helping people build relationships with each other, and we're helping them improve their long-term health and wellbeing… it works, there's results.(Staff, 2020)*

There was also a sense that meeting new neighbours enabled residents to realise that they were not alone in having difficulties, and that they can tap into a wider support network of local people who have been through similar challenges.

*At least you get to meet people and you're finding out what's going on all around (and) you've realised that it's not just you that is going through hard times. (Resident, 2020)*

*The whole thing is to get the people of Caia Park to realise that they're not alone. (Resident, 2020)*

Some residents also welcomed the opportunities that new connections provided to broaden their horizons and help them understand different perspectives and experiences and the strong impact of the project on community cohesion was evident in some residents’ narratives.

*It makes me look at other people's opinions where maybe I might not have taken any notice over the years. (Resident, 2020)*

#### Increased community spirit

From our conversations with staff and residents, it is evident that Caia Park has always had a strong sense of community, but also that it has previously lacked both the physical space and the opportunity to use this community spirit to the best effect. The Local Conversation is providing a platform for those who were already community-minded to focus their energies, as well as encouraging new residents to get involved and experience the benefits of community activity. Some residents articulated how getting involved had effectively opened up a new world to them and made them realise the benefits of working alongside one another.

*You're with people who care about what's going on around and care about everyone; pensioners, the kids, adults, you know it's just that nice feeling […] I've never seen nothing like it.(Resident, 2020)*

*It's just been really eye opening to actually get more involved with the partnership and the community. When I was younger, I wasn't really bothered with the community but as I got older, I started to realise that a community was getting treated quite horrible, so I decided to do something to make it better to help change that community, to make sure it was a better place, and it was understood better. (Resident, 2020)*

Others spoke about how they had previously been involved in community work but had been put off by bad experiences where the community had been side-lined, or they felt as though their efforts were not making a difference. The Local Conversation had drawn them in as a new opportunity to get involved in something that was genuinely resident-led and was having a visible impact on the community.

*What's making it work is the involvement of the community.(Resident, 2020)*

#### Confidence

Residents who are involved with activities such as the Steering Group or one of the forums indicated that taking part had helped them increased their confidence.

One resident involved in a forum reflected on how running a session by himself and receiving a positive reaction to it had both boosted his confidence and led to him feeling more in control of his life. Another resident recalled how they had initially been reluctant to speak out at Steering Group meetings but had found that their confidence increased over time:

*Yes, definitely confidence, because you go in there and I wouldn't dream of speaking out but when you're there you sometimes sort of just get involved and then you surprise yourself sometimes you think “I didn't think I'd be able to say that” but you just get so involved because of the community.(Resident, 2020)*

Staff and residents had also witnessed increased confidence in others. For example, some spoke about how they had seen young people’s confidence grow when they took part in Youth Forum activities and were thrown into new situations with other young people they had not met before. Others mentioned activities, such as the Craft ‘n’ Chat group, where they had seen participants’ confidence in speaking to others and taking part grow week on week.

#### Skills

Some residents credit the Local Conversation with setting them on a path to gaining more skills. Among those we spoke to, there were residents who had got involved with one or more of the Local Conversation activities and as that increased their confidence, they had taken an interest in some of the courses that the Caia Park Partnership runs. One resident also described how support from Local Conversation staff had led him to take a teacher training course, something that he does not think would have been possible without that support.

*Wouldn't even have gone on the course [because I] wouldn't have known where to go. (Resident, 2020)*

The Local Conversation activities themselves were also credited with improving residents’ skills. The Craft ‘n’ Chat group was cited as one example where residents initially came to the group with minimal craft skills but developed them week on week. In one instance, this had led to a resident becoming so invested in their new hobby that they had created a specific craft space in their home. Residents who have developed these new skills are also using them to support others, for example by helping children when they come along to the craft group.

It is also clear that the resident-led culture that is being developed means that residents are continually developing new skills in order to be able to deliver the various activities. Staff actively encourage residents to take on specific roles, which helps them to develop leadership skills and knowledge in a range of areas from local government processes to event management and health and safety.

#### Empowered residents

The Local Conversations programme explicitly seeks to enhance communities’ collective control. While there are early indications that some residents in Caia Park are starting to gain a sense of control, this is not yet widespread. However, there is evidence that local residents are starting to feel more empowered and it is possible that this sense of empowerment will be a precursor to control as the Caia Park Local Conversation gains momentum.

There was a strong sense among both staff and residents we spoke to that the Local Conversation had started to empower the local community in a way that other funding programmes had not.

*So, if you cut the red tape down a little bit it will help with the community and the wellbeing cos people will think “it's us that are making it” and they'll feel proud of their own community because they've done it themselves.(Resident, 2020)*

*What they're basically wanting is people to be empowered, isn't it? Which is a noble goal that everyone else sticks on their bleeding prospectuses or whatever, but I think the Health Trust is the only one I've come across which is actually doing it.(Resident, 2020)*

Staff indicated that as residents connect more and the community spirit grows, residents are recognising that collectively they can make their own decisions and have an impact.

*I think historically community development does things for people and now we've got this new model where we're saying “people should do things for people.”(Staff, 2020)*

In some cases, residents are using the empowerment generated by the Local Conversation as a springboard to getting involved in other issues and forge their own relationships to address the problems that matter to them.

*Some of them are now starting to engage in civic life outside of it, which is quite nice. I've seen people start new courses. I've seen people work with councillors, work with local officials on things that they've seen that they want to happen, independently.(Staff, 2020)*

However, staff were also keen to point out that while the Local Conversation had certainly played a role in helping the community to feel more empowered, there are many other local partners contributing to positive outcomes residents are experiencing. Although the Local Conversation has in many ways helped to lead the way, ultimately, they feel that it is the combined effort across organisations that has had an impact on the community.

*There's lots of momentum across lots of partners and the Local Conversation is playing a role in that. (Staff, 2020)*

### Impact on the wider community

Although the number of residents that the Local Conversation has so far directly engaged with is relatively small, there is emerging evidence of the programme starting to have an impact on the wider community. This is manifesting in three different ways.

First, the Local Conversation is arranging a range of events and activities that directly benefit local residents. This ranges from the delivery of food parcels to discos, fundraisers, and litter pick events.

Second, the Local Conversation has played a big role in supporting existing community groups to help ensure that they remain available for local residents to access. This includes the adventure playground, which has received a grant from the Local Conversation and is regarded as central to children and young people in the area. FC Queen’s Park, the resident-led football club has also benefitted from the Local Conversation’s support. As a fundamental part of the local community, particularly for children and young people, this support is seen to be hugely beneficial and helping to improve children’s physical and mental wellbeing.

*Money from the Local Conversation has kept them [the football team] going when they couldn't get funding from anywhere else.(Resident, 2020)*

Finally, there is a sense that the Local Conversation is creating a new feeling of momentum within the Caia Park community. This is clearly less tangible than the other benefits, but important none the less. Evidence of this new momentum was apparent in staff’s reflections on the way that residents are beginning to think about the area differently and “starting to feel more ownership of the space”. As the programme gradually builds the community’s trust in the Local Conversation, staff are seeing a shift in local attitudes:

*We're starting to see a strong sense of solidarity and ownership amongst the residents and a can-do attitude. (Staff, 2020)*

Despite the estate’s historically poor reputation locally, there is evidence that the area is starting to reinvent itself slightly. The activities the Local Conversation delivers are providing reasons for people to talk about the estate in a positive way.

*I think it gives that good feeling; everybody talks about Queen's Park. (Resident, 2020)*

This is helping to boost pride in the area and staff report hearing new slogans such as “Team Caia” and “Up the Park” being used in a way that has not happened before.

### Impact on the lead organisation

The Local Conversation is providing an opportunity for the Caia Park Partnership to revisit its purpose in the community and to shift back towards community development and engagement, working with the community rather than just for it. While this has always been a priority for the Partnership, in recent years things had stagnated a little. There had been less ongoing engagement with the community to test that the services that the Partnership provided remained relevant. Staff hope that by taking this opportunity to go back to the organisation’s roots now, the Partnership will be in a stronger position to continue much of this work itself when the project ends.

*The Local Conversation is enabling us to recapture what our overall mission and purpose is and as and when the (money from) the People’s Health Trust ends, we can't let that reconnecting also end. (Staff, 2020)*

## Plans for the future

Residents’ aspirations for the future focus on doing more and reaching a larger section of the local community. With everything currently paused because of Covid-19 restrictions, there is an impatience to get the previous momentum back and deliver all the activities and events that have been planned.

Staff are equally keen to get things moving again but are pragmatic about what that might look like. They suggest that in the short-term at least, the residents’ strategy may have to take a bit of a back seat so that they can focus on supporting community mental health and reaching the most vulnerable. Strong partnerships also remain a priority for staff, who are keen to ensure that the right networks exist to allow the Local Conversation to have influence beyond the boundaries of the estate.

### Sustainability

Residents and staff were asked to reflect on the sustainability of the Local Conversation. There were mixed views on this. Some residents felt strongly that individual activities would be able to continue on their own. They see the support given through the Local Conversation as an initial boost to help activities to get to a more sustainable position. While they value that and the support and knowledge that the paid programme staff give them, they ultimately want to get to the point of having their own knowledge and connections and be able to fundraise independently.

*I feel like that it's here to help us start, give us a bit of a footing, help us out to move things on, and then make ourselves self-sufficient.* (*Resident, 2020)*

*They just need that little bit of help to just get going or they might not know how to start up a group.(Resident, 2020)*

However, other residents are sceptical about the long-term outcomes of the programme. While they have faith in the ability of residents to keep some of the individual activities going, they are concerned that once the Local Conversation project ends, its wider impact will not be sustained.

*This is working for me…right now I'm happy to just trundle along and be part of something, do something for my community. But is this sustainable after? I don't think so. It's like everything else, as soon as they pull the money, somebody else is off on another tangent.(Resident, 2020)*

Staff are keen to ensure that this does not happen and are therefore hoping to use the next few years to demonstrate the impact that the Local Conversation is having, in order to strengthen local partnerships, embed the Local Conversation approach into the Partnership’s activities, and potentially attract more funding, so that this sort of resident-led change can continue in the future.

# Annex 6. Edberts House, Gateshead

Supported by Edberts Community House.

## Methods

The purpose of this case study was to examine one particular aspect of good practice in the Local Conversation run by the charity Edberts House, the Community Linking Project (CLP). Interviews therefore focussed on that, rather than the Local Conversation in general. Due to the nature of the CLP, which operates through local GPs rather than the Local Conversation, it was difficult to find residents who had participated in that project to interview.

As such, interviews were conducted with four people between August and October 2020: one resident who had recently become a member of staff, and three more long-time staff members. Interviews were conducted via telephone and Zoom. Most, but not all, were recorded and extensive notes were taken for analysis.

In this report, ‘Edberts House’ is used to refer to the charity as a whole (which operates several community houses), rather than the community house of the same name. Where that community house is referred to, it is specified.

## Context

### Edberts House and Pattinson House

Edberts House is a charity which operates a network of community houses in east Gateshead, just south of Newcastle: Edberts House, Pattinson House, and Larkspur House. Edberts, the first community house, was established in 2009/2010 and was followed by Pattinson House which was established with People’s Health Trust funding. Edberts House community house, where the charity’s core staff are based, is located in the High Lanes Estate, while Pattinson House is located on the Old Fold and Nest Estate.

Although residents are close to a range of leisure amenities in Gateshead, including the beach, parks, leisure centres, galleries, and sports, staff say that cost is a barrier for residents accessing and using these local amenities. Staff also feel that traditional services and access routes to support services often fail residents.

The ethos of Edberts House as an organisation, recognising this failure and a sense of alienation, is reflected in its architecture. Edberts House community house, for example, is in what used to be four flats. Staff feel that this structure makes it more accessible for residents, as it more resembles one of their own homes, rather than an institutional building, which might be off-putting.

*You’ll come to the front door… and that’s what it looks like, it’s like going into somebody’s house. And that’s often part of the appeal as well. It’s informal, it’s casual, it’s not threatening. You’re not going into a community centre with a big hall inside. (Staff, 2020)*

Inside, there are cooking facilities and the space where most activities happen downstairs. The upstairs space is used as a crèche to allow parents to attend events or participate in activities in the downstairs space, an after-school club for children (toddlers, as well as Key Stages 1, 2, and 3), and a space for teenagers to socialise in the evenings.

Staff members interviewed explained that East Gateshead is a largely deprived area, that historically had a bad reputation. A decade ago, the area was significantly run down with high levels of anti-social behaviour and empty homes. Staff reflected on the impact of austerity on local services and the role of the local authority. One staff member described this as a “pulling back” from estates, which has led to less effective service provision:

*For a long time, local authorities have been quite centralised, kind of pulled back from local estates and that kind of neighbourhood provision, not just councils. It has been fought through economic decisions and austerity, pulling back from local neighbourhoods. [There are] logical reasons why that’s happened, but actually is that a shrewd way of working when everybody’s pulling back from estates? (Staff, 2020)*

The area is ethnically homogenous, with mostly White British families living there, although recently there have been some newly arrived refugee families. It is diverse in terms of age and has a mixture of owner-occupiers and social renters.

Despite the area’s longstanding challenges, there was a sense from interviewees that the presence of the network of community houses run by Edberts has started to shift this, by providing something positive and creating focal points on the different estates for services to work together more to better support residents.

*[The area] is much better now. It’s a much better place. […] People respect it now, and all because of Edberts and Pattinson House. (Resident, 2020)*

### The Local Conversation at Pattinson House

The Local Conversation at Pattinson House has run a mixture of formal and informal projects for residents. The formal projects have included accredited education, projects run with the Workers Educational Association focussing on English and maths skills, as well as counselling training and usually the provision of some formal counselling for residents in need, delivered with the North East Counselling Service. Meanwhile, the informal projects are those oriented more towards social wellbeing and community connection. These have included craft groups, coffee mornings, toddler groups, youth clubs, kids’ cafés, lunch clubs, and cooking sessions as well as seasonal events such as a Christmas pantomime.

Pattinson House also operates as a social space where people circulate around the range of formal and informal projects. Staff feel that functioning as a social space is one of the most important aspects of the community houses, especially since the availability of such spaces and people’s ability to access them are limited. Having that social space enables local people to build social connections, provide peer support and come into contact with staff, sometimes to seek support informally.

*People hang around, have conversations with each other. There’s a lot of peer support that goes on. People will hang back and have a quiet word with a member of staff abut an issue that’s going on. (Staff, 2020)*

Residents are heavily involved in the activities at the community houses and do a lot of the day-to-day running of them. This includes running projects and taking responsibility for the space. Staff described their own role in relation to the houses as facilitating residents’ ability to run the day-to-day activities and aspects of the space, ensuring that the necessary things are in place to make this possible and effective.

*What happens relies on local people. People open and close. They run their own sessions. The community lunches are run by local people. Our role is really to make sure that all the infrastructure’s around them to make it safe and secure and try and remove the barriers, cos quite often people want to do volunteer stuff but then, you know, bureaucracy and health and safety – which is important – makes it difficult. (Staff, 2020).*

One staff member described how the community houses have helped to strengthen residents’ senses of connection and belonging. The emphasis on local control in the Local Conversation was particularly important in the area, as staff described residents as feeling very disempowered through their experiences with, and perceptions of, both national and local government.

## Good practice

### The Community Linking Project

The CLP is a social prescribing scheme that was first developed by staff to address the link between social issues and mental/physical ill health. It was widely recognised in the area that residents were presenting at the GP with anxiety, stress, and depression, problems which were ultimately being driven by complex social and economic problems in their lives, which the GP could not address.

While there may still be a role for the GP and some kind of clinical intervention, also it is important to try and “get to the root cause” of the problem. These roots are of course very varied, but typically revolve around mental health, social isolation, substance misuse, domestic violence, children’s social care, money (budgeting/debt/benefits), housing, and, since the Covid-19 pandemic, bereavement and anxieties around employment security or unemployment. Staff recognised that this project, with its emphasis on understanding and addressing complex social and economic issues, is a world away from the image of social prescribing that has been adopted by government.

*I think that marks our project, but social prescribing projects in areas like ours… you know, taking someone to a craft group’s not gonna solve their problems. What’s gonna solve their problems is sitting with them, sorting out their PIP assessment, their Universal Credit, making sure that the kids have got school uniform etc., etc. (Staff, 2020)*

*[Government] sees social prescribing as taking Mabel to her art class on a Wednesday afternoon because she’s lonely. Don’t get me wrong. There is an absolute place and time for that, and Mabel will absolutely benefit from accessing that. But the reality is in an area of high deprivation like Gateshead and its pockets, they [cases like this] are few and far between. Because, you know, the referrals we get are so complex. They’re like, drug and alcohol, domestic violence, the kids are going into care. You know, really significant issues.(Staff, 2020)*

#### The CLP Model

The CLP model of social prescribing is based around GP surgeries who fund and commission the Link Worker roles, and this is the most common access route. If a GP has a patient presenting who they feel could benefit, they can refer them to the Link Worker in the surgery who will follow up with the patient if they consent. Having Link Workers as staff at the GP surgery creates an easy flow of information between GPs and Link Workers, including quick referrals. The initial meeting between the Link Worker and the patient will usually take place at the surgery for safeguarding purposes, but then subsequent meetings will take place in a home or community setting in line with the ethos of social prescribing, that the clinical environment is not the appropriate place for addressing complex social problems. Although most referrals are through the GP, people can and do self-refer, and community development workers at the community houses will also refer residents.

As previously described, Link Workers work with residents with a wide range of presenting issues. When asked what Link Workers offer, staff consistently came back to a variation on “whatever people need.” Staff feel that this flexibility is important, both for providing effective help and for empowering residents (see *Outcomes*). Typically, though, support tends to fall into two broad categories:

* Helping people navigate/access other services. This can just be signposting/referring but can also be helping people follow up on services, helping them prepare for meetings, and attending to support them/advocate for them.
* Helping people attend social groups. This can be finding people the right group to meet their needs, attending with them if they are anxious, and/or helping them arrange transport.

Unlike many social prescribing schemes, which only offer support for a limited amount of time, the CLP supports residents for as long as they want to be supported. This was felt to be important in an area where it takes time to build trust and where people were facing such complex and entrenched issues (see *Elements of good practice* for more on why this type of provision is perceived as crucial to the project’s success). The CLP initially began with one Link Worker but has now expanded to 14 in surgeries across Gateshead. In the last financial year, there were only 6 workers who worked with 900 patients.

As the CLP is run through a GP referral scheme, it does not target particular groups, but some patterns have emerged in terms of who uses the Project. Last year, around 60% of people with a Link Worker were women, and the main age group was adults aged 45–65. Staff felt that having men make up 40% of the scheme’s clients is a success as men are typically harder to engage than women in this kind of community activity. However, younger people (under-30s) are now starting to access it more. This may reflect the increasing negative impacts of Covid-19 and its economic fallout for younger generations. When asked, staff explained that although some residents decline the service (either declining the referral from the GP or declining afterwards), it is quite unusual.

#### The Local Conversation at Pattinson House and the CLP

Having expanded across Gateshead, the CLP is run quite distinctly from Edberts House as an organisation. However, staff explained that their work at Pattinson House informed their approach to designing the CLP and played a key role in its origin story. The extensive community consultation done during the development of the Local Conversation at Pattinson House had created a strong understanding of residents’ need. This awareness was taken further through engagement with other local stakeholders once the project began.

For example, during a stakeholder engagement event that involved a presentation on Edberts House to the local GP, one GP recognised some of her own patients in the presentation. She realised that these were also patients who had begun to book fewer appointments, and who were more articulate around their issues when they were attending. She developed a curiosity about why *these* patients seemed to be doing better, and with staff at Edberts collectively realised that this was an effect of the support residents were receiving for non-clinical issues. This then led to additional capacity being made available through another funding stream to facilitate a Community Development Worker beginning to work with the GP, who was then seconded there as the first Link Worker.

Staff also explained that the network of community houses also has an ongoing role in supporting the CLP. A well-run network of community organisations is important for social prescribing programmes. If there are no programmes to refer people to, Link Workers are more limited in what they can offer. Staff were keen to emphasise that being territorial over this was not productive, and that Link Workers would always refer a resident to the most appropriate place. As such, community organisations will continue to play an important role in the infrastructure around the CLP. However, there has been some concern in the voluntary sector as a whole as to whether it has the capacity to take on the additional referrals that are expected from social prescribing.

## Elements of good practice

Staff identified three broadenablers of the success of the CLP: model of service delivery, local embeddedness and leadership/staff.

### Model of service delivery

While unusual for a social prescribing project, staff feel that the decision to not limit the time that residents can stay with a Link Worker or impose criteria for participation is crucial to the Project’s success. It is important for provision to reflect the entrenched, long-term, complex nature of the problems that residents are often facing, and therefore provide flexibility and adaptability based on current and evolving needs. This flexibility and time also allow residents and Link Workers to build a greater sense of trust.

*[The] key to our success really is about the trust and the relationship that we build up with the patient. Because often they’ll divulge and share things with the Link Worker that they don’t feel comfortable or confident sharing with other agencies. (Staff, 2020)*

Flexibility also characterises the referral model. When designing the project, staff felt that it was easier for GPs to have no access criteria; if they were offering a universal service, GPs could easily refer patients in the limited time that they have for appointments. The openness to referrals from outside the GP surgery has also worked well as it has allowed residents to access support from wherever they are in the community, rather than insisting that they jump through initial hoops to establish contact.

### Localised nature of the CLP

Staff feel that the localised nature of the CLP has also contributed to its success, as Link Workers are more in touch with local issues. The Link Workers have team meetings in the community houses where they also meet with Community Development Workers. This ensures that they are meeting local people consistently, outside of a traditional client-support worker dynamic, and allows a dialogue between staff that helps Link Workers stay grounded in the particular challenges of the area.

The community infrastructure of the network of community houses has remained stable thanks to funding from the Trust (and a number of other funders who fund the other community houses) and provides important local infrastructure to underpin the project. One staff member explained that social prescribing projects can thrive where there are rich, well-run, community organisations for prescribers to introduce people to. However, uncertain funding environments often cause these to come and go. The continuity of the Trust’s funding for Pattinson House in comparison is hugely useful because it has allowed the space to grow and embed itself locally over time.

However, staff were also clear that Link Workers should use all the resources locally to meet people’s needs best and not limit them to their own projects. The Local Conversation has built the CLP’s reputation locally, allowing it to gain recognition as a project that truly emphasises residents and their views. This reputation has insulated the CLP from some of the backlash that other social prescribing schemes have seen from their local voluntary sector, where they are sometimes perceived to create an influx of residents into already stretched services within the voluntary sector.

### Staff and leadership

The staff members interviewed highlighted several ways in which leadership and staffing had made the CLP a success. Staff reflected on a positive culture of kindness and collaboration at the heart of the Edberts network of community houses, which, through leadership and recruitment, had also been instilled in the CLP. Several staff members reflected openly in interviews on anecdotes of past failures in judgement and the lessons learned. This suggests a team environment where such reflection is practised and encouraged. Staff feel that this culture of openness to learning new things and being challenged on existing ideas is key to the success of the programme, as it allows for growth and adaptation.

Staff also reflected on the culture of kindness instilled by leadership and how this reflects in the treatment and support of staff. In recognition of the difficult, and at times harrowing, work that they do, Link Workers are provided with a lot of support. In addition to peer support and support from their operational manager, they also have access to group clinical support from the North East Counselling Service. This culture of kindness is now well established across the organisation. By recognising the pressure often involved in the role, the leadership ensures that staff have the support that they need to do their work well and maintain their own wellbeing. This support has also been extended to community development staff at who are often involved in similar work with residents, which exemplifies the easy information flow between Link Workers and community development staff.

It quickly became clear through the interviews that staff are extremely knowledgeable on social prescribing. Two staff members work as regional learning coordinators for NHS England, providing support for social prescribers across the North East. Staff were able to reflect confidently and in depth on the potential impacts of upcoming changes to NHS England’s policies around social prescribing. This level of expertise is very useful, as it secures the reputation of the scheme and enables the project leadership to ensure that it is aligned (where it needs to be) with NHS guidelines and place themselves strategically within that.

The leadership at Edberts House has created a culture of openness to other organisations, which staff members consistently recognised as unusual in the voluntary sector but crucially important to the CLP’s success. Although the project had initially assumed that Link Workers would mostly be directing people to activities within the community houses, this has proven to not be the most effective way of working. Link Workers are encouraged to take residents wherever is best for them to go, be that one of Edberts House community houses or elsewhere. This is the most genuine way of ensuring that residents get as much as they can from the Project, as well as supporting a healthier voluntary sector in the area.

*That strapline about making connections that we have, it is a genuine way we approach our work – we help people to make connections with each other, to make connections with local community organisations and the services best able to support them. (Staff, 2020)*

## Barriers

Staff also highlighted several challenges that the CLP has encountered. These broadly group under management demands of a rapidly expanding project, the relative novelty of social prescribing, and a fundamental lack of statutory services for residents in need, particularly around mental health issues.

### Management demands of a rapidly expanding project

One staff member explained that the growth of the project, and the fact that it has to work within the enormous bureaucracy of NHS England, made it difficult to operate as a small organisation. She described a constant fight for money, the complicated and protracted negotiation of contracts, and frequently updated guidance that requires unbudgeted or impossible changes in delivery.

This latter point was another issue; although it takes a lot of administrative capacity to work with Primary Care and NHS England, and a team of Link Workers requires robust management for successful delivery, there is only a small management fee in these contracts, which makes them very draining for voluntary sector organisations. Another staff member was very positive that the NHS is starting to understand the value of social prescribing but felt that the implementation still poses difficulties.

*One of the challenges is that the voluntary and community sector in general would argue “Well, we’ve been doing social prescribing for years”. The difficulty now is that NHS have realised: “Actually we need to start looking at people in a different way to make any kind of impact on the health inequalities that people are presenting with.” Which is great, don’t get me wrong, it’s a fantastic move. But it’s [about] how it’s implemented and managed. (Staff, 2020)*

On a related note, one staff member expressed struggling with managing expectations from other institutions, as some expect her to provide her expertise for free. She feels that there is a lot of learning for smaller community organisations to do in this area, to ensure that their expertise is properly valued and remunerated.

### The novelty of social prescribing

Although social prescribing has gained significant ground in recent years, it is still relatively new. This can cause confusion both for patients and GPs. For patients, the kind of help that they receive from a Link Worker is unlike anything that they expect to get at the GP surgery. It is possible that this may at times be confusing, as residents may be unable to fully understand and make use of what is available to them, or they may skip the service entirely because the offer is unclear. One misfire that staff mentioned is that Link Workers are often confused for a substitute mental health worker or social worker, which can create confusion around expectations or create misplaced mistrust. As such, staff feel it is important to ensure that people working with a Link Worker really understand the nature and the limitations of the role.

Staff also reflected that there had been some confusion amongst GPs, particularly around the flexibility in the CLP’s referral model. The flexibility in the model – both in terms of the lack of referral criteria and the lack of time limit (as discussed earlier, in ‘Model of Service Delivery’) – runs contrary to the way GPs are used to working. Project staff have worked with GPs to address this misunderstanding, particularly engaging with clinical directors and practice managers who are key to embedding the service successfully in the surgery. This work, and the successes of the project that become visible in GP waiting rooms, has contributed to a slow change and GPs coming to see the advantages of the way the service is structured.

*Our model was already in existence since 2015. [It] was valued, recognised, even before the investment in NHS England in social prescribing. Reputationally, and because we had an existing model, that we can back up what we were offering, that’s been really helpful. But nonetheless [it] has its challenges in terms of working with new surgeries who are new to social prescribing. (Staff, 2020)*

### Lack of statutory services

A final difficulty that staff identified in the interviews that impedes the CLP is the fundamental inadequacy of statutory services, particularly mental health services, in Gateshead. Interviewees repeatedly reiterated the high levels of mental health issues in the area, including a high reliance on medication, which was often felt to be inappropriate or insufficient on its own.

*Too often people will go and present with mental health issues and they’ll go “Here you are, here’s a prescription, go away and take these pills.” If you’re lucky you might get referred for talking therapies, but even that’s not ideal cos then you’ve got your 12-week wait. (Staff, 2020)*

Ultimately, Link Workers are supposed to function as a link between local residents and a network of services, which they can be helped to access. However, if this network is not there, or is not rich enough, there is a limit to what Link Workers can provide. Link Workers have been able to get some residents additional support through the North East Counselling Service, but this is not a sustainable long-term solution for a lack of locally provided mental health services. Furthermore, staff feel that the need for mental health services will only increase because of the ongoing impact of Covid-19; they have already seen an increase in referrals to Link Workers around bereavement and anxiety related to job loss/insecurity.

## Outcomes of the Community Linking Project

### Outcomes for residents

It is difficult to summarise outcomes for residents who use the CLP, given the diverse array of issues that residents can and do present with, as discussed earlier. One staff member also reflected that, given the size of the project and the limitations on staff capacity, measuring impact is difficult.

*I think what we struggle with is measuring that and demonstrating the impact because we’re quite a small organisation with not much resource or capacity to do that kind of stuff. (Staff, 2020)*

However, interviewees did identify a set of common core outcomes that residents gained from the CLP that include confidence, reduced isolation, a sense of control over life, and an improved ability to access the services that they need.

Staff feel that residents commonly increase their confidence through accessing the project. One staff member articulated this as a general increase in confidence underpinned by a sense of connection, a sense that people are being supported.

*That sense of connection, of somebody being there, your person, who understood your stuff and would walk with you through it, is powerful for people. (Staff, 2020)*

It was also reflected that the ethos of the project, helping people to do things rather than doing things for them, helps build residents’ confidence because they are able to see successful outcomes of their efforts to navigate a service and recognise their own role in achieving that.

*[Many people] would now feel more confident if they have subsequent issues of a similar nature – with the Universal Credit, with the housing company, with the GP – of actually tackling that themselves. Because they’re not being done to, they’re being done with. (Staff, 2020)*

In this way, increased confidence is related to an increased feeling of **control over one’s life**. Staff feel this is very important, making sure that it is residents, not Link Workers, who are defining priorities, as well as ensuring that Link Workers help residents feel more equipped to deal with issues themselves.

*They’re not just passive recipients of services, they own whatever actions are agreed with the Community Link Workers. (Staff, 2020)*

*Those professionals, no matter how, kind of well-intended they are in terms of providing support, will, because of the nature of the organisation that they’re representing, have some idea of the outcomes that they’re hoping to achieve. Our workers don’t. Our workers will sit down with a family and say, “Right, you just tell us about what is going on in your life and what is important for you, and we’ll help you achieve that.” (Staff, 2020)*

Although residents define priorities that Link Workers support them with, and although Link Workers are connected to the community through the community houses – which staff recognised as an important factor to its success – the CLP has never been a resident-led project. In part, this relates to the delivery model, as it is a service commissioned by GPs and operated within GP surgeries, which is outside the scope of the resident-led Steering Groups at the community houses. When asked about this, staff were open, thoughtful, and reflective about the possibility of introducing an element of resident control in the CLP. They felt that it was still early days for the CLP, which has just come out of a period of very rapid growth, which has absorbed a huge amount of energy and resource.

*I think there could be and should be [more resident leadership] if I’m honest… and it’s important to work alongside colleagues in health on this because they have groups like Patient Champions in their surgeries, which we probably haven’t tapped into. (Staff, 2020)*

Still, staff were also aware that additional capacity and resources would be needed to enable more opportunities for resident control. It was also felt that they could harness energy from residents towards this, as many had become enthusiastic proponents of the CLP in the community. A staff member mentioned the mutual aid response to Covid-19 in the area as an indication of a lot of energy within the community for collective action.

For residents not needing to access statutory services and instead needing more social/wellbeing support, reduced isolation was felt to be a key outcome. One resident interviewed explained that, unlike the GP, the Link Workers are able to support people in this way and suggested a link between reduced isolation and a host of lower-level mental health problems.

*They came back [after attending with a Link Worker initially], and you wouldn’t have thought they’d ever get out and meet new people… so that’ll be affecting on their health, and their depression might go away and their loneliness and what have you. (Resident, 2020)*

Finally, residents using the CLP are more able to access the services and other support that they need. All interviewees explained that there are many practical and structural barriers that often prevent residents from getting what they need from services. Practical help was felt to be essential; systems are often complex and difficult to navigate and where residents’ lives are chaotic, they cannot give it the focus that is needed. The Link Worker can provide that support or other support, like advocating for a resident in meetings with services, following up with services after the meeting, or informing residents of their rights to services.

One resident explained that people often find filling out forms difficult – perhaps because of literacy, digital literacy, or confusing bureaucratic language and systems – and just avoid them instead, therefore reducing their access to services or benefits to which they have a right. Again, this is something that Link Workers can provide practical help with.

*People just used to never bother with forms and that, and they used to let them go. (Resident, 2020)*

*Often when people are going to these appointments, they’re quite anxious, or they’ll just not bother going at all. So the Link Worker will accompany them and support them through that process. (Staff, 2020)*

Structurally, too, Link Workers are ultimately able to advocate more strongly on behalf of residents because of their professional position.

*Often Link Workers can get services to do things which residents just can’t get them to do. (Staff, 2020)*

There was a consensus among those interviewed that the sustainability of these outcomes depends very much on the individual, their circumstances, and how other areas of their life might change over time. While a Link Worker might be a single experience for some residents, the high deprivation in the area means that many of those using the CLP are facing very complex issues; even if one issue may be resolved, another is likely to come along.

*What we’re finding now, particularly after Covid, it’s never one issue. It’s much more complex; there’s such a knock-on effect of other things. (Staff, 2020)*

### Outcomes for the lead organisation and the wider community

Staff noted several positive outcomes for themselves as a lead organisation through the CLP. First, its success and expansion has increased their reputation among local organisations. One staff member explained it in terms of professionalising community development work. By delivering it as a distinct service (rather than, perhaps, less formally or within other services), this work and its value has become more visible by other important public sector institutions. This has opened some important doors. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic one member of staff was invited to sit on a high-level planning committee, which she felt was quite unusual for a small community organisation.

The CLP has also strengthened the network of voluntary and community sector organisations that the lead organisation works with, which seems increasingly important in the context of austerity and the retreat of local councils as service providers. One staff member noted that, when the pandemic hit, the local authority was slow to respond and the voluntary sector provided support to residents in the early weeks. Link Workers were also a valuable part of this early support, fielding calls to support residents and delivering food parcels. The expansion across Gateshead has extended its geographic reach, therefore helping to create a collaborative network of voluntary organisations in the area, which is ongoing.

*The CLP has given the organisation a massive reach over Gateshead and has connected us to a lot of organisations that we wouldn’t previously have engaged with because of the nature of our place-based work. Obviously, we [would have] work[ed] with local organisations, but wider organisations across Gateshead, not so much. (Staff, 2020)*

Link Workers have also become a reliable asset within GP surgeries, particularly as they have adapted their work to maintain contact with patients throughout changing national and regional guidelines throughout the pandemic. They also led on the surgery’s responsibilities to contact and support shielding patients during the national lockdown in spring 2020, conducting welfare checks, which brought them in contact with a new group of patients who needed support with issues that were not clinical and therefore would not have raised them with their GP. Other outcomes staff noted from the CLP include reductions in GP appointments for non-clinical issues, fewer missed/cancelled appointments at the GP, and fewer residents presenting at A&E for issues that are not clinical.

## Conclusion

When asked about plans for the future, staff brought up four main priorities.

One priority is to provide additional support for staff dealing with difficult caseloads. This was discussed in terms of giving staff more training in important areas (eg increasing understandings of childhood development and the impact of trauma), as well as ensuring that staff have adequate support within their teams to deal with this difficult work.

Another priority is to increase user participation to maximise the impact of the CLP on the wider community. It is felt that investment in impact measurement is also important to evaluate the success of the CLP.

A third priority is to continue working with GPs and patients to bring about a culture change in healthcare settings and a change in understanding from both clinicians and residents, which is necessary for the CLP to deliver its full potential. This means doing more engagement and relationship-building with GPs to embed what staff described as a community-focused service into a setting that usually understands itself as a clinical setting and the understandings and ways of working that come with that.

Finally, staff reflected on broader changes to healthcare provision that may be introduced by NHS England. As the CLP is commissioned by GPs, any changes to national policy which require GPs to make more, less, or different provision may impact the programme. It was anticipated that NHS England may establish new roles that may have a lot of overlap with Link Workers in areas of health, wellbeing, and care coordination, and introduce these roles into primary care networks to work with GPs. As such, staff feel that it is important to ensure that they continue operating in a networked way such that their model continues to work effectively within this space and meet the needs of residents and GP surgeries.

# Annex 7. Penparcau, Ceredigion

Supported by the Community Hub in Penparcau.

## Methods

The purpose of this case study was to explore three areas of good practice in the Local Conversation project at the Community Hub in Penparcau. These areas, which were identified by the Trust, are:

* A strong, active, and engaged Youth Forum.
* A community food-growing project.
* Established community space and successful engagement with a diversity of stakeholders in the neighbourhood.

The interviews focussed on these aspects of good practice rather than on the Local Conversation project in general. Interviews were conducted between October and November 2020, including during the period Wales was undergoing a fire-break lockdown. Interviews were carried out with three residents and two staff members, via telephone and Zoom calls. Extensive notes were taken for analysis and where possible the interviews were recorded, with the express permission of the interviewees.

Both staff members started working for Local Conversations in 2020 and one of the residents first attended the Hub while social distancing measures were in place. Given this, and the timings of the interviews, the good practice findings are in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Context

### About Penparcau

Penparcau is the largest village in Ceredigion, Wales, situated south of Aberystwyth. The community of Penparcau consists of a large housing estate on the outskirts of Aberystwyth, and the village has the largest number of Welsh language speakers in the Aberystwyth town area. The entire area consists of over 1,200 homes with approximately 3,200 residents.

Penparcau falls within the top 20–30% of deprived wards identified in the overall Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2019. In addition, 40% of the 800 children and young people in the village live in poverty.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to 2011 census data, the majority of the population is white (96%); there is a large elderly population, with 15% of the population being above the age of 65; and a significant young population, with 24% of inhabitants being under the age of 18.[[13]](#footnote-13) The census also showed that 11.5% of the population faces significant limitations in their day-to-day activities because of disability. Staff also mentioned that there is a sizable vulnerable population with limited resources.

*The biggest special needs unit in the whole of Ceredigion and a huge women’s refuge centre, so Penparcau is the overspill for a lot of people[who are vulnerable], so we are getting a mixed range of families coming into the area, and[these families]don’t have the resources to get better and increase their health and wellbeing. (Staff, 2020)*

*[The] hospital and [the] university are the big employers, but you have to speak Welsh. If you don’t, or [if you] have a low educational background then the options are limited. There are a number of hospitality jobs, given it’s a seaside town, but these tend to offer insecure work with no sick pay or annual leave…a lot of families are scraping to get by. (Staff, 2020)*

Those interviewed explained that, locally, Penparcau has a negative reputation for being a rough area, but that this does not reflect their experience. However, they did describe the village as being run down due to a lack of investment in public spaces, such as the park, and stated that there is a lack of local amenities where people can socialise. This historically bad reputation and stigma have been a significant barrier for achieving change in Penparcau. One of its key effects has been making residents hesitant to believe that change is possible.

*There is a stigma against Penparcau, but that’s just people’s perceptions. I’ve always enjoyed living here. (Resident, 2020)*

“*I’m proud to live in Penparcau. There is a great community spirit and the one thing about Penparcau is that people do stick together, and they help each other. (Staff, 2020)*

*Trying to stay away from the fact that people sneer at Penparcau, we want people to say Penparcau is on the up. (Staff, 2020)*

### About the Local Conversation in Penparcau

Through Local Conversations engagement, which initiated in 2014, the Penparcau Community Forum (the Forum) found that there were issues concerning available communal meeting space in Penparcau. Following this, Penparcau received funding from the Welsh government for the construction of a Community Hub building (the Hub), run by the Forum, which opened in December 2017.

The Forum is a community organisation for the facilitation, planning, and organisation of events and activities within and across the community of Penparcau. It was set up in 2012 in response to the closure of Penparcau’s Communities First office. The Forum is the anchor organisation for the Local Conversation project and is principally funded by the Trust. It seeks to “raise the profile of the village, encourage community engagement, develop cohesion, promote social inclusion and improve the facilities and amenities of Penparcau”.

Despite public demand for communal meeting space, staff feel that Penparcau’s poor reputation means they need to work harder to get a wider range of residents involved in the Hub. When the Hub first opened, it was fully run by volunteers. Those interviewed felt that this resulted in less structure and a lack of incentive to run an open-door policy. This lack of structure limited the variety and consistency in activities offered, which did not encourage all groups of the community to engage and resulted in the Hub being viewed as a “clique”.

Furthermore, overreliance on volunteers may not be optimal as running the Hub requires a lot of people’s time. This is unlikely to be affordable for many people especially in deprived areas. However, the role of volunteers is also important, as they support the staff and help shape the role of the Hub. Many of the volunteers regularly frequent the Hub, attend the Steering Group meetings, and may even take the lead in running different sub-groups. Staff and residents equally feel it is important that staff and volunteers work in unison to complement each other’s work.

*When it was run by volunteers and trustees, I think that in the village[the Hub] had become a very cliquey place… so first of all we had to dispel that… slowly then it was building up that the Hub was for [the wider community] not just a certain few. (Staff, 2020)*

*Having paid staff in now, it’s not that anyone is in charge it’s just that we need to adapt and change. We need to get away from it being cliquey to an open house. The old volunteers are great, but change is always hard. It is good to get new blood[new volunteers and staff] on board to implement change. We are slowly turning the cogs on that and it’s great. (Staff, 2020)*

The Local Conversation runs a number of activities at the Hub including the Caffi (a café that opens daily), a food bank, a parent and toddler group, a veterans’ club, and an annual carnival, among others. Alongside these, there are several active projects, such as the Pendinas Archaeology Project and the Penparcau Planting Project. Separate to the Local Conversation activities, the Hub runs activities to generate additional income, such as dance classes and birthday parties and hires out rooms for third parties to train their staff.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Local Conversation activities at the Hub adjusted in order to improve the support available to the community. In particular, it has aimed to support the most vulnerable residents, in part through food banks, delivering prescriptions, and, as the rules lifted, providing free trips to the supermarket in the Hub’s minibus. It also had to adapt to new ways of working, setting up meetings through Zoom, and keeping the groups active virtually.

*[We went into]* r*eactive mode when Covid started: lots of food banks, giving out prescriptions, becoming an outreach worker really. (Staff, 2020)*

The residents who attend Local Conversation activities represent a wide range of ages from 8 to 90. There are over 50 volunteers registered, of whom 7 volunteer regularly for activities. The Local Conversation Steering Group has 20–25 regular attendees, with an age range of 18 to 68. In addition to the volunteers, the Forum has six employees, two of which work part-time on the Local Conversation; seven trustees; and the chair of the Forum’s board. Local Conversation ideas are discussed at the monthly Steering Group meetings.

Currently the Steering Group’s main priorities are young people, the environment, and education and skills. The Steering Group members are also members of the sub-group under each priority and have sole responsibility for the budget allocated by the Trust and for how it is spent within Penparcau. Decisions about the budget are made by a vote; a majority of five votes or more is needed for an expenditure to be signed off and agreed. Their decisions are reported back to the Forum and the community through the Facebook page Penparcau Conversations.

The Hub identifies itself as non-competitive with other community organisations, making efforts to signpost people to other groups and services in the area, as well as promoting all activities taking place locally on a digital screen in the café and a public noticeboard in the village. This has fostered close links with other organisations in the community and collaboration on a number of projects and activities.

In addition to identifying the need for a community space, the Local Conversation project revealed four additional community priorities: developing a Youth Forum, a community website, and an Environmental Group, and purchasing a community mini-bus. These priorities were achieved and operate from the Hub. The recent Local Conversation website rebrand is part of effort to increase community understanding of the project and to increase local participation.

*People are aware of it now, and now for the first time they feel like they’re being listened to… their concerns are being listened to and that is the integral part of it. (Staff, 2020*)

### Good practice

### Strong, active, and engaged Youth Forum

From the outset, a Youth Forum was seen as a priority, in part because of the high youth presence in Penparcau but also due to the lack of communal social space for young people to interact outside school. From the initial Local Conversation meeting, it was clear that residents

…*wanted to see opportunities happen for the young people, see them up-skilled, they want to see them having some fun. (Staff, 2020)*

The Youth Forum, which is open to people from the ages of 11 to 18, was viewed as a way to empower young people, by enabling them to gain confidence, knowledge, and skills, as well as acting as a tool for them to create change where they live and to feel like they form an integral part of the community. This is important to foster feelings of being listened to, as well as social connectedness.

Residents commented how this is of particular importance for Penparcau with its historically negative reputation, which has been acutely associated with young people and even led to a curfew for people under the age of 16 in the past. The Youth Forum, therefore, also represents an opportunity for young people to improve their reputation within the community.

*Through the Forum, young people can build positive views about Penparcau and realise that they can be empowered to create change where they live. (Resident, 2020)*

*It is nice to know that the youth can still have power whilst being children at the same time. (Resident, 2020)*

Prior to the March 2020 national lockdown, the Youth Forum met every Friday. Generally, 5–10 young people attended the meetings. The agenda is set prior to each meeting, based on members’ interests. These have included cooking classes, history quizzes, and playing pool. In the past, the Youth Forum ran a small grants scheme to support youth activities in Penparcau. Organisations that presented successful applications include the Scouts and the Guides.

*The crux [of increasing participation in the Youth Forum] was the engagement, talking to the kids about what they wanted and needed. Then trying to implement that into a social exercise that will get them to come in and integrate with the community. (Staff, 2020)*

Since the lockdown, these meetings have moved to Zoom, but attendance has declined. Given that many of those involved have been attending school virtually, staff members believed participants were too “tech-ed out” to participate in any more virtual activities. Despite the decline in participation in meetings, the group has still been active through its Facebook group, where staff continue to provide updates on events and the support that is offered. For instance:

*[Due to] the increasing strains on mental health, particularly this year, one initiative during lockdown has been to run a virtual mindfulness course just for the Youth Forum. (Staff, 2020)*

A key barrier to the Youth Forum is ensuring that people get involved on a regular basis. Prior to and during the pandemic, it was at times challenging to get new members to attend meetings. It can also be hard to maintain a structured process, as this usually requires support from staff, rather than relying on Youth Forum members to do so alone. The inability to meet up physically has limited potential progress. Despite these barriers, the Youth Forum is still seen as a valuable, sustainable group because information is passed down to the younger members, which builds their knowledge and skills. The hope is that over time, this will help build their confidence and empower them to keep the Youth Forum going.

*We will look for the older ones to become role models for the younger ones and as the older ones slip away from the youth but into the more senior forum and then there is the next lot, and you have this continual sort of rolling production line of more enfranchised people. People who have been given the confidence to have a go. (Staff, 2020)*

### Community food-growing project

The community food-growing project emerged from the rise in food and child poverty in Penparcau. Linking in with the environment priority, the physical space surrounding the Hub was previously unused and residents saw this as an opportunity for a community garden and community food-growing project. The lack of green space is evident in Penparcau and the residents wanted to amalgamate all three projects into one. Staff members took the initiative to contact local supermarkets, explaining the project and asking for donations in the form of plants or seeds.

During the spring of 2020, with permission from the trustees and taking advantage of supermarket donations and the support of volunteers, the plant beds were built, painted, and potted up within two months. To promote the project, the Hub documented progress on the Forum website and through a social media page, Penparcau Planting Project, which accumulated more than 350 members in its first six months.

Staff and residents commented on how this project has the potential to achieve multiple aims. From an environmental perspective, it promotes greener habits, improves the visual landscape, and helps improve biodiversity locally. It also strengthens community ties, in part because of the number of people and organisations involved in the development and maintenance of the space, but also due to the collaboration that occurs in the upkeep of the plant beds.

Residents who actively engage by regularly gardening, benefit from the exercise and increased social connections. Meanwhile, residents who are not actively engaged in the gardening also benefit from the food-growing project, as they choose longer routes to walk through the Hub planters and enjoy the space. Lastly, the project promotes healthy behaviour, by getting residents, and particularly children, to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables. The hope is that the expansion of the food-growing project will contribute to better health and wellbeing in the long term.

*Foot fall going past the Hub has just gone up tremendously because of the gardens. (Staff, 2020)*

*Wales has the worst obesity rates in Europe, so we have to do something to tackle that. (Staff, 2020)*

The group of residents that helps maintain the garden is intergenerational, which means that more residents are experiencing increased social connectedness and confidence, as well as knowledge and skills. There has been success in getting Youth Forum members involved in the food-growing project, which has allowed intergenerational interactions and integration. Residents feel that stronger intergenerational relationships are important for social cohesion. Staff also commented on how the intergenerational nature of the project supports its sustainability, as older generations teach their younger counterparts how to tend the garden. Participating in the gardening has also enabled younger residents to stay connected with each other and the wider community while social distancing restrictions have been in place.

*[We] managed to get some youth to work the garden which has created quite a nice intergenerational collaboration there. (Staff, 2020)*

*Different generations have a lot to learn from each other. It is nice seeing the younger ones take initiative in the gardens. (Resident, 2020)*

One of the residents interviewed is a retired farmer who works on the garden, and said:

*I can’t go in the Hub because I have to self-isolate, but I am able to help with the garden a few times a week. [I] really hope to see it keep growing. (Resident, 2020)The garden has been a great way to engage with new people because it is outdoors and visible. During the build, members of the community came to ask about it and that way were able to explain more about the Hub and Local Conversations. (Staff, 2020)*

To continue to promote intergenerational interactions, the Hub staff is in the process of setting up a pen pal scheme between youth members and the elderly. The idea is that the younger generation can share basic tech skills, such as how to use Zoom, while the older generation can teach young people about the history and geography of Penparcau.

The food-growing project has been so successful and welcomed by the community that it is already expanding beyond the premises of the Hub, which was able to fund eight planters for a housing estate in the area, growing herbs, fruit, and vegetables.

*The aim is to have them round the whole village. (Staff, 2020)*

It has already been agreed with the football club that if a group of volunteers cleans up the pitch, the football club will donate some of their land for residents to use to grow the bigger vegetables. Residents are also in discussion with schools to try to get more children growing and learning about seasonal food. This exemplifies how residents have gained additional resources through Local Conversation activities and projects.

Moreover, the food harvested from the project goes back to the community and, as the project expands, the plan is to organise free community lunches at the Hub. There is also the hope that residents will take skills home and grow fruit and vegetables in their own gardens. The Hub is currently getting ready to hand out 200 seeded compost pots to families in the coming year to try to encourage them to plant.

*[The] long-term aim is to stop the reliance on food banks and try to get [residents] to grow as much as they can. (Staff, 2020)*

Effective engagement with local stakeholders, like supermarkets, the football club, and schools has helped expand the food-growing project. However, the biggest barrier to its continued success is that residents will lose interest and stop being involved, as the garden needs constant work throughout the year in order to be able to harvest crops. Another barrier is that the project will require further investment if it is to be maintained and extended.

### Established community space and successful engagement with a diversity of local stakeholders

It was clear from the initial Local Conversation meeting that there was a need for a community space in Penparcau. The Hub has benefitted from this community backing and has been a valued space since it opened. It has been successful in offering a range of activities, acting as a drop-in centre for residents, and making rooms available for the community for its own events, such as birthdays and training.

There was a visible increase in the use of the Hub by the community leading up to March 2020. Activities with growing participation included JOY (Just Older Youth) club every Tuesday, Bingo every Thursday afternoon, and youth club on a Friday night. There have also been efforts to use the exterior space in ways that benefit the community. Staff members commented on how it takes a while to build up a reputation with the community, and that it is important to engage with them so that what the Hub offers reflects and responds to what residents actually need.

*There isn’t a lot [of] places to meet up in Penparcau. This is why the Hub is so important. It brings people together. I help out at least twice a week. I don’t know what I would do instead if the Hub wasn’t there. (Resident, 2020)*

The use of the Hub’s physical space has been limited during 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as many events have been cancelled. During lockdown, the Hub was partially closed and when it reopened, it had to operate with social distancing measures in place. Despite these limitations, the Forum and the Local Conversation have continued to function by holding virtual meetings, reaching out to those who are vulnerable in the community, and running activities wherever possible. In some cases, it has actually increased the number of residents taking part in activities.

The Hub is now in the process of setting up a conference room that allows for social distancing, enabling people who lack access or skills to use technology to attend meetings in person, including those of the Local Conversation Steering Group. Staff and residents agree that this successful adaptation was possible because the Hub already existed as a community space.

The Local Conversation initiatives have involved a wide range of residents that are representative of the area. The opinion of staff members is that the range of activities offered, alongside a clear open-door policy that welcomes all residents, has encouraged this broader participation. Activities include Bingo Thursday, creative writing classes, and parent and toddler sessions. The open-door policy not only applies for the activities, but also for drop-in sessions, to use the communal computers, access the café, or just use the space. Residents can get support and advice on a number of issues, including contacting MPs on their behalf, support with housing issues, and help accessing the GP surgery.

*[We] actively try to provide something for every age group, so that everyone feels like the hub is for them. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff and residents interviewed highlighted strong engagement with the community as a contributing factor to the success of the Local Conversation activities and events. Engagement and input from residents have helped the Hub establish itself as a community space, made it more inclusive of the community, and supported residents to take collective action. This engagement may involve one-off conversations with residents while at the Hub or in a more structured manner through the Steering Group and its sub-groups. The Steering Group meets once a month to discuss ideas and progress on events/activities; participants are encouraged to play to their strengths and interests, taking their own initiatives where possible.

An example of this is a resident with a legal background, who is investigating Council spending in Penparcau to build an argument that the Council is underspending in the area compared to the rest of Aberystwyth. Within the Steering Group, the more confident residents have supported the quieter ones to express their own opinions and have a say in what happens. This reflects how the Local Conversation is providing residents who are in the Steering Group more opportunities to gain confidence, knowledge and skills. This helps to slowly build control, as more residents are finding their voice and feeling like they are listened to, even if just by their peers.

*Sometimes we are just chatting at the Hub. If we have an idea, we put it forward and we get a group of us to volunteer and make it happen. (Resident, 2020)*

*The Steering Group has so many passionate residents. Some of them have lived here all their lives and they know what Penparcau needs. (Staff, 2020)*

*The more confident residents try to support the more quiet ones to take part and build up their confidence. (Staff, 2020)*

Different forms of outreach and communications with the community were identified as another contributing factor to wider representation. The Forum has a website which clearly explains what the Local Conversation is, what is going on at the Hub and how people can get involved. It runs a Facebook page, providing updates on its activities and access to dedicated pages of different groups, such as the Youth Forum, where people can access information and engage in a virtual space.

The Hub has been innovative in reaching out to families. For Halloween, it distributed over 200 bags of sweets to families, as trick or treating was not allowed. This provided an opportunity to identify vulnerable families that could subsequently be supported with food packages throughout the pandemic and changing public health guidelines. However, it has been a challenge to engage with 18–25-year-olds and single parents, which staff recognise as requiring further thought.

Particular efforts have been made to engage with the elderly population, as evidenced by the creation of the JOY club. Seven people attended the first meeting, in February 2020, in which they discussed the sort of activities they wanted the club to have. Ideas included quizzes, discussing the history of Penparcau, or just a social sit down with a free cup of tea.

*The aim is tobuild up relationships, tackle isolation and give them confidence to get out and about. (Staff, 2020)*

It has been crucial in building relationships in the community and helped those who live alone with few places to socialise.

The latest meeting, which took place in March 2020, had more than 40 attendees. During Covid-19, staff members and volunteers emailed and talked on the phone with JOY members and even organised afternoon teas by dropping off a cup of tea at the door and having a socially distanced chat.

*JOY club literally became the go-to event every Tuesday and really helped create much more community engagement in Penparcau for the elderly residents and tackle loneliness. (Staff, 2020)*

*Given that there is a large elderly population in Penparcau, who may not have the technology skills to interact through a website or social media, the JOY club has allowed them to stay engaged. (Staff, 2020)*

Reaching out to local organisations and institutions has allowed the Local Conversation activities and projects to be more expansive, best demonstrated by the food-growing project’s successful engagement with local supermarkets, the football club, and schools. These partnerships have increased the amount of resources available and have permitted projects to expand beyond the grounds of the Hub. They have reinforced the sustainability of outcomes, allowing projects to become more independent of the Hub. Partnerships with schools also provide a form of early intervention, which can create change over the lifetime of an individual. The support goes both ways. The Local Conversation has also provided help to local organisations, such as the grant scheme run by the Youth Forum.

These relationships promote social cohesion, help increase awareness of the Hub, and foster more sustainable outcomes. However, those interviewed felt that engagement with the Council has not been a success. Interviewees shared the view that it is not because residents have not tried, but because there is a lack of interest on the part of the Council. Staff and residents believe that this has to do with the stigma attached to Penparcau and its historically bad reputation. Because of a widespread perception that Penparcau is not a place that is worthy of time or investment, it is challenging for residents to communicate and engage with the Council to get more support. Residents also feel that the Council’s continued disinvestment in Penparcau is a barrier to change and hinders the progress of the Local Conversation.

In response to this perceived neglect from the Council, residents have pushed to refurbish the park, which has not received any significant investment in 20 years. The equipment is sadly outdated, with no access for wheelchair users and no equipment for disabled people. This is particularly concerning, given the fact that it is just across the road from the biggest special needs unit in Ceredigion. It is viewed as a reflection of the divide between the wards of Aberystwyth. The Steering Group has been campaigning tirelessly about the park, not only because of the importance of the space for the community but also because it echoes the relationship the community has with the Council. As part of the campaign, the group has published a number of newspaper articles on the state of the park, with little response from the Council. However, it has spurred residents to be more involved in campaigns against the Council.

*I’ve had a few barriers with the Council. They are the only ones who haven’t helped us. We are still in battle with them about the park. We have been campaigning about the it since January…I remember the town clerk writing us an email about how disappointed she was because of a Facebook post about how we need a better park, basically the ethos of the Council is “Penparcau just put up and shut up.” There is a park in town [where the tourist area is] that has been done up three times in 10 years, but that is good for tourism. Although Penparcau is the biggest ward, we have a tyre swing that hasn’t had a tyre for 15 years. We were just trying to say come on Council, pull your finger out. (Resident, 2020)This is spurring the residents on to become more active in our campaigns and speaking out at the injustice they feel is being served in Penparcau. (Staff, 2020)*

Staff and residents are attempting different methods to engage with the Council in the hope that this relationship can change. In addition to the campaign about the park, examples include the resident with a legal background building a case of underinvestment by the Council. An email thread has been set up to the Council with demands from residents that were also included in the thread. This has now been escalated to Ben Lake, MP for Ceredigion.

## Conclusion

Throughout the different areas of good practice, a recurring theme for success was having effective engagement with the community. This engagement consisted of getting input from a wide range of residents, having different avenues for residents to raise points, and ensuring that the ideas raised were actually acted on. Examples of this type of engagement were apparent in the Steering Group, the Youth Forum, and the JOY club.

It is important that the community centre and its activities represent what the community wants. It is also important that it has consistency and structure, with people who can maintain communications, run the Hub, and stay aware of what is going on in the different groups and activities. This is what the staff members provide. Although volunteers could offer this, it would require a lot of time and could become a burden, especially for those with limited resources, including too little disposable time. The staff are also members of the community and it is clear they are passionate about their work, believe change is possible, and want to improve health and wellbeing for the residents of Penparcau.

Penparcau is an example of how different areas of good practice do not function in silos; instead, they are dependent on each other, building on one another to achieve the desired outcomes and future sustainability. Initial engagement with residents gave the mandate to establish a physical community space. This space, in turn, has allowed for further engagement with a wider range of residents, such as through providing space for groups, such as the Youth Forum and the JOY club, to meet. It is also a space for residents to hold activities and events, as well as run projects, such as the food-growing project, which are shaped with input from the community.

Further benefits are achieved through interactions with local organisations and institutions, which offer resources and support, such as the donations of space, plants, and seeds to support the expansion of the food-growing project. Local institutions can help to raise more awareness of the various Local Conversation activities and projects, so that they reach and benefit more residents.

Annex 8. Stanwell, Surrey

Supported by the Surrey Care Trust.

## Methods

The purpose of this case study was to identify aspects of good practice in the Local Conversation project in Stanwell. The Trust has identified it as a project which other Local Conversation sites can learn from in several activity areas. This case study explores the following areas of good practice:

* Conflict resolution and governance processes.
* Community allotment plot.
* Activities during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Interviews were conducted with seven people in November 2020 of which five were local residents (including one staff member), one was a member of staff, and one was a co-opted member of the Steering Group. The interviews were conducted via telephone and Zoom and extensive notes were taken for analysis.

## Context

### About Stanwell

Stanwell is a village in the Borough of Spelthorne, Surrey. Residents describe the village as a relatively working class area with pockets of deprivation.

*It’s like a lot of areas, everyone is like ‘eurgh’ Stanwell, one of the deprived areas. It has deprivation...The village is more middle class and there’s not obvious poverty up there. (Resident, 2020)*

Some residents interviewed have lived in Stanwell for a decade or more. These residents described how the socioeconomic characteristics of the population have changed. The area is more ethnically diverse in comparison to 10 years ago, with a larger Asian and Southeast Asian population.

The village is located very close to Heathrow Airport and many residents hold jobs there. There is a mixture of tenures in Stanwell, ranging from bedsits to detached houses to bungalows. There is the Lord Knyvett Hall (a community hub in north Stanwell run by the Local Conversation) and the Rose Centre in south Stanwell run by a local group (A2dominion) that organise community events. Residents in Stanwell make use of facilities further out from the village, in neighbouring towns such as Staines and Ashford. The village has a Scout “hut” for Cubs; however, other children’s clubs such as Guides or Brownies travel to Staines. There’s also a Men’s Shed and tennis courts that some residents make use of in Ashford.

### About the Local Conversation in Stanwell

The original focus of Local Conversations was a small area of Stanwell North, where a lot of bedsits and flat blocks are located. It was decided that the project needed to cover all of Stanwell and be accessible to all residents.

*Initially, it was designed for the area around Witney Close. But we as Steering Group, felt that there are [other] people isolated. It’s not just one area, it’s across the board. (Resident, 2020)*

Deprivation is not just limited to certain areas within Stanwell but applies to individual households. An interviewee mentioned that Stanwell was in need of support and is often overlooked when it comes to funding:

*Stanwell was the deprived area. It missed out on a lot of opportunities – whether it was funding, borough involvement, it didn’t seem to me it got the reel of support it needed. I thought the Local Conversation was a real empowering tool. (Resident, 2020)*

It was highlighted for having a great community engagement since receiving support from the Trust for the Local Conversation.

*We have a reputation for community spirit. (Resident, 2020)*

*Stanwell has just become alive in the past few years. It’s given local people a chance to grow, a chance to feel happy, a chance to learn. (Resident, 2020)*

The Local Conversation in Stanwell aims to bring the community together and take action on local issues. Three local priorities were identified by residents in Stanwell:

1. Taking pride in a better living environment for Stanwell residents.
2. A well-connected, healthier, and active community.
3. Ongoing activities for children and young people.

The Local Conversation in Stanwell has involved many activities – from forming an independent grants panel, to hosting sporting clubs for children, to organising community litter picks. The majority of activities are tailored for children and young people; however, there are also activities for older residents. The following section focuses on areas of good practice, including the outcomes experienced by residents and key learnings.

## Good practice

### The Community Allotment

Two members of the Steering Group own an allotment plot. They proposed the idea of a community allotment when they saw two plots available next to theirs. The plots were crowded with weeds, but they thought it would be great for the Local Conversation to own and develop. In February 2019, the Local Conversation acquired the plots and started clearing out the weeds and tidying the area. The allotment plots are roughly 250m2 combined. This is similar to the size of a double’s tennis court. With advice from local residents, the Local Conversation team put a plan into place for setting up a seated area and shed.

In the first year, residents concentrated on doing the groundwork and creating a usable space. The maintenance cost was very low and involved the help of a few local volunteers. A local resident has taken the lead on managing the allotment, with support from others in the community. The support was described as very minimal to begin with, just one or two more people getting involved. The allotment was advertised through social media and flyers; however, there was little to no response. The team originally struggled to promote and encourage the use of the allotment and would often receive feedback from people wanting to own a plot.

There was a huge turning point for this project one year later, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown. With residents put on the furlough scheme and working from home, it seems they had more time on their hands to find out about and engage with the local allotment, which some had seen through the advertisements on Facebook.

*More people were at home sitting on Facebook. There was a huge surge of people becoming interested, reading things and getting in touch. (Resident, 2020)*

During the Covid-19 national lockdown in spring 2020, the Local Conversation project has further developed the allotment. The allotment project was fortunate that it was a permitted space where people could go outside and therefore follow government social distancing guidelines. It has come a very long way since the surge in interest. During difficult times of social distancing and isolating from others, the allotment enabled the community to safely enjoy a space in line with the government guidelines at the time. Many families in Stanwell do not have a private garden to grow plants – the community allotment enabled children and families to enjoy an outdoor space in a safe environment.

The local lead on this project holds a key to the allotment and residents share the key, or co-ordinate with the lead when planning their visit to the allotment. During the national lockdowns there was a limit of two families (with young children) or two people on a plot at any given time. When the national lockdown ended in the summer, there were even more opportunities for local residents to engage with activities at the allotment, at a social distance.

The community allotment group originally involved more individuals who are retired. Since starting up the allotment, more working-age people have got involved, particularly those with young children. It was highlighted that there was a greater number of women involved, which could be due to women’s disproportionate caring responsibilities of their children.

#### Activities

Since gaining a lot of interest from the community during lockdown, the Stanwell Local Conversation and volunteers have run various activities for different groups of people. Some activities are regular, and others are adhoc:

* **A children’s area in the allotment plot.** A local resident commented: *“*It was a great inspiration and plan that a children’s area was to be incorporated.”Young volunteers involved in the Duke of Edinburgh Award[[14]](#footnote-14) cleared a large space for a children’s play area. The project is thought to have helped them fulfil their volunteering hours (a requirement of the Duke of Edinburgh scheme) while other opportunities were not available.
* **Play sessions for toddlers and children.** Sessions for toddlers are run through the week. The allotment provides an outdoor space for toddlers while many indoor play groups are closed. A local resident involved in the project said: “It gets [parents] involved working here and relaxing here, with children enjoying a safe outdoor environment.” Parents and grandparents also use the space, whether it is for socialising with neighbours or helping with maintenance of the allotment, while children make use of the play area.
* **One-off activities during lockdown.** Through lockdown, interviewees mentioned many different activities taking place on the community allotment, from sunflower growing to planting bulbs to rock painting.

The community allotment includes a pond area for residents to enjoy wildlife and insects. In addition to the activities mentioned, some local residents contribute to the upkeep of the allotment and others take a trip to the allotment to enjoy nature in a safe environment. There is a seated area, a sheltered area, and a place to burn firewood. The allotment is a versatile space and can be used for many activities or pastimes such as planting.

One resident mentioned it was used for a “teatime party”for a small group who wanted to gather together safely, in line with government guidelines during the pandemic. Another resident described how they use the allotment:

*My grandson and granddaughter cycled to the allotment. My granddaughter played in play area and me and my grandson chopped up some wood to turn into firewood. (Resident, 2020)*

The activities for families continue:

*They’re creating learning spaces, sensory pathways, lots of things they wouldn’t normally see. For me, that is the ultimate of what the Local Conversation is about. (Resident, 2020)*

#### Outcomes

Many residents have benefited from the community allotment. Before this, an outdoor communal space for the community did not exist. It’s inspired initiatives that affect the wellbeing of the Stanwell Community. The project lead described two cases where individuals have benefited from the allotment in different ways:

**Access to a safe outdoor space**

*We have a family who have no garden, with a toddler. There’s a concrete flowerbed and it’s really unpleasant. She was gardening in the flowerbed and her daughter was running around. I asked her to get in touch with me to come over to the allotment. I took her over and showed her the plot and gave her the key. For her, it was such a special place. She didn’t realise how long it has been there. We found lots of people like that. (Resident, 2020)*

**Improved wellbeing**

*We have a little lady. Her husband has dementia and became ill incredibly fast. She came over to look at the allotment, and she loved being out and having that break. She enjoyed watching the kids play. It was respite for her. (Resident, 2020)*

*I love going over there, chatting to the other people, getting in a lot of exercise. It makes me happy.* (*Resident, 2020)*

A member of the Steering Group described the interactions between local residents and what the benefits have been:

**Sharing resources**

*They’ve shared resources and vegetables they’re growing,* (*Resident, 2020)*

**Increased knowledge**

*Learning about gardening and learning about other outdoor activities. The more you work in the garden the more you learn about gardens. I’m a vegetable gardener myself. They put in the pond there and they do other stuff as well. I meet new people. (Resident, 2020)*

In addition to the outcomes described by interviewees, the community allotment has been given three awards in the Spelthorne in Bloom 2020 competition which takes place every year. The allotment won first place for the following:

* Best Environmental Planting Project.
* Best in Show.
* Best Community Garden.

The allotment is over a year old and all the planting is relatively new as the Local Conversation project has concentrated on building the allotment. The majority of equipment and tools they make use of at the allotment are donated/second-hand. The project lead believes that is what enabled the allotment to win the environmental planting project prize, in addition to having a pond, which attracts wildlife such as butterflies, bees, and bugs.

Residents have benefited from a local member of the community taking the lead on this. The community come together and take greater notice of the allotment. For example, an interviewee said that residents offer any items in their homes or sheds that might be useful:

*They start going through their things and think, shall I give it to the allotment? (Resident, 2020)*

The project has managed to gain lots of free items such as chairs and other things for their fire pit. The allotment also received a donation from Heathrow Fencing. The next milestone for the community allotment is a chicken coop, so residents can have eggs as well as vegetables, and children can engage with the chickens.

The community allotment has been described as an asset that the local community can continue to use and maintain going forward. It is a key legacy from the Local Conversation in Stanwell, particularly as it has supported residents throughout the pandemic.

### Governance processes and overcoming conflict

The Local Conversation in Stanwell has a Steering Group with seven resident members and two co-opted members. The group has one chair and two vice-chairs. It is a diverse group made up of local residents, local councillors, project officers, and individuals from local agencies. Individuals have priority areas according to their interest and expertise, such as pride in Stanwell, social connection, transport, and healthy lifestyles. The Steering Group works with local residents to determine how and when money is best spent to achieve their priorities. The group meets on a monthly basis.

Members of the Steering Group have changed since the start of Local Conversation in Stanwell, with some members being part of the group for just a year, and others since the outset of the project. Interviewees highlighted that there had been the odd occasion of conflict within the Steering Group, specifically at the start of the project.

*It wasn’t unusual; it was probably a reaction of a project in its early days. (Resident, 2020).*

There were issues with regard to decision-making power and how the Steering Group operates. This was due to lack of clarity on what the aims of the Local Conversation in Stanwell are – there was a crossover of members’ aims. Some people took it on themselves to carry out activities on behalf of the Local Conversation and did not fully grasp an understanding of democratic processes and collective action. While the conflict was resolved by the project officers, it did result in three members leaving the group. An interviewee reflected on the conflict and explained that those who left the group went on to create another voluntary organisation and host community events.

*I think people learnt from that [conflict]. Some of the original Steering Group members went to form their own voluntary organisation and as a result their local voluntary organisation networks with the Local Conversation. People learnt from the conflict from support provided. People were growing up. People appreciated that there’s space out there for everyone. (Resident, 2020)*

#### Activities

Since then, the Steering Group has been actively improving their governance processes and how they operate democratically as a team. They are doing a number of activities to help resolve any future conflicts that may arise and prevent them from happening. The first set of activities aimed to get everyone on the same page and understand one another. Members of the Steering Group come from different backgrounds. Some have never been part of a Steering Groupbefore and others have a lot of experience sitting on boards and committees. Workshops were held by two individuals, one from the Kaizen Institute and another from University Central Lancashire (UCLan), to improve understanding in how to run a Steering Group, how to work with one another, how to adhere to a constitution and more.

Member’s highlighted transparency and process as the Steering Group’s strength:

*I would describe it as strong – there’s a Local Conversation constitution. It’s properly minuted. The Steering Group are communicating constantly on a regular basis. All information is shared, communicated about, voted on. (Staff, 2020)  
It has gone forward [in] leaps and bound. Everyone is consulted. (Resident, 2020)*

*We’ve learnt to deal with conflict better. We’ve got people who are part of the Steering Group who I’ve known for a long time who I never thought would join. (Resident, 2020)*

The group has been working on a number of activities to improve their governance processes, including:

* Recording votes and taking meeting minutes.
* Developing a code of conduct/terms of reference, with the aim to have a robust and workable document to refer to.
* Developing a grants panel, separate to the Steering Group.
* Having two chairs.

#### Outcomes

Members of the Steering Group as well as residents participating in Local Conversation activities have benefited from the governance processes put in place. In general, the Steering Group seems to follow a structured process and works well with one another. Members of the Steering Group mentioned that they have significantly improved as a unit since beginning the Local Conversation in Stanwell and several outcomes have been identified as a direct result of improving governance processes. Interviewees highlighted the spread of power and increased equality, as well as collaboration and smooth processes.

**Greater equality.** A member mentioned that spreading power across two people has allowed individuals to share power and responsibilities. The democratic processes in place have enabled members to constructively make decisions and provides a balance of power.

*We’ve got two chairs which has spread the power. (Staff, 2020)*

*It became a lot more smoother – a lot more equality and cohesion. (Staff, 2020)*

**Working together.** The processes have allowed for greater collaboration and transparency. For example, the decision-making process involves all Steering Group members.

*Moving forward now we’re more coherent and working in a transparent and fair way. (Resident, 2020)*

*I don’t see any problem/conflict left behind and unresolved. We’re trying to break those barriers, bringing people out of their comfort zones. (Resident, 2020)*

*It’s more open and everyone having a say and deciding. It’s much better and moving in the right direction. (Resident, 2020)*

*Everyone has their say and [are] always checking back with what the priorities are and what [the] community wants through consultations. (Resident, 2020)*

*They’ve learnt how to work together and how to collaborate. (Resident, 2020)*

**Increased skills and knowledge.** Being part of a Steering Group has also been a learning experience for some members. Some residents have not been part of a Steering Group before and therefore are learning about how it should operate, as well as harnessing on expertise from members with more experience.

*These members are learning about governance and processes. There’s clear guidance on how the group should behave and act towards one another. (Staff, 2020)*

*We’ve got a couple of local councillors on the group as their residents. They bring a lot of guidance with regard to governance in a local community. They’ve been very instrumental. (Resident, 2020)*

*It’s quite a learning journey and it’s quite enjoyable as well. Our chair is very lovely, and no one can be is as good as her. The way we have worked last, for the few months – the action we have taken is enormously big – it’s a great success for us. (Resident, 2020)*

*It’s about communication between people and people recognising their own skills and coming forward. (Resident, 2020)*

The Steering Group continues to improve its processes and members are keen on working together and engaging with residents. As the community entered a second national lockdown over the winter period, a survey was designed to gain input from residents and their key priorities for Stanwell.

### Adjusting to national lockdown and Covid-19 guidelines

There was a national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic between March and June 2020, which disrupted many of the Local Conversation events and activities. Just before the first lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Conversation was holding an event to celebrate the Hindu festival Holi, but this was cancelled, and the team had to adapt to the situation and engage with the community in line with government guidance.

Since then, the Local Conversation has come a long way in co-ordinating activities and adjusting to social distancing guidelines. The Local Conversation team was more than ready to adapt to the second national lockdown in November 2020.

#### Activities

Prior to March 2020, the Local Conversation hosted a range of events, from craft clubs for children, to plant growing on verges, to afternoon tea for older residents. While these events engaged a range of residents, switching to virtual activities had generally led to an increase in engagement from the wider community. A key aim of the Local Conversation in Stanwell is to sustain its connection with the local community. The project had been reaching out to locals by using leaflets to describe what it is about and posters with contact details, as well as by creating its own website.

Some interviewees mentioned that social media is its strongest platform, with more than 500 members in its Facebook group. As residents are now staying at home with fewer social activities to take part in, more people are finding out about the Local Conversation in Stanwell.

While children and young people are a priority for the Local Conversation in Stanwell, the Steering Group felt it is important to engage with older residents too. Staff interviewed mentioned that lack of online access or not being on Facebook was a key barrier for some, particularly older residents. Through previous engagement and connections with community members, the Local Conversation was able to send care packs to people, many of whom were unable to leave their homes.

The Local Conversation introduced a range of activities for families and individuals to do in their own home, to keep them entertained while still feeling connected to the community:

* Online fitness classes. A staff member is a fitness instructor and ran these classes for free.
* Virtual dance classes for children.
* Activity packages including a bean-growing and sunflower-growing competition; colouring activities; and celebrating different festivals such as Easter, Eid, Diwali, Raksha Bandhan, and Christmas.
* A bake-off competition for all ages. The competition included 49 family entries and 19 adult entries.
* Creating a book for care home residents – a collation of pictures, jokes, photos, illustrations, and stories from the community to send to care home residents.

The Facebook group played a huge part in keeping the community connected between March and June 2020. For example, the bake-off competition involved families and individuals sending pictures of their cakes to the group and local residents often post pictures online of what activity they’re doing or have completed.

#### Outcomes

The Local Conversation in Stanwell has been able to keep the community engaged despite setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many organisations and groups, it has been able to adapt. The main outcome for these activities is sustaining connection with the communitywhile enabling as wide participation as possible. Interviewees highlighted the successes of adjusting to socially distanced and virtual activities. Despite the difficult in reaching some people beyond social media, the Local Conversation in Stanwell has grown rapidly over the past nine months, as an interviewee commented:

*We started with 30 packs [sent to families and residents], [this increased to] 75, to 135, now we’re nearly at 300. (Resident, 2020)*

The activity packs enabled individuals to feel connected to one another. This was particularly important for those who live alone or were in isolation.

*I think the project will probably make people feel appreciated and also valued. I also think the project quite often reminds people that there is somebody thinking of them. A simple thing like a craft pack. We go out of our way to message someone we haven’t heard from in a while.(Resident, 2020)*

While staying connected virtually, the community also celebrated various different religious festivals together. A resident mentioned it provided the opportunity to share culture.

*We celebrate all of religious festivals – a lot of families with different backgrounds together […]They’ve given us the chance to share our cultures. We sent out Diwali packs. (Resident, 2020)*

The Local Conversation continues to maintain a connection with the local community and enable residents to remain connected to each other. This is largely down to the staff members driving the activities with the support of the Steering Group and volunteers. For Christmas, children and families have been sent packs to decorate their windows and encouraged to put out their Christmas decorations as part of an event called “Light up Stanwell”. The Local Conversation team has tried to extend this event further by sending wreathes for older residents to put on their front doors.

## Conclusions

This case study of good practice in the Stanwell Local Conversation highlights three key themes:

* **Strong communication.** A recurring theme for success across the three examples of good practice is strong communication. First, the community allotment, which is now a community asset, could only get into the great state it is in now with the teamwork and effort from volunteers in the community. Residents had ideas for improvements in the allotment and put in the work to make that happen. Second, improving governance processes allowed for more democratic decision-making, which enabled the Steering Group to identify its priorities and make collective decisions after discussions and voting. Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the community has come together to support members of the community and maintain connections through social media or other means.
* **Learning and sharing knowledge.** Residents have been learning and sharing knowledge with one another through various avenues. Individuals have been able to share their skills and expertise at both the community allotment and in the Steering Group. In general, residents have a greater understanding of one another and different cultures and religions, which has brought them closer together as a community.
* **Inclusivity.** The Local Conversation in Stanwell adapts activities to engage with people across different ages, cultures and religions. Although the priority is to engage with children and young people, the Steering Group and staff often think about how to create activities and events that are inclusive for people of all ages. For example, the community allotment is for anyone to use, whether it is a family with young children to enjoy the play area or an older resident who likes to garden. Inclusivity goes beyond age groups, as activity packs have enabled residents with different backgrounds to celebrate religious and cultural festivals with one another. Despite barriers, the Local Conversation staff have tried their best to reach out and engage with members of the community who are not on social media.

Strong communication, learning, and sharing knowledge, as well as inclusivity have enabled the Local Conversation in Stanwell to create and maintain a strong community spirit. Whilst the community allotment is a key legacy and asset from this Local Conversation project, sustaining activities and accessing other resources were identified as something to build on for the future. The project is largely led by staff members and there is a need to increase community leadership for some of the Local Conversation activities to ensure they are sustainable. Workshops on community leadership are being considered to help empower local residents and build greater collective control.

# Annex 9. staff survey findings

### Introduction

In February 2020, an online survey was sent to 17 of the lead organisations in receipt of the full Local Conversations grant: Bingham and Magdalene, Caia Park, Govanhill, Haverhill, Highercroft, Holyhead, Kirkley, Longbenton, Lozells, Merstham, Muirhouse, Northam, Old Fold and Nest Estates, St Mary’s, Stanwell, Claremont Ten, and the Upper Afan Valley.

Of the 17 areas which surveys were sent to, we received 6 responses, despite multiple attempts to follow up to get more responses. The last round of lead organisation surveys received 16 responses. The dramatic drop in the response rate may be explained by a combination of factors. Mainly, the Covid-19 crisis had begun to emerge as the deadline for submission neared. As this was the final round of surveys, people may have felt less motivated to complete it. The respondents were kept anonymous to encourage honesty in the answers they provided.

The survey was designed to probe a range of themes:

* Reflections on Local Conversations in the past year – successes, challenges, learning, and outcomes for the lead organisation.
* Impact of the Local Conversations programme on the lead organisation, those involved in the Local Conversation, and the wider neighbourhood.
* The formal and informal structures which constitute the Local Conversation and how well they work.
* Resources available to each area including staff time and funding.
* People, organisations, and institutions the Local Conversation has sought to influence, how they’ve sought that influence, and how successful they’ve been.

Most of the questions in the lead organisation survey were open ended and qualitative, and so have been coded and analysed thematically. There were a number of closed questions designed to capture information about the resource, staff, and institutional capacity of the Local Conversations.

## Differences Local Conversations have made over the past year

### Differences and successes

The Local Conversations programme has led to a series of concrete changes in their respective local communities over the past year. The projects have continued to grow, with an increase in the number of activities provided, as well as the number of people attending those activities. Relationships within the community between both individuals and institutions have also grown and strengthened, and the Local Conversations themselves have become something of a mainstay locally, with reports that they have felt more embedded in the local communities.

There have also been reports of individual growth and development, with people building confidence and taking on more roles and responsibilities in the formal structures of the Local Conversation. In some cases, this has also resulted in volunteering and job opportunities elsewhere in the area.

Finally, in three areas, respondents discussed the worsening levels of poverty in their area – for example in relation to the detrimental impacts of austerity, unemployment, or an unstable local population. They also discussed the role of the Local Conversation in attempting to respond to the acute problems the increased levels of poverty had created.

**Expanding number of activities**. Respondents in three areas describe an expansion of activities related to the Local Conversation, enabled by their ability to funnel money into setting up local projects and groups. This was the most common of the differences that the respondents noted.

*We have strengthened the forum and developed the community chest which has put substantial moneys into local projects.*

*The LC [Local Conversation] continues to support the valley's hubs with their vital work, and the small grants given out by the independent panel have financed some interesting projects, such as scuba diving training and a new men's shed.*

*The Local Conversation has afforded opportunities for lots of new exciting activities to children and parents who would not otherwise have been able to attend.*

**Growth in number of people attending.** Similarly, in two areas, respondents reported an increase in the number of people attending the Local Conversation and the activities associated with it.

*The Local Conversation has seen a big increase of repeat footfall to our activities in the last year.*

*…new groups established and grown (Hobby hub for adults, Lego club, choir).*

**Strengthening community connections**. Three Local Conversations reported stronger community ties over the past year, as the Conversations themselves built on the work they had been doing over the past few years.

*We have seen a lot of new friendships formed (children from different schools having the opportunity to meet and interact).*

**Relationships developed between community institutions.** In addition to building and strengthening connections between individuals, respondents in two areas reported cultivating new relationships with other institutions in the area, including businesses, schools, and services which had existed prior to the Local Conversation.

*… and relationships with local businesses (Heathrow Fencing for our allotment needs) and local existing services (Scout Association, Bedfont lakes, Heathrow Biodiversity, Footsteps4life).*

*There have been new relationships formed with existing local providers to strong build networks within Stanwell.*

**Local Conversation more established in the community**. In two areas, respondents said that they are more embedded and established in the minds of the local community. In one area, the respondent said that the Local Conversation had become a place where people focus more of their time, and it had been “embraced” by the local community. A respondent in another area said that local people now “trust” the Local Conversation more.

*The community has embraced the project and has taken it by the reigns. The project has evolved to become more of a focus/starting point for those who wish to become better involved in their community.*

*The LC worker has gone a long way down the path of building trust with the local residents– a long process.*

**Continued development of individuals within Local Conversation**. In three areas, respondents said that they had seen multiple individuals within their Local Conversation gain confidence, which in turn has enabled them to assume additional roles and responsibilities within the Conversation. These individuals have become an increasingly important part of the formal structures within their respective project.

*I personally have seen a growth in people’s individual capacity within community members, [having] the confidence to take on more responsibility for arranging events, speaking at meetings and sharing new ideas has been positive and welcomed.*

*Increased role local people are playing in managing the building and also in planning and leading their own activities.*

*The forum has been taking on much more responsibility and this has been a huge achievement, at times I thought that it may never happen and then suddenly it just seemed to slip into place. There are community members sitting on community action groups and having their voice heard and straight from the community not via us as an organisation.*

**Opening up other opportunities outside of the Local Conversation**. A respondent in one area said that the Local Conversation had acted as a platform through which people from the community can take up volunteer roles and employment opportunities elsewhere.

*Movement of local people into volunteering opportunities with other organisations and also into employment.*

**Mediating impact of austerity**. Respondents in two areas discussed the detrimental impact of austerity on their local areas, and the responses of the local community and the Local Conversation to mitigate its worst effects. In one area, the respondent described at length the effect of cuts to mental health services, where waiting lists for therapy or counselling through the NHS can range from six weeks to nine months – an abject failure to meet the high demand for mental health in the area. In response to this, a group was set up to try and help local people with some of their local needs.

*A local woman has formed the Let’s Talk group and she volunteers her time to help others open up about their mental health, reduce stigma, and most importantly reduce isolation. Let’s Talk was set up due to the lack of support in the area for those with mental health issues […] There are also opportunities for us to provide Mental Health First Aid training to members of the community, organisations and support services.*

In another area, the respondent reported that they had developed a “device” which helps people with welfare support, though details of this device were not provided.

*Developing a welfare support device that has put in excess of £150,000 into the local community.*

### Challenges

The Local Conversations continue to face a series of challenges which can impede the progress of the individual projects. Consistent with previous reports, a number of these challenges are long standing, including factional local politics, a worsening economic situation for residents, and people feeling jaded by the failures of community projects preceding the Local Conversation. A transient local population leads to high levels of turnover and instability, which makes organising in the local community very hard. Some sites reported that increasing the levels of participation and responsibility among residents was especially challenging, and formal decision-making bodies such as Steering Groups can take a long time to become independent.

**Factional communities and resistant individuals**. This issue was briefly mentioned last year. This year, three sites cited it as a major problem. In one of those areas, a former member of their Steering Group has left the project and has been disruptive by delaying their work, for example.

*We have had an ongoing issue with a former Steering Group member starting with a separate project [...] He is constantly trying to delay our project and aims to interrupt our fabulous work as much as possible.*

Another Local Conversation blames parochialism and factionalism for limiting the success of their project, while another said that there were community tensions with migrants who were scapegoated for local problems.

*There is a strong parochial attitude in different villages which hampers the project, further extending to factionalism in some of the communities. There is a toxic relationship with a few linked organisations that work against the LC.*

*There is underlying tension within the area where there is a blame culture, eg crime that must be from the foreigners. There is also anxiety within the community of interest due to the Settled Status for EU citizens and people are worried that they may not be granted [that] status.*

**Worsening economic situation**. A respondent in one area said that a worsening economic situation had created increasing levels of disadvantage which has hampered the progress of the project. They did not expand on the nature of socio-economic disadvantage, or exactly how it acted as a barrier.

*[A] growing concern is the increasing level of socio economic disadvantage.*

**People jaded by past failures**. In one area, the respondent said that the failures of projects preceding the Local Conversation had left people feeling disillusioned, pessimistic, and assuming that the Local Conversation would also fail. This has created something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the project struggling to recruit volunteers.

*Many years of unsuccessful projects have left a tendency to assume failure among some residents. The LC worker has failed to secure a workable number of volunteers for his new transport panel, despite it been the priority area most talked about by locals.*

**Formal decision-making bodies take time to set up and become independent**. Steering groups and other formal decision-making bodies take time to set up, as people learn their roles and build relationships. A respondent in one area found that the initial stages of building the Steering Group was particularly difficult, and the Steering Group was failing to act independently of the Local Conversation staff. However, they also suggest that those issues were eventually overcome, as members of the Steering Group received support from the Local Conversation staff. This gave them the time and space to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and grow in confidence to become more independent. The staff survey from 2019 emphasised the importance of one-to-one support, as well as the incremental increase in levels of responsibility to Steering Group members as a key part of their success.

*Starting up a new Steering Group! This was really difficult to begin with, and to get the Steering Group to take control rather than look at LC staff for affirmation.*

**Struggles to move towards further levels of participation.** Similarly, another area had struggled to involve residents beyond attending events or activities passively. Specifically, they have found it challenging to get residents to take ownership of and responsibility for the projects, which acts as a major barrier in terms of securing the long-term sustainability of the Local Conversation.

*Getting volunteers to take ownership of projects and develop the sustainability of the LC programme.*

**High levels of turnover and an unstable local population**. A respondent from one area said that they had issues with a transient local population, which had made organising in the local community very hard for the past few years. However, they also said that they had developed a stable core group of people who have formed the Local Conversation’s forum and was resulting in some success.

*As in the past, movement within the community that is very transient, which means that we lose some forum members, and you can feel that you are starting at the beginning; however there has been a core number of forum members who have stayed and are making the steps to take more control of the project.*

## Staff capacity

The Local Conversation areas were asked about the number of staff who worked for them, but explicitly on the Local Conversation project. Two of the areas who responded had four members of staff, two areas had two members of staff apiece, and one area had a single staff member dedicated to the project.

There was variation in the number of hours of staff time committed to the project across the Local Conversations. Two areas reported having just over 100 hours of staff time dedicated per week, two areas reported having between 40 and 50 hours a week, and one area reported only having 21 hours a week (Figure 1).

When asked about whether the staff members working on the Local Conversation live in the neighbourhood, respondents in three sites said that some of their staff did and respondents in two sites said that none lived in the neighbourhood. Of the sites who responded, none of them said that all their staff working on the Local Conversation lived in the neighbourhood.

## Funding

Only three organisations answered the question about the percentage of their total organisational funding from the Trust. The respondent in one area said that all of their funding came from the Trust, another area said 90% of their funding did, and the respondent in another area said that just 30% of their funding came from the Trust.

**Helping the lead organisation to secure funding**. Of the two people who said that work related to the Local Conversation had helped their organisation secure funding from other sources, only one gave further information. They said that the model of community organising associated with the Local Conversation had enabled them to build a close connection with the local community, which potential funders had noted.

*Close connection with community [as a] well recognised - trusted delivery partner. Model of community development developed as part of LC recognised as good practice community development.*

This Local Conversation said that it had received £838,000 from the National Lottery for partnership work to support community development and systems change in another part of city, and £2,600 to help deliver the Council's holiday hunger scheme in area.

**Helping local groups secure additional funding.** Three of the four areas that responded said that work related to the Local Conversation had helped local groups to secure funding from other sources. The respondent in one area said they helped local groups get nearly £24,000 over four separate bids, with two coming from the National Lottery, Awards for All; one from the county Council; and one from a small partnership. Another Local Conversation helped a local group win £2,600 from the Council to support the holiday hunger scheme.

However, it seems as though this respondent has conflated their answer for the previous question with this question. The £2,600 secured to support the Council’s holiday hunger scheme is part of the lead organisation’s programme of work, rather than a separate local organisation. Finally, the fourth area reported that local groups won grants from Garfield Weston, Big Lottery, Coalfields Regeneration, Tesco, Lloyds Foundation, and some wind farm funds, but failed to specify the amounts.

**Reports for the People’s Health Trust helped with funding bids**. In one area, the respondent said that the collection of data for the reports they regularly wrote for the Trust were directly helpful in applying for other sources of funding.

*Some of the reports prepared for the LC helped provide metrics for applying for other grants (and vice versa, information gathered to support other applications has been useful to provide information requested by PHT).*

**Administrative support for local groups**. Respondents in two areas said that they had used staff time to provide both administrative and technical support for local groups in their early stages – which has created the necessary organisational basis for them to get funding – for example, through setting up a bank account and constituting themselves as an organisation.

*We have been able to support groups to become constituted, open bank accounts and apply for their own funding.*

*Other local groups have been able to see what we have achieved - they have visited our project - and been supported by other parts of our Charity to develop their own plans to make their community a better place to live.*

**Partnering with local groups to jointly fundraise**. The respondent in one area said that they were able to jointly apply for funding with local groups, which meant that the local groups were more likely to win those grants. When applying together, the Local Conversation could use its staff and resources as part of the matched funding in the bid.

*Directly within the LC - provision of “free” space within our building often counted as matched funding by delivery partners who were able to secure funds to support activities for local people. Partners also included staff and volunteer time as part of matched funding.*

## Formal structures

### Steering groups

All respondents said they had a core Steering Group or similar decision-making body for local people to get involved in controlling the direction of the Local Conversation. The respondents in two of the areas said the Steering Groups were well established, and two said they was still developing. The size of the Steering Groups varied, ranging from 6 to 18 people.

The respondent in one area described their Steering Group as “amorphous”, and would change in composition depending on the project they were organising and who was willing to take on the work to bring the project into reality. Another respondent in another area said they reviewed reports from the activities that were happening locally, as well as reviewing the progress of grants, and would take decisions by voting.

All Steering Groups bar one said that they meet regularly. The largest Steering Group holds open meetings and encourages new members to come along, where they discuss all existing and new projects and make decisions on them. They also encourage the input of children and young people through regular staff and volunteer discussions with their children’s group. This is then fed into the Steering Group.

#### What works well for Steering Groups?

**Welcoming culture encourages more people along**. The respondent in one area said that they cultivated an especially welcoming, open, and friendly atmosphere, which meant that anyone could come along with any idea they had. This was particularly advantageous for getting new people to come along to the meetings.

*[The] open nature of the group means people can come along if they want to raise a particular idea of issue. [There is] no sense of exclusion as everyone, especially new faces, are made to feel welcome and are valued.*

**Ensuring the Steering Group has representation from other structures**. In another area, the respondent said that having representation from their “sub-groups” on the steering committee meant that they had a better overview of the project, with people being able to relay first-hand experience of project delivery in the meetings.

*Having residents on the SG who are involved through a sub-group has made a big difference as they understand the support we offer first hand.*

**Making decisions about money engages members**. The respondent in one area said that deciding on funding applications was a particularly engaging responsibility of the Steering Group, echoing past reports that decisions over money are seen as particularly important for the communities in which the projects are situated.

*Making decisions on community chest funding applications.*

**Changing membership to overcome organisational paralysis**. Sometimes the composition of working groups is not conducive to effective organisation and can lead to the stagnation of the project. When this happens, an organisational “shake up” and the recruitment of new members is sometimes perceived as necessary.

*‘It needs a shake up. New dynamic members recruited recently and the potential to take over the portfolio of the failed transport sub-group will I hope make it a more useful body that can steer the LC, rather than being like a board of directors voting on changes.*

#### Challenges for Steering Groups

Steering groups faced a range of challenges, including getting people to take on a wider range of responsibilities, the incapacitation of individuals through personal issues, the diversion of support staff to deal with urgent crises, struggles to understand project budgets, and residents’ lack of confidence to get more involved.

**Getting people to take on a wider range of responsibilities can be difficult**. In one area the respondent said that individuals on the Steering Group would focus their time and energy on things that were of most interest to them, which could lead to individuals pursuing their own agenda as opposed to the collective interest.

*Some members are only interested in things that directly impact their group or area of interest.*

**Key individuals can become incapacitated through personal issues**. The respondent in another area said that active Steering Group members sometimes face constant personal and family challenges, which can reduce their involvement in the Steering Group. Their absences can diminish morale amongst the remaining members.

*The ongoing challenge for us is the complexity of the lives of our community members. We have seen how strong, active and strategic members of the group can quickly become diminished by personal and family challenges. This has a knock on effect on other members and local people – sometimes maintaining a sense of optimism and hope is sadly very difficult.*

**Energy of supporting paid staff is diverted to address immediate crises**. Similarly, because of the increasingly tough socio-economic situations of people in the Local Conversations, staff time and energy are often diverted away from building a sustainable Steering Group and redirected to assisting local people in times of constant crisis. This leads to staff burnout.

*Our staff play a key role in maintaining a “can do” attitude. However, the increasing one to one support staff are having to provide due to increasing socio-economic challenges is putting staff under increasing pressure. Consequently, we are putting in place clinical support sessions for all of our community project staff.*

**A lack of confidence amongst residents can dissuade them from taking on larger roles**. Residents often do not yet have the personal confidence needed to feel empowered to take on more responsibility. This means they often defer to organisational staff, rather than take initiative.

*Building confidence in our residents has been a big barrier, empowering them to not seek out affirmation from LC staff, but to drive us instead has been a challenge. A vast majority of our residents have been unemployed and not used to being in a role of responsibility.*

**Managing budgets is difficult**. Finally, the respondent in one area said that the management of budgets was especially challenging, with residents sometimes finding it hard to understand the budget, which can throw a project off track.

*Understanding the overall budgets and ensuring that they remain focused on their main priorities.*

## Informal structures

Of the four areas that responded, two respondents said they had a well-established informal group for local people to get involved in controlling the direction of the Local Conversation, and two respondents said that they were still developing them. In one area, the respondent said that their Steering Group regularly holds open meetings where anyone from the local area can come. A respondent in another area said that local residents are involved in some aspect of the locality planning, and another said that they have ad hoc meetings with other local groups outside of the Local Conversation to get their input on the direction of their project.

#### What has worked well?

**Informal structures provide an opportunity to influence**. Interestingly, in one area the respondent said that their ad hoc meetings with local decision-makers constituted an informal structure, where they could attempt to influence local decision-makers including the local authority. They said that there was an informal group focused on “locality planning”, which has just started and is “still finding their feet”. They did not say exactly how the informal structure helped with the influencing process.

*…making links with the local authority and challenging some decisions.*

**Opportunity to recruit more volunteers**. Another respondent in another area said that the informal structures created an alternative space where people could engage with the project and sign up as volunteers if they wanted to become more involved. The informality of the occasions, for example ad hoc coffee mornings, created alternative and more relaxed spaces, which allowed Local Conversation staff to have general conversations with people not yet involved in the wider Local Conversation.

*Recruitment of volunteers to take part in the LC.*

#### What challenges have they faced?

**Hostility from local established groups.** The respondent in one Local Conversationarea said that other local groups had felt that the Local Conversation project had encroached on their space. However, they have since attempted to resolve this by directly funding those groups and engaging with them more regularly.

*There is a sense that we are planting flags on other lawns. To overcome we have engaged and awarded funding to other groups.*

**Negative attitudes of other groups and individuals can adversely affect Local Conversation members**. Similarly, the respondent in another area said that they received negative feedback when meeting with other local groups and individuals. This negativity adversely affects members of the Local Conversation and their interest in the project can wane.

*Sometimes groups and individuals can be negative and suppress potential interest from members.*

## Sub-Groups and Action Groups

The Local Conversations were asked whether they had any sub-groups or action groups for local people to lead on specific priority areas or activities. Of the four people who responded, one said that they did not have any, and another said they did not yet have any but were planning to set some up. Two respondents said they did have such groups, with one respondent saying their groups were well established.

The respondent from one of the areas with sub-groups and action groups said they have an environmental sub-group with 10 members that meets monthly, an independent group with 14 members which oversees grants and meets as and when needed, as well as three ‘hub’ sub-groups with their own leadership and plan. The ‘hub’ sub-groups also run many services, but the respondent did not specify what services were delivered by the sub-groups. They have also tried to set up a transport sub-group; however it failed to achieve a workable membership. The sub-groups report back to the Steering Group and an ”Independent Group”, which is mainly tasked with overseeing grants.

The other area had a wide range of sub-groups with high levels of membership, all of whom met on a weekly basis. Their sub-groups include a parent and toddler group with 25 members, a community events group with 10 members, a mental health group with 20 members, a “digital drop-in” with 10 members, and a knitting group with 26 members.

#### What works well?

**Active and independent sub-groups are more effective**. A respondent in one area said that their environmental group had become more independent and was actively requesting activities – although it was not specified who they were requesting those activities from or what they were. Their work has started to have influence over external groups, though details were not reported.

*The Environmental group has requested activities and is now finding its feet and beginning to have results.*

**Having representation from sub-groups on the Steering Group**. Some sub-groups are represented on the Steering Groups. This improves the effectiveness of both the Steering Group and the sub-groups, which are more likely to align their actions with the Local Conversation’s core strategy.

*What has worked well is having those running these groups on our Steering Group as they have a good understanding of what the local conversations is aiming to achieve.*

#### What challenges did they face?

**A lack of interest in specific focus of sub-groups can make them ineffective**. A respondent in one area said that their transport sub-group lacked adequate membership to operate. As such, they have responded by planning to merge the transport sub-group with the Steering Group, to involve a larger group of people to carry out and preserve its functions.

*People aren't interested in joining the transport group. I plan to merge it with the Steering group, providing them with a reason to meet more often and undertake transport related work.*

**A dependence on leading individuals is a weakness**. The respondent from the other area said that they had found it challenging when the chair of a particular sub-group was unable to attend. The implication is that the chair has assumed a form of leadership that centralises responsibilities onto themselves, therefore making it harder for others in the group to pick up and learn new roles. This means that when the chair is absent, no one else is able to take their place.

*Getting a committee together to support running the group on a regular basis and to take over when the leader/chair isn't able to attend.*

### Grants panels

The Local Conversations were asked about grants panels. Of the four respondents, two said they had a well-established panel, one said that they had a developing one, and one said they did not have one yet but were planning to set one up.

In one of the two areas with a functioning grants panel, the respondent said they actively encourage people to apply for grants from the Local Conversation and the grants panel meets to discuss the merits of each application. They typically receive up to four applications a month and give grants of up to £500 to each group or individual.

The respondent in the second area with a well-established grants panel said the panel meets weekly and gives out grants of up to £500 or £1000 per group depending on whether the grant will be disbursed once or twice in the year. Prior to releasing grant application forms, they examine how the budget allocated for grant-giving will be distributed and decide on how they want to “format the form”. It was not specified what “format the form” means, but it is likely that it refers to deciding on the types of questions asked of those applying for the grants. They then conduct site visits and give feedback to the panel. After the grants are given out, the panel meets monthly to review and report on each group that received a grant.

In the area with a grants panel in development, the group meets to discuss and query the merits of each grant and vote on which to approve. The maximum grant amount was £2499, although they are planning to reduce it in line with other Local Conversation areas. They also aim to have the environmental sub-group disburse “micro-grants” for small pro-environmental projects in the near future.

#### What works well?

**Group discussions over awarding grants are engaging**. The respondent in one area said that the debates at grant-giving meetings are “‘robust” and enjoyable for the panel members, who are nervous about the importance of the decisions they are making.

*The discussions are robust. Despite some nervousness about making these decisions, the panel enjoys once their teeth are into it.*

**A steady membership means people are familiar with the process**. In another area the respondent said that keeping the same membership on the grants panel had allowed a sense of continuity, which meant that the panel was familiar with the potentially complicated process. This increases the panel’s effectiveness and capacity to act independently, as members are able to chair the meetings.

*Keeping the same members on the panel as they are familiar with the process and are able to chair the meetings.*

**Grants given to already existing groups can be more effective**. The respondent in the final area that had a grants panel recommended that grants be given to an already-constituted group for one-off projects but failed to explain why.

*Already constituted groups doing one off projects, such as gardening or trips away for older folks.*

#### What challenges did they face?

**Insular communities can be a barrier to progress**. In one area the respondent said that the insular culture in some local communities had posed a challenge to the operation of the grants panel, although they did not expand on this. They have tried to overcome the challenge by recruiting from across communities, but the issue remains.

*There is a certain parochial attitude between the communities. I tried to address it by recruiting widely, but no shows can throw the balance off.*

**Some groups in receipt of grants failed to report back**. A respondent in another area said it was difficult to get groups or individuals in receipt of grants to report back on their progress, despite this being a condition of the grant itself.

*Having groups report back on their activities.*

## Other formal structures

The Local Conversations were asked whether or not they had any other formal structures aside from those previously mentioned (egSteering Groups) for local people to get involved in controlling the direction of the Local Conversation. No respondents said they had additional structures and only one said they were planning to set some up but failed to provide more details.

## Leadership

### Identifying and supporting leaders

**Local Conversations staff should support, not lead.** In five out of six areas, respondents said they actively encouraged their staff to support the development of local projects, but not to actively lead on them. This enables residents to assume greater responsibilities and shape the development of the project.

*By modelling good behaviour and involving local people in activities and events that help develop their confidence and skills. Our Community Development Worker endeavours to support without leading - helping local people to recognise the project belongs to them and their own potential in making it a success.*

*Allowing individual community connectors to exercise individual agency and make decisions regarding projects.*

*Our residents are supported in taking control of their own areas of interest.*

**Using Steering Groups as a steppingstone**. One group said that they designed their Steering Groups such that Steering Group members would have a comprehensive understanding of how the Local Conversation is run. This would ensure that all residents would have the necessary knowledge about a project to assume more leadership.

*The level of information discussed at the Steering Group enables people to have an in depth understanding of the LC and to be ambassadors for the project.*

**Peer mentoring**. In one area, the respondent noted that they had noticed that residents who have taken on positions of leadership and responsibility were using their time and skills to mentor and support other residents to do the same.

*Following support, we are also seeing a number of our local people mentoring others - both within our own project and within other projects of the Charity.*

**Residents shadowing staff**. The respondent in one area said that they encouraged emerging leaders to attend meetings with people in positions of power. They did not specify who the people in positions of power were, but it is possible that they include local councillors, judging by the respondent’s answers to questions about influencing. Attending meetings with people in positions of power allows potential local leaders to build confidence, to access networks of power and to learn through observation how to engage in those spaces.

*Strong voices are emerging from new people to the area, and I'm taking some to meet with people in power and new organisers.*

**Training for residents helps boost confidence**. Finally, the respondent in one area said that they provided training for leaders they had identified, particularly training which focused on boosting their confidence (although they did not specify the particulars of the training). This is important, as many areas cite residents’ lack of confidence as a barrier to greater and deeper engagement in the Local Conversation. These types of training enable more residents to have the tools and ability to impose themselves in public spaces and take on more leadership.

*They are upskilled with training and confidence boosting tactics and are given a place to have their voices and ideas heard.*

### Barriers and solutions to identifying and supporting leaders

**Strong characters can be divisive***.* The respondent in one area said that they had a number of big personalities in their group who often had differences of opinions, which was proving divisive. They have attempted to diffuse these issues through skilful facilitation from Local Conversation staff, and they say that things have improved recently. They held a facilitated political discussion among their members in order to identify different political views, and to address them in a direct and convivial way. That discussion led the group to agree on a set of “Family Values”, from which people can hold each other to account.

*Sometimes it can be challenging for our staff as there are many strong characters with differences of opinion. Our Community Development Worker is a skilled facilitator and ensures everyone is heard and that democratic decisions are made. Our staff sometimes have to smooth relations and understanding outside of meetings. However, over the course of the LC the need for this is decreasing.*

**Personal circumstance can leave residents unable to take up leadership roles**. Residents’ life circumstances can act as a barrier to leadership, particularly if they suffer poor health and do not have the capacity to take on time-intensive leadership roles. They have tried to address this issue through being flexible and changing meeting times and places to accommodate people’s lives and needs.

*Life and health can get in the way for Local Residents.*

**Unrealistic ambitions of potential leaders can be problematic**. Finally, respondents in two areas experienced difficulties in tempering the expectations of potential leaders, who wanted to do something that is either at odds with the priorities of the Local Conversation, or wildly unrealistic in what could be achieved in a short space of time. Both areas said they would overcome these challenges by redirecting the energy and enthusiasm these individuals have towards ideas or projects that are more achievable and sustainable.

*It is difficult sometimes to support residents if you can foresee that they want support for the wrong reasons or that their ideas are maybe over reaching and impossible to achieve in a short time scale. It is hard sometimes to rein in ideas and concentrate them.*

*…difficulty with keeping perspective.*

### Support in overcoming barriers

The respondents were asked what type of support they would like to more effectively address the barriers discussed. The respondent in one area said they would like to see an example of best practice, while another would be grateful for external groups and individuals to help them address negative stereotypes of and bias against different communities.

**Challenging stereotypes**. The respondent in one area said they would continue to put on events and facilitate discussions with the aim of actively challenging negative stereotypes, especially around race and nationality. The presence of and assistance from other organisations in partnering with the Local Conversation in these facilitated political discussions and supporting activities was perceived as very important. This was partly because some of the individuals and organisations brought in to help with these discussions were themselves “non-white British”, which helped to challenge racist stereotypes in the area.

*We will be continuing our activities to bring different people together so they can learn about differences and commonalities. We also plan further facilitated political discussions and supporting activities. Additionally, some of our partner providers and volunteers are “'non-white British” - this also helps challenge stereotypes.*

**An example of best practice**. The respondent in the other area requested an example of a successful and sustainable Local Conversation project so that they could learn from examples of best practice.

*Demonstration of how this project can develop into a sustainable self-fulfilling entity.*

## Influence

Only four organisations responded to questions around influence. All four respondents said they had actively attempted to influence powerful local people and organisations through the Local Conversation, and that the influencing work aligned with their local priorities. Two respondents said that influencing would be particularly effective for the environmental work they are engaged in, for example through attempting to influence a local Lost Peatlands pilot project with shared aims with the environmental group, in providing a ”managed wilderness”, which would bring in tourists, as well as benefit those already living in the area.

One area had attempted to influence local councillors, Natural Resources Wales, the local council, and the Lost Peatlands Project. Another area had sought to influence the NHS, local politicians, local schools, the police, local GP surgeries, and local businesses. According to the respondent in one area, they had only attempted to influence their local authority. Finally, the respondent in one area gave a more detailed response, saying that they enjoy a strong positive partnership with public sector organisations, including the council, a housing company and local schools.

### Methods of seeking influence

**Convivial meetings**. The respondent in one area said they always actively attempt to influence powerful people and organisations. They meet up one-to-one and have friendly discussions and actively avoid confrontation. Successes include their housing company's agreement to pick up a hefty repairs bill despite it being the lead organisation’s responsibility under the terms of the lease.

*Our ethos is all about sitting down with people, whoever they are, to talk about the issues and identify solutions. Our approach is coffee and cake rather than confrontation.*

**Influence through practice**. In two areas respondents have said that they have sought to influence local decision-makers through providing examples of community-led projects, for example a mental health drop-in project. These examples are either adopted by other local organisations, or they improve the reputation of the Local Conversation in the eyes of those power holders, particularly local politicians. One of the results of this approach is that the Local Conversation is consulted on other projects, including national ones such as Natural Resources Wales. This approach has also seemed to improve the Local Conversation’s relationships with local councillors, but concrete results are not yet apparent.

*Improving the area to influence Councillors. Getting in on the ground floor with major new projects from NRW and LP and giving residents a direct voice on them.*

*The let’s talk mental health drop in has influenced the NHS and local doctors’ surgeries as well as politicians to think about the shortfall in MH services in the town. Local school in the area as well as the police have attended anti-social behaviour surgeries to reduce crime in the locality.*

**Attending open forums**. The respondent in one area said they aimed to influence the local authority through attending the councillor forums. As a result, councillors have taken on requests brought by the Local Conversation and fulfilled their promises. However, the respondent did not provide any more information or examples detailing what the councillors did.

*Directly having a councillors’ forum.*

### Building on influence

**Influencing broader social and economic issues**. In one area the respondent said that influencing people in positions of power was especially important for addressing the structural inequalities which define the lived reality of their communities, and especially the impact of austerity. Those decisions are not made locally but are part of a national political framework and have a tangible impact on local communities. Aside from austerity, the respondent did not give any more details of the macro-economic problems the community suffered from.

*We find individual representatives of those in power locally are understanding of the challenges faced by our community and willing to work with us to think about and deliver new ways of doing things. The challenge from my point of view is two pronged - informing macro rather than micro change. And the impact of austerity measures.*

**Invite councillors to join the Steering Group**. Another group suggested inviting councillors to join the Steering Group and become active members of the Local Conversation as a way to further build influence.

*Could invite councillors to join the forum and have their input into the projects.*

**Turning the Steering Group into a path through which residents can influence powerful people**. The respondent in one area said that eventually they would like their Steering Group to be seen as a resource for residents to raise issues about changes they wanted to see and have enough clout to influence those with power to try and enact those desired changes.

*A feedback loop so that residents can use the forum as a vehicle to make things happen – they can approach the forum with confidence that action will be taken.*

**Getting the Local Conversation onto the decision-making bodies of other organisations**. Finally, one respondent in a Local Conversation area thought that it should build influence through actively seeking out larger projects and attaining a degree of decision-making power within them.

*I hope to work with the CVS on the long gestating overarching body for the valley and give the LC a seat at the table if and when it goes live.*

## Vision, aims, and principles

When asked whether they were clear about the vision, aims, and principles of the Local Conversations programme, two areas that responded said they strongly agreed with the statement, and two areas said they agreed with it, therefore indicating a high degree of clarity over the Local Conversation’s vision, aims, and principles. The respondent in one area said that they initially did not understand what the Local Conversation was trying to do and saw a lot of it as “unnecessary bureaucracy”. However, after the first few months and after their induction, they realised the importance of some of the bureaucratic processes associated with the programme. The respondent did not provide any details of these bureaucratic processes.

The Local Conversation areas were asked whether they thought the residents involved in the Local Conversation were clear about the programme’s vision, aims, and principles (Figure 2). There was a broad spread of opinion, with one respondent each strongly agreeing, agreeing, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or disagreeing. The respondent that neither disagreed or agreed expanded, saying “some residents are just not interested” in the aims and principles, while another respondent that disagreed said that volunteers often do not see the difference between the Local Conversation and other grant programmes.

The respondents were also asked whether or not they agreed that the Local Conversation in their neighbourhood had developed a widely shared vision for what it is trying to achieve locally. Two respondents strongly agreed, one respondent agreed, and another respondent disagreed. The respondent in the area that disagreed said that there has been a history of grant organisations operating in the area and residents have understandably confused and conflated them.

## The future

### Hopes for the next year

**Train more individuals**. In one area, the respondent said they hoped that over the next year they would be able to help move more residents into training, education, and employment, which they identified as a key measure for success.

**Increase levels of control for residents**. Another respondent in another area said that they wanted to focus on enabling more residents to assume greater responsibility and control of the Local Conversation.

**Build influence locally**. The respondents in all three areas who gave further details said they wanted to build on the work they had been doing with the formal structures and sub-groups and continue to increase their independence so that they could exert more power and influence locally.

*To be the predominant forum in the locale with agency and authority.*

*I'm very happy with the progress of the Environmental group and want us to continue to gain influence in this area and set up long-term positive projects.*

*We would want to continue to grow and maintain connections with partners to help make our community a happier and healthier place to live.*

### Support needed for long-term change

**Changes in wider economy needed**. In one area the respondent said that they would need a boost to the local economy for the project to become more sustainable. Specifically, more local jobs were needed to allow for more money to circulate locally, therefore boosting the local economy and the lives of the residents.

*More jobs would mean more money coming into the local community.*

**Clearer brand recognition**. In another area the respondent said that they would need the Local Conversation “brand” to become more recognisable and distinct from the multitude of other local projects that have preceded or operate alongside it. The type of support was not specified, however.

*Creating brand awareness of the LC separate from the other schemes.*

### Final thoughts

The respondent in one area wanted to make clear that they found answering the survey quite challenging because of the “‘unusual multi-site nature” of their area, but they did not elaborate on what they meant.

Finally, another respondent said that they thought Local Conversations is “a fantastic programme, long may it continue.”

# Annex 10. Residents’ survey analysis: waves 1–6

## Key points

* Since 2017, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) has conducted a biannual survey of residents in Local Conversation areas focusing on views of the local area, health and wellbeing outcomes, and opinions about the Local Conversation project itself. We have analysed the responses focussing on change over time and compared results with outcomes from the Community Life Survey (CLS) and the National Survey for Wales (NSW).
* We analysed six waves, including a total of 2,852 responses from 21 Local Conversation areas. The demographic diversity of respondents increased between the first year and the third year.
* Views of the local area expressed by Local Conversations respondents differed from English and Welsh averages. Residents in Local Conversation areas have similar levels of satisfaction with the place they live in compared to the average for England but are lower than Wales overall. Residents in Local Conversation areas have lower levels of satisfaction with local services than both national averages for England and Wales. The views of Local Conversations respondents on outcomes relating to sense of community and the neighbourhood were more positive than the average for England.
* Local Conversation respondents reported similar levels of wellbeing compared to the averages for England, lower levels than the averages for Wales, but higher than the averages for comparable deprived areas in England.
* Local Conversations respondents reported lower levels of general health compared to averages for England, Wales, and deprived areas in England.
* Over time, there was a decline in general health and wellbeing indicators across the Local Conversation areas. This decline was more prominent for women and is consistent with findings from the 2020 Marmot Review, which shows the disproportionate negative impact of austerity on health, wellbeing, and health inequalities in deprived areas.
* Residents’ views on the Local Conversation project were favourable across a number of indicators, in particular being able to have a say in developing the project, gaining increased confidence due to participating in various activities, learning new skills, and developing new friendships.

## Methodology

The Local Conversations residents’ survey includes three kinds of questions:

* Demographic questions to find out who is taking part in the Local Conversations and how they are involved.
* Questions asking participants’ opinions of the Local Conversation project and the difference they think it is making.
* Questions about outcomes, which can be tracked over time.

The outcome questions are taken mainly from the Cabinet Office’s annual CLS, which provides official statistics on issues related to social action, community empowerment and engagement, volunteering, giving, and wellbeing.

The CLS questions were chosen to make national data available as a comparator to the Local Conversations residents’ survey data. The CLS uses a nationally representative sample of more than 10,000 adults over the age of 16, resident in England. This document mainly compares the outcomes of Local Conversations with the CLS outcomes for 20182019, while also looking at 2016/2017 outcomes to capture trends over time. In other words, this report compares the CLS findings from 2016/2017 and 2018/2019 with the Local Conversations Survey from 2017 to 2020.

The Local Conversations residents’ survey includes areas in Wales and Scotland. This limits CLS findings as a comparator given that the CLS only captures outcomes for England. Where the exact same questions are used, this report also includes outcomes from the annual NSW as a comparator with the Local Conversations survey. The NSW uses a nationally representative sample of over 11,000 respondents above the age of 16, resident in Wales. Although the Scottish Household Survey covers similar topics, its questions are worded differently and are therefore not used in this analysis.

The Local Conversations residents’ survey was administered by self-completion online and in paper form. Over the same six-week period,local lead organisations facilitating Local Conversations in all areas were asked to distribute online survey links or paper surveys to every resident they came into contact with as part of the Local Conversation. Paper surveys were posted back to NEF for data entry and analysis.

Where possible, the current analysis compares data from Local Conversations Waves 1–6 with overall national CLS data, NSW data, and the national CLS data restricted to those living in areas with comparable levels of disadvantage. The previous reports categorised these as areas in the bottom 30% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The 2018/2019 CLS data looks at IMD in quintiles rather than deciles, for which this report looks at the bottom 20% of the IMD. When we restrict the CLS to comparable levels of disadvantage, the sample size reduces to around 2,500. This necessary adjustment makes it a weaker comparator, as Local Conversation areas fall in the bottom 30% of the IMD.

This survey approach has a number of limitations:

* **Non-random sample.** The Local Conversations sample is not random and therefore not necessarily representative of all Local Conversations participants.[[15]](#footnote-15)
* **The cohort of residents participating in each survey wave is not the same.** Although survey responses are anonymised and there is no record of all Local Conversations participants, it is highly unlikely that the same cohort of residents responding to the survey is consistent from wave to wave.
* **The Local Conversations survey is hard to compare with the CLS and the NSW**. Unlike the Local Conversations survey, CLS and NSW use a representative sample of a geographical area. The CLS and NSW only cover England and Wales, whereas the Local Conversations residents’ survey also includes neighbourhoods in Scotland.
* **Participation bias**. Anecdotally, some leads said that they avoided giving the survey to people they thought might be “put off” by it. This is particularly the case in areas of deprivation where people may be less comfortable with reading and writing or using a computer.
* **Response bias**. Despite efforts to enable anonymised responding, the circumstances of answering surveys in each local area are unknown. Those less comfortable with reading and writing might have received help from members of staff, biasing their responses.

The following analysis is a descriptive look at the first six waves of the survey, which were administered six months apart. Where individuals responded in more than one wave, we have included only their most recent response, to avoid counting them as multiple people. When looking at change over time, multiple responses by an individual have been included in the analysis.

As this is the final year of evaluation, we conducted further analysis of changes over time on reported health outcomes. This includes a regression analysis of the relationships between variables. For this analysis, waves 1 and 2 and 5 and 6 are compared, respectively, with 2016/2017 and 2018/2019 CLS outcomes.

One key change emerging from our more in-depth analysis is that we have changed the classification for reported health. Previous reports noted that health outcomes were significantly worse for the Local Conversations residents’ survey. Further investigation highlighted that the order of the multiple choice answers in the Local Conversations survey differed slightly from those in the CLS s, which could have skewed the results, suggesting better health outcomes for CLS respondents compared to Local Conversations residents. This is explained further in the section on *Health over time*.

### Interpretation

Differences between our sample and population averages could result from differences in the nature of the areas chosen for Local Conversations funding, or differences in the kind of people who are likely to engage with local initiatives such as Local Conversations. For example, people who are well connected locally and are dissatisfied with the situation where they live may be likelier to have the motivation and ability to engage with Local Conversations. Differences could also be a result of participation in Local Conversations up to this point.

A number of the graphs presented include error bars – black vertical lines at the top of the coloured bars. These are a standard tool in statistics and are used because we only surveyed a sample of Local Conversations participants. Our sample of participants indicates what the results of all Local Conversations participants are likely to be, but because we have not surveyed every person, we do not know the real results for all Local Conversation participants. Error bars tell us how confident we can be that the results of our sample are an accurate reflection of all participants.

In the comparison between Local Conversation results and national averages in the graphs, if the error bars do not overlap, this means that the differences between Local Conversations participants and the average for people in England are unlikely to be the result of chance.[[16]](#footnote-16) If the error bars do overlap, even if the coloured bars look like there is a difference, we cannot be sure that this difference is not just the result of chance.

### Who responded?

We received a total of 2,488 responses from 21 Local Conversation areas for waves 1–6 of the residents’ survey (Table A10.1). Around 220 individuals were identified as completing the survey in multiple waves. For the purposes of this overall analysis, we have counted only their most recent wave responses to avoid double counting them.

*Table 1: Response by Local Conversations area*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Area** | **Total number of respondents** |
| Bingham and Magdalene | 120 |
| Caia Park | 289 |
| Claremont Ten | 84 |
| Gainsborough | 16 |
| Govanhill | 137 |
| Haverhill | 81 |
| Higher Croft | 133 |
| Holyhead | 138 |
| Kirkley | 118 |
| Longbenton | 203 |
| Lozells | 45 |
| Merstham | 112 |
| Muirhouse | 66 |
| Netherfield | 211 |
| Northam | 141 |
| Old Fold and Nest | 87 |
| Penparcau | 107 |
| Sparkbrook | 74 |
| St Mary's | 114 |
| Stanwell | 92 |
| Upper Afan Valley | 120 |
| **Grand Total** | **2488** |

## Who participates in Local Conversations and how?

This section describes who responded to the Local Conversations survey (see Annex 11 for more detail).

* **Gender:** The majority of survey respondents are female (65% of non-missing responses), followed by 34% male, and 1% who prefer not to say.
* **Ethnicity.** 70% of the survey respondents describe themselves as White/White British. This is followed by Asian/Asian British (8%).
* **Age.** There is an even split across the age categories 22–34, 35–44, and 65+ years old, with each of those representing about 20% of responses. Those aged 16–21 have the fewest responses (6% of all responses).
* **Sexuality**. Most respondents identified as heterosexual or straight (74%), with 1.9% identifying as gay or lesbian, and 1.5% identifying as bisexual. The number of missing responses is 16%, and 5.9% preferred not to specify their sexuality.
* **Employment status**. Most respondents are working full- or part-time (38%), followed by those who are retired (22%), or not working due to sickness or disability (13%).
* **Education.** 31% of respondents have an O Level/GCSE or NVQ Level 1 or 2 as their highest level of education. This is closely followed by those who have no recognised qualification (24%). Another 15% each have either a university degree or A/AS level/ NQV level 3, 4, or 5 as their highest qualification.
* **Length of residence**. 64% of respondents had lived in their local area for more than 10 years when answering the survey.[[17]](#footnote-17) The results suggest that large-scale changes in population were unlikely to be skewing our results.
* **Disability.** 75% of respondents reported having no disability, while 20% did, and 5% preferred not to say.

Comparing averages for the first year (waves 1 and 2) with averages for the final year (waves 5 and 6), we can see signs of increased diversity across most of the abovementioned categories:

* **Gender.** There is a higher proportion of men responding to the survey, increasing from 31% of respondents to 35%.
* **Ethnicity.** The proportion of White/White British respondents has decreased from 85% to 71%, while all other ethnic groups have increased from 7.6% to 20%.
* **Age.** There have been two small decreases in the proportions of the two most dominant age groups: those aged 65+ (24% to 20%) and those aged 22–34 (21% to 18%). Those aged under 21 increased from 9.3% to 16%.
* **Sexuality.** There is slightly higher proportion of gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual respondents, increasing from 3.1% to 4%.
* **Employment status.** There has been a small decrease in the proportion of respondents who work full- or part-time (39% to 37%) and an increase in the proportion of respondents not working due to sickness or disability (11% to 14%).
* **Education.** There has been a decrease in the proportion of respondents with GCSEs (39% to 30%) and with A levels (18% to 16%). Those reporting no recognised qualifications have increased (18% to 26%), as have those with university degrees (14% to 15%).
* **Length of residence.** There has been an increase in the proportion of people that have lived in the neighbourhood for less than 10 years (31% to 36%).

Changes in demographics will partly explain this evolution of survey results over time. For example, if the sample ages between surveys, you would expect an older cohort to have worse health outcomes. Where possible, these factors will be considered in the analysis of change over time.

Survey respondents are involved in Local Conversations to varying degrees. Most take part in project activities and events (44%), 23% are Steering Group members, and 21% are volunteers. The survey over-represents Steering Group members, since staff leading the Local Conversations often have the strongest and most trusting relationships with these residents and are responsible for administering the survey.

The demographic profiles of Steering Group members, volunteers, and participants are broadly similar. The largest share of those who have been involved with Local Conversations for two years or longer are Steering Group members. Asian/Asian British participants are underrepresented in Steering Groups compared to other ethnic groups, with the exception of one Local Conversation, which is in an area that has a larger Asian/Asian British population. Annex 12 contains a detailed demographic breakdown of the survey by group of respondents.

### Wellbeing, health, and attitudes of participants

This section reports findings on the wellbeing, health, and attitudes of Local Conversations participants. Where possible, the analysis compares survey responses with CLS and NSW data.

Figures 1 to 18 include ‘error bars’ – black vertical lines at the top of the coloured bars that indicate the degree of possible error in the data they present.

### Views on the local area

Around 75% of respondents are satisfied with their local area as a place to live (Figure 1). This is comparable to England-wide averages, and significantly higher than for areas with similar levels of deprivation. However, compared to Wales-wide averages it is significantly lower. Local Conversations respondents reported lower satisfaction with local services and amenities than three comparators. The error bars confirm that this is a statistically significant difference for England-wide and Wales-wide averages (Figure 2).

Of Local Conversations participants surveyed, 46% reported talking to their neighbours on most days, significantly more than the average for England (Figure 3). They also reported significantly stronger feelings of neighbourhood belonging (81%) than England-wide averages and averages for those living in deprived areas (Figure4). These are similar findings to the last report, and the question remains as to whether there is a greater likelihood that people with higher levels of social connectedness are more likely to get involved in the Local Conversation projects, or whether the Local Conversation projects*cause* people to feel more connected?

It could also be the case that higher levels of social connectedness partially explain why residents of Local Conversation areas display higher levels of satisfaction with their local areas. To answer this question, we would have needed to collect baseline data on levels of social connectedness from the Local Conversation areas prior to the initiation of the projects.

Interestingly, Local Conversations participants report significantly higher levels of neighbourhood trust (73%) than those living in deprived neighbourhoods in England, but the same level of trust as England overall (Figure 5). Most Local Conversations participants also agree that people from different backgrounds get on well together (84%), which is similar to the average for England (82%) and higher than the average for deprived areas in England (75%) (Figure 6).

On average, significantly more Local Conversations respondents agree that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood (76%) than in similarly deprived areas (47%), and in England as a whole (58%) (Figure 7).[[18]](#footnote-18) Local Conversations respondents were also significantly more likely to agree that when people in the area get involved in their local community, they really can change the way the area is run (82%, Figure 8).[[19]](#footnote-19)

### Wellbeing

Compared to England averages, Local Conversations participants had slightly higher scores for feeling what they do in life is worthwhile, for life satisfaction, and for lower levels of anxiety (Figure 9). Happiness was lower than the England averages but higher than the deprived areas in the country. At a statistically significant level, Local Conversations participants are more satisfied with life, less anxious, and more likely to feel that things they do in life are worthwhile, compared to averages for deprived areas in England. This may reflect how the higher levels of social connectedness in Local Conversation areas might improve, or mitigate against, stress and anxiety.[[20]](#footnote-20)It could also reflect how people with higher levels of social connectedness to begin with are likelier to participate in Local Conversations.

The fact that Local Conversations participants are significantly more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile could be a testament to how participation in the Local Conversations can instil a greater sense of purpose and belonging. This could contribute to increased perceptions of control, as people feel that not only are the things they do worthwhile, but they are also able to have a say in the things that matter to them. Coming together to engage in dialogue and decision-making can lead to collective action and an increase in collective control, which can improve wellbeing.

Meanwhile, in comparison with Wales averages, Local Conversations participants feel less happy, less satisfied, more anxious, and that the things they do are less worthwhile. Figure 9 also shows that there are higher national levels of wellbeing in Wales compared to England. It is worth noting that the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act of 2015 requires public bodies in Wales to consider the long-term impact of their decisions based around seven wellbeing goals.[[21]](#footnote-21) Further research on the impact of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act on Welsh people’s wellbeing could be useful to better understand how to design and implement an effective country-wide policy on wellbeing. These higher levels of wellbeing in Wales compared to England could also explain why Local Conversations participants perform significantly better than deprived areas in England, as over a quarter Local Conversations respondents include participants in Wales.

Mean wellbeing scores alone, however, disguise the different distributions of wellbeing. Figures 10–13 show the distribution of wellbeing in four categories. There are broadly similar distributions for the positive wellbeing questions, although compared to England averages, Local Conversation areas reported significantly higher levels of “very high” wellbeing, other than for levels of happiness. Residents in Local Conversation areas also appear to be significantly less anxious overall compared to respondents in England. As with Figure 9, Local Conversation areas have significantly lower levels of wellbeing in comparison to respondents in Wales.

The majority of Local Conversations respondents (64%) report high or very high levels of power to change important things in their lives (Figure 14). There is currently no nationally available data to compare to this finding. However, this is worth investigating further, given that a sense of control is critical to maintain positive subjective wellbeing.

Figure 15 shows the results of a question on the extent to which Local Conversations participants feel they have people on whom they can rely in times of need. Local Conversation areas agree slightly less with the statement than the national averages, but it is a statistically significant difference.

### Health over time

Figure 16 shows that Local Conversations participants report slightly lower levels of good or very good health when compared to Wales and deprived areas in England. However, at a statistically significant level, Local Conversation respondents were almost twice as likely to report bad or very bad health relative to England average. Bad or very bad health for Local Conversations respondents was 15% higher compared to deprived areas in England but 10% lower compared to the Wales average.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Since the Local Conversation projects aim to improve residents’ health outcomes, it is possible to examine how these outcomes have changed over time. Comparing averages from the initial period (waves 2 and 3)[[23]](#footnote-23) with averages of the third year (waves 5 and 6), it is apparent that there has been a decline in those reporting good or very good health (from 67% to 62%), high/very high life satisfaction (69% to 59%), high/very high happiness (65% to 59%), and high/very high feelings of worthwhileness (71% to 68%). Slightly more Local Conversations respondents reported high/medium levels of anxiety (52% to 53%) in the third year compared to the first.

These figures only compare averages; they do not consider changes in demographics between survey cohorts or external factors that have an impact on health and wellbeing, and they do not necessarily mean that Local Conversation projects have caused worse health outcomes. One plausible explanation, for instance, is that the survey, and by extension the programme, is now reaching more diverse and marginalised groups, who may have lower levels of health and wellbeing to begin with. This finding is corroborated by the demographic results already highlighted.

It is also possible that over this time period, health in the UK declined overall, as suggested by the CLS where there was an increase in the proportion of respondents indicating bad or very bad health. This could be associated with a number of complex and interrelated factors such as decreased spending on healthcare and local services, increasing obesity rates, and an ageing population, which are now compounded by the effects of Covid-19.

We conducted further analysis to explore these potential effects more in-depth, using difference-in-difference regression. This is a common econometrics tool that allows us to look at the effect of a treatment or intervention (in this case, the Local Conversation project) by comparing results with those for individuals who did not receive the treatment or intervention (CLS responses).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Even when other variables are factored in, including age and ethnicity, Local Conversations participants experienced a greater deterioration in health between 2017 and 2019, which was more pronounced among women than men. Independently of the Local Conversation projects, and consistent with other research, results showed that reported health levels are lower in more deprived areas, for non-white ethnicities, and for older age groups. More detail on these findings, including the regressions, are outlined in Annex 13.

There are limitations to these findings. First of all, this type of model is based on the assumption that Local Conversation areas and residents across England were experiencing the same trends in health outcomes prior to the inception of the Local Conversation projects. This is unlikely to be the case, as Local Conversation areas were chosen because of their higher levels of deprivation and health inequalities. Furthermore, there is a high likelihood of sample bias in the Local Conversations survey, which would also mean the results might not be representative of the health trends for all residents of those areas. As mentioned previously, Local Conversation areas include neighbourhoods in Wales and Scotland, making CLS results an imperfect comparator.

It is still plausible that the Local Conversations programme is now reaching more diverse and marginalised groups that are not captured in these demographics, who may have lower levels of health and wellbeing. There was also an increase in the number of Local Conversations survey respondents who have been living in the area for less than 10 years. It is possible that they could have come from areas with lower levels of health.

Moreover, the model does not account for external factors that might have a greater influence on health outcomes in Local Conversation areas than in England as a whole. The updated Marmot Review found that over the past decade austerity has significantly contributed to the deterioration in life expectancy for people living in areas of high deprivation.[[25]](#footnote-25) Increasing inequalities in society, cuts to government spending, and real cuts to people’s incomes have led to health deteriorations, particularly among those in areas of high deprivation.

Cuts to government spending, especially to local authorities that provide services to improve wellbeing, were weighted towards more deprived areas. This aligns with the findings reported herein, where health outcomes have worsened in Local Conversation areas relative to the rest of England. It also supports the findings for rows 5–8 in Table A13.1 in Annex 13, where the more deprived an area is, the worse people’s reported health is.

Additional evidence from the updated Marmot Review corroborates and contextualises the reported decline in health among Local Conversations participants. The Marmot Review found that declines in life expectancy were more noticeable among women in deprived areas, and that regions in the North of England have been left behind while health has improved elsewhere in the country.[[26]](#footnote-26) Given that 65% of respondents to the Local Conversations survey were women, this could also explain why a decline in health is observed. Furthermore, a third of Local Conversation areas within England are in the north, again suggesting that health outcomes in those areas would be likely to be deteriorating at a higher rate than the England average.

### Participants’ views on theLocal Conversation project

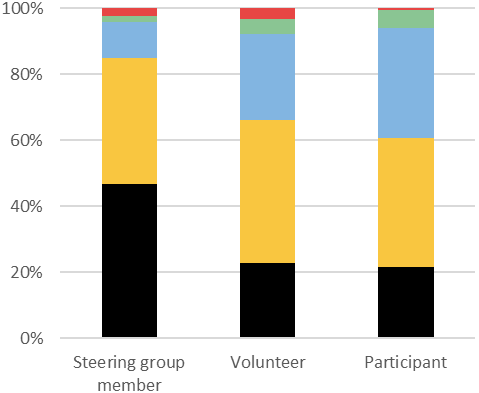
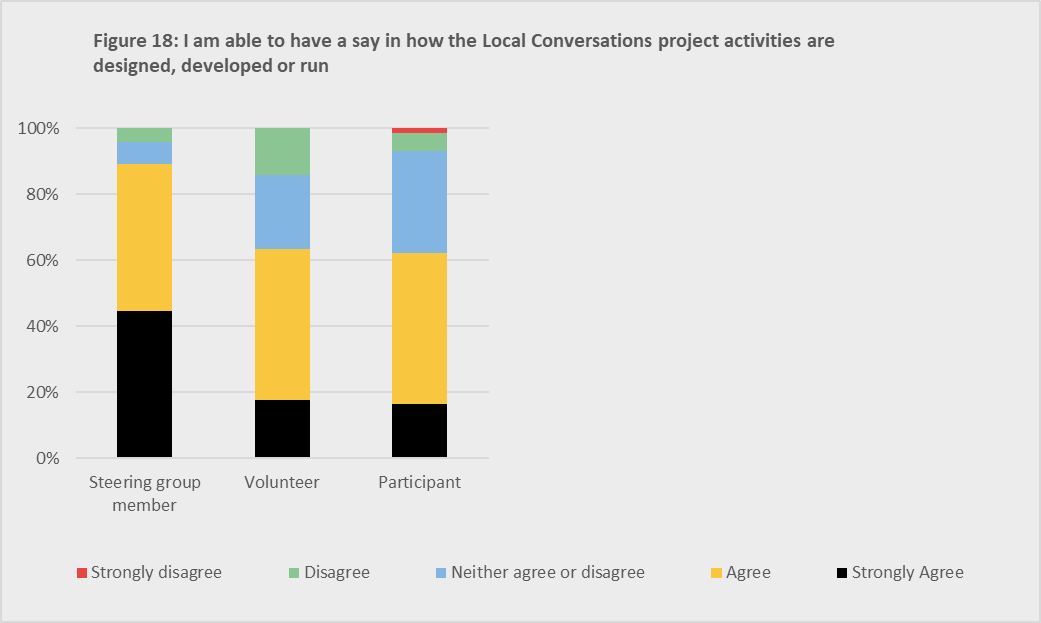
Results from the retrospective questions reflect very positive views on the Local Conversation projects (Figure 17). The majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they are able to have a say in how the Local Conversation project is designed, developed, and run; that the project has helped them feel more confident; helped them to develop and learn new skills; and enabled them to make new friendships. Non-response rates remained relatively high for these questions, perhaps because not everyone participating in the projects is aware that they fall under Local Conversations and so did not identify as participating in it.

The following graphs break these results down by level of involvement, comparing the first year (waves 1 and 2) to the third (waves 5 and 6), to see who benefitted the most from the Local Conversations over time. Compared to the first year, there was an increase across all levels of involvement in who strongly agreed that they were able to have a say in developing the project (Figure 18). This was more noticeable for volunteers and individuals who participated in activities.

There was also a substantial increase in the number of volunteers reporting that the project helped them feel more confident, with those who strongly agreed increasing from 18% to 33% (Figure 19). For both volunteers and participants in activities there was an increase in the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed that the project helped them learn and develop new skills (Figure 20). Similarly, there was an increase in the proportion who strongly agreed that they were making friends through the project (Figure 21). This is important because increased confidence and learning new skills can contribute to increased perceptions of control, which has been found to help improve wellbeing. Increased friendships can also strengthen social connectedness, which is another factor that contributes to higher wellbeing.

Steering group members saw the least change over time but remained the group that most strongly agreed that their confidence, skills and friendships had increased compared to volunteers and activity participants (Figures 18–21). This is not surprising, given that participation in Local Conversations is deepest among Steering Group members, who are more actively involved in shaping and running projects. Those whose participation is deeper experience greater breadth and depth in the positive outcomes, such as increased confidence, skills, and social connectedness. However, when agree and strongly agree are compounded, the responses are similar and mostly positive (around 70%) for all groups, with little change over time.

Local Conversations surveys, 2017-18



Local Conversations surveys, 2019-20

# Annex 11. Demographic breakdown of survey responses: waves 1–6

#### Table 1: Gender

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| Female | 1478 | 64.54% |
| Male | 785 | 34.28% |
| Prefer not to say | 24 | 1.05% |
| Prefer to self-describe | 3 | 0.13% |
| **Grand Total** | **2290** | **100.00%** |

#### Table 2: Ethnicity

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Ethnicity** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| Asian/Asian British | 195 | 7.8% |
| Black/African/Caribbean/Black British | 104 | 4.2% |
| Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups | 71 | 2.9% |
| Other ethnic group | 178 | 7.2% |
| White/White British | 1731 | 69.6% |
| Missing | 209 | 8.3% |
| **Grand Total** | **2488** | **100.0%** |

#### Table 3: Age Group

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Age Group** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| <16 | 210 | 10.4% |
| 16–21 | 116 | 5.7% |
| 22–34 | 399 | 19.7% |
| 35–44 | 369 | 18.2% |
| 45–54 | 287 | 14.2% |
| 55–64 | 258 | 12.7% |
| 65+ | 385 | 19.1% |
| **Grand Total** | **2024** | **100.0%** |

#### Table 4: Sexual orientation

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Sexual Orientation** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| Bisexual | 28 | 1.5% |
| Gay or lesbian | 35 | 1.9% |
| Heterosexual or straight | 1367 | 74.4% |
| Prefer not to say | 109 | 5.9% |
| Prefer to self-describe (please specify) | 1 | 0.1% |
| Missing | 298 | 16.2% |
| **Grand Total** | **1838** | **100.00%** |

#### Table 5: Employment

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Employment Status** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| In full-time education | 57 | 3.0% |
| Not working due to sickness or disability | 254 | 13.4% |
| Retired | 422 | 22.3% |
| Unemployed but seeking work | 208 | 11.0% |
| Unpaid family worker (egstay-at-home parent, maternity leave, caring for a relative) | 219 | 11.6% |
| Volunteer | 6 | 0.3% |
| Working full- or part-time | 726 | 38.4% |
| **Grand Total** | **1892** | **100.0%** |

#### Table 6: Education

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Highest level of education** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| A trade apprenticeship | 101 | 5.5% |
| A university degree | 273 | 14.9% |
| No recognised qualification | 437 | 23.8% |
| O Level/GCSE or NVQ Level 1 or 2 | 567 | 30.9% |
| Other qualification (including overseas) | 161 | 8.8% |
| A/AS level or NVQ Level 3, 4 or 5 | 297 | 16.1% |
| **Grand Total** | **1836** | **100.00%** |

#### Table 7: Length of residency

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Length of Residency** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| <10 years | 744 | 36.2% |
| >10 years | 1314 | 63.8% |
| **Grand Total** | **2058** | **100.0%** |

#### Table 8: Disability

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Row Labels** | **Count** | **Percentage** |
| Yes | 464 | 20.5% |
| No | 1691 | 74.7% |
| Prefer not to say | 108 | 4.8% |
| **Grand Total** | **2263** | **100.00%** |

# Annex 12. Demographic breakdown by project involvement

*Table 1: Demographic breakdown by project involvement*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level of Involvement** | | **Steering Group Member** | | **Volunteer** | **Participant** |
| **Gender** | Female | | 432 | 353 | 640 |
| Male | | 211 | 180 | 351 |
| Prefer not to say | | 4 | 3 | 10 |
| Prefer to self-describe | | 1 |  |  |
| **Age** | <16 | | 24 | 25 | 127 |
| 16–21 | | 17 | 26 | 44 |
| 22–34 | | 77 | 82 | 153 |
| 35–44 | | 76 | 80 | 149 |
| 45–54 | | 76 | 69 | 89 |
| 55–64 | | 70 | 50 | 91 |
| 65+ | | 79 | 62 | 162 |
| **Ethnicity** | Asian/Asian British | | 31 | 24 | 110 |
| Black/African/Caribbean/Black British | | 34 | 19 | 40 |
| Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups | | 9 | 17 | 34 |
| Other ethnic group | | 46 | 37 | 73 |
| White/White British | | 365 | 351 | 654 |
| **Employment Status** | In full-time education | | 17 | 12 | 23 |
| Not working due to sickness or disability | | 68 | 51 | 89 |
| Retired | | 102 | 78 | 166 |
| Unemployed but seeking work | | 36 | 53 | 70 |
| Unpaid family worker | | 64 | 49 | 79 |
| Volunteer | | 3 | 4 | 1 |
|  | Working full- or part-time | | 193 | 147 | 232 |
| **Length of residency** | <10 years | | 148 | 147 | 354 |
| >10 years | | 308 | 275 | 492 |
| **Length of involvement with Local Conversations** | 1 month or less | | 42 | 40 | 201 |
| 1 month–1 year | | 148 | 161 | 280 |
| 1–2 years | | 112 | 118 | 165 |
| 2 years + | | 174 | 115 | 204 |

Annex 13. Difference-in-difference regressions

Table 1 compares the change in reported health trends between Local Conversations respondents and CLS respondents.[[27]](#footnote-27) Each column represents a separate difference-in-difference regression for reported health. The regressions look at the response of the dependent variable (reported health) to changes in the independent variables. Reported health is out of 5, 5 being very bad health, so a positive number in the regression represents an adverse effect on health.

Column 1 shows a simple regression, taking into account fixed effects by including the different Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) levels.[[28]](#footnote-28) The second row accounts for initial differences and shows that in the first year, Local Conversations respondents were more likely to have reported better health than CLS respondents. The third row suggests a slight, non-significant, improvement in health over time for respondents to both surveys. The top row looks at the impact of the Local Conversation projects, suggesting that it has had a negative impact on reported health of 0.43 units over two years. However the R-squared, which shows how much of the variation in health is explained by the model, suggests that this model only explains 2% of the variation in reported health.

Column 2 extends the model by including further explanatory variables, including demographic differences. Despite the additional controls, the effect of the Local Conversation project on reported health is still adverse and significant (a 0.41 unit increase over two years). As expected, the age variable suggest that health worsens with age. Those who reported having a disability also tend to have worse health. White/White British people are likely to be healthier than people of other ethnicities, while females are more likely to be less healthy. The R-squared suggests that including the additional variables results in the model explains 26% of the variation in reported health.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 1: Predicted general health (difference-in-difference)* | | |
|  | **(1)** | **(2)** |
|  | **General Health** | **General Health** |
|  |  |  |
| Local Conversations | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.41\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Initial difference | -0.10\* | -0.06 |
|  |  |  |
| Time | -0.01 | -0.01 |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 1 (most deprived quintile) | 0.21\*\*\* | 0.26\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 2 | 0.09\*\*\* | 0.13\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 3 | 0.04\* | 0.07\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 4 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  |  |  |
| Age group |  | 0.08\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Disabled |  | 0.88\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| White/White British |  | -0.10\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Female |  | 0.02\* |
|  |  |  |
| Constant | 2.01\*\*\* | 1.51\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Observations | 16,904 | 16,310 |
| R-squared | 0.021 | 0.258 |
| **\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1** | | |
|  |  |  |

Table 2 separates the results by gender. Column 1 compares females at the national level with females who responded to the Local Conversations survey; column 2 does the same for males. The impact of the Local Conversation projects is isolated (row 1) and demonstrates that the adverse effect is greater for women than it is for men, with a 0.48 unit increase towards bad health for women compared to 0.30 for men. This is in line with the updated Marmot Review findings discussed earlier in the Summary of Residents’ Survey Waves 1–6: Health over Time.

The other results in Table 2 are in line with Table 1 for both genders. The greater the level of deprivation, the higher the likelihood of poorer health being reported. Both increasing age and non-white ethnicity also result in individuals reporting poorer health. These results are statistically significant. However, the R-squares are low, suggesting the models explain less than 10% of the variation. It is likely that there are other external factors not captured in the surveys that are also having an impact on health outcomes.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Table.2: Predicted general health (by gender)* | | |
|  | **(1)** | **(2)** |
|  | **General Health** | **General Health** |
|  | **Female** | **Male** |
|  |  |  |
| Local Conversations | 0.48\*\*\* | 0.30\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Initial difference | -0.21\*\*\* | -0.03 |
|  |  |  |
| Time | -0.01 | 0.01 |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 1 (most deprived quintile) | 0.32\*\*\* | 0.33\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 2 | 0.15\*\*\* | 0.20\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 3 | 0.07\*\* | 0.14\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| IMD 4 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
|  |  |  |
| Age group | 0.13\*\*\* | 0.17\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| White/White British | -0.05\*\* | -0.06\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Constant | 1.58\*\*\* | 1.30\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Observations | 8,987 | 7,495 |
| R-squared | 0.065 | 0.082 |
| **F-statistic:** | **70.03** | **74.84** |
|  | **\*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1** | |

1. In this context, the term ‘activities’ refers to project activities funded through the Local Conversations, such as gatherings and facilitated groups. The term ‘action’ refers more specifically to action directed towards social or individual change, such as forming a group to lobby for change. In practice, they will overlap. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P. & Morrison, J. (2020). *The Marmot Review 10 Years On. Institute of Health Equity*. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/marmot-review-10-years-on> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Participants are residents who participate in activities and/or attend events, but do not play an active role in their design or delivery. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Further research is needed to understand why this is the case. It is worth noting, however, that compared to England, there are higher national levels of wellbeing in Wales. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Build Back Better. (n.d.) Website. Retrieved from <https://www.buildbackbetteruk.org/what-we-want> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. La Valle, I. & Jones, N. (2020). *Reducing Inequalities in the Early Years: A rapid evidence review to inform LEAP’s next five years*. Lambeth Early Action Partnership. Retrieved from <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/files/documents/LEAP%20Evidence%20Review.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). (2012). Census 2011. Retrieved from [www.understandingglasgow.com](http://www.understandingglasgow.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). (2012). Census 2011. Retrieved from www.understandingglasgow.com [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Scotland, a ‘factor’ for a group of rented properties is equivalent to the English ‘managing company or agent’. The factor is paid a small contribution by each property in return for them organising and paying for cleaning and repairs to communal areas regularly, avoiding them becoming run down. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. (2019). English Indices of Deprivation 2019, File 1 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hydroponics is a method of growing plants without soil, as it relies on water to deliver nutrients to plant roots. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. End Child Poverty. (n.d.) Child Poverty in Your Area 2014/15 – 2018/19. Retrieved from: <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-in-your-area-201415-201819/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. UK Census Data. (n.d.) Aberystwyth Penparcau. Retrieved from :[https://www.ukcensusdata.com/aberystwyth-penparcau-w05000365#sthash.iMmwslsA.dpbs](https://www.ukcensusdata.com/aberystwyth-penparcau-w05000365" \l "sthash.iMmwslsA.dpbs) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A programme aimed at 14–24-year-olds requiring them to learn a new skill, volunteer, take part in physical activity, and plan and complete an expedition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One reason is that there is no record of everyone participating in the project, as participation can take many forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These error bars use 95% confidence intervals. For example, the data measures ‘satisfaction with your local area’ for 2,137 Local Conversations participants to generalise about the Local Conversations project participants as a whole. A 95% confidence interval means that if a different random sample of 2,137 Local Conversations participants was repeatedly studied, 95% of the time the true levels of local area satisfaction for participants would fall within the confidence interval. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Children (aged 16 and under) were asked this question, but their responses were removed to avoid skewing the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Note that the CLS updated responses categories, and therefore the Local Conversations survey’s categories changed between waves 1 and 2 to continue comparing results to the CLS. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This question was only included from wave 2 onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In wave 1, the results showed higher than average levels of anxiety for Local Conversations project participants, which was probably the result of the reversed anxiety scale (because feeling not at all anxious is better than feeling completely anxious) than because of a genuine anxiety gap for Local Conversations areas. To correct this, from wave 2 onwards, the anxiety question was presented separately. This resulted in no-one choosing ’10’ for all four wellbeing questions in waves 2–4. The responses of anyone who answered ‘10’ for all four wellbeing questions in wave 1 were removed. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Commissioner for Wales. (n.d.). Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Retrieved from <https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wave 1 was excluded from the analysis because ‘fair’ was not an option and therefore not an appropriate comparator. It is worth noting that the answer to question in the surveys were presented in a different order, which could have skewed the results. In the Local Conversations survey the ordering was: (1) very good (2) good (3) bad (4) very bad (5) fair. The ordering for the CLS and the NSW was: (1) very good (2) good (3) fair (4) bad (5) very bad. Although the difference is subtle it could have resulted in fewer Local Conversations respondents selecting (5) fair. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Given that the waves are six months apart, results are observed in pairs to account for seasonality. For consistency with general health results, where wave 1 is not a suitable comparator, wellbeing results are also observed for waves 2 and 3 rather than 1 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A regression is a tool that allows to estimate for causal effect by controlling for confounding factors. Difference-in-difference is a strategy to model the role of pre-treatment outcomes. The assumption is that trends in the control group and the treatment group would have been the same in both states in the absence of treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Marmot, M. et al. (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Marmot, M. et al. (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Reported general health is between 1 (very good) and 5 (very bad), therefore a positive coefficient means worse reported health. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Fixed effects dummy accounts for initial difference between Local Conversations respondents and CLS respondents. IMD quintiles are used as it is assumed that these are unlikely to change over a three-year period. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)