



Voices for Change: Covid 19, Recovery and Rebuilding

Lessons from community consultation within London Borough of Newham



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1. Introduction and Summary of Key Findings

Summary of key findings

At a street, neighbourhood and even national level, the shared experience of crisis has forged a greater sense of unity. As a ground breaking body of new psychology has shown, a sense of belonging to communities can protect people against depression, improve cognition in older people, dramatically improve people's health prospects on retirement and greatly improve recovery from heart attacks. Our membership of groups and communities is its own type of "social cure". The Guardian March 2020 (1)

Between Oct 2020 and March 2021, a team of community researchers from Bonny Downs Community Association, gathered insights into local experiences of the pandemic, to understand how people managed and exploring their hopes and aspirations. We used a range of tools, using face-to-face and digital platform. The analysis was also conducted by the community researchers, ensuring that the themes, findings and all aspects of the project were designed and delivered by local residents.

The initial plan was to organise a series of community events including sports and fitness activities to engage local people in the research. However, the government restrictions introduced as part of the winter lockdown led to a comprehensive redesign of the engagement plan. We worked through the food-bank to reach people who might prefer traditional paper-based methods. The team also devised a range of creative online approaches including poetry and music workshops, which provided rich material with nuanced insights.

Loneliness. Many people felt lonely and isolated, and acknowledge the effect this was having on their mental and physical health. The main factors that contributed to this being cut off were: missing family, the claustrophobia of being stuck indoors for extended periods and the lack of social interaction, which was particularly acute for those required to shield due to an underlying health condition.

Looking to the future, there was a strong sense that people want activities that contribute to a sense of community and belonging. People placed a greater value on approaches that support the web of social connections and expressed less concern about the actual methods used. People long to belong to a strong local community.

Mental Wellbeing. Many people told us they have concerns and challenges around mental health. Many recounted their struggles with stress and anxiety related to the loss of freedom, the disruption of daily routines and the lack of human contact. They also described feeling depressed, fearful and alone. A number were anxious about the disease, their own safety and that of their families, friends and community. There was an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and lack of control over events. Casting ahead, people want activities that bring the community together, as well as activities that improve mental health including support groups, counselling, wellness sessions. In all this, there is a desire for shared experiences.

Physical Wellbeing. People shared their pressing concerns about their physical health, and particularly about contracting Covid19. They also worried about other illnesses and conditions, their disability as well as a general concern about weight gain and fitness.

Looking ahead, many want to stay healthy and to improve their wellbeing through physical activity, including through fitness and sports sessions, organised walks, dance. People asked for activities that accommodate all ages and varying abilities, and for services designed for specific groups for example, women and girls sessions.

Work. People told us they were concerned with lack of work, reduced hours and unemployment. A number also expressed concerns about managing their present work situation, finding the 'new normal' of working from home difficult and stressful. When looking to the future, there were suggestions about future provision to support people into work, including training workshops, volunteering, work placements and skill share schemes.

Food Insecurity. For some people the availability of food was a major concern, particularly at the start of the first lockdown. This was an overwhelming priority for people who suddenly lost their jobs and had no recourse to public funds, including international students. Many turned to the BDCA food bank for the first time, and it became a lifeline.

Thinking about life beyond the pandemic, people hoped to be working again, to find new better paid, secure jobs. They also spoke about wanting more culturally appropriate foods from the food bank.

Money. Money related issues were expressed as a major concern by around a third of respondents. They spoke about debt, paying bills and other household costs. When asked about their future aspirations, people spoke about wanting financial security, and their desire to develop skills in budgeting and financial literacy to help them to achieve their goals. They also spoke about wanting advocacy and help with accessing available services.

Continuing the conversation.

The route to recovery and rebuilding will not be linear. Present priorities, as described in this research, are likely to shift as circumstances change. In order to learn and respond appropriately to these changing needs, BDCA wants to continue this conversation. Voices for Changes has developed an interactive exhibition where you can read more about this report and feed back thoughts and ideas. Please log on to www.bdca.org for more details.

**Community has got Britain through the pandemic.
How can we create more of it?**

2. Our approach

Newham was particularly hard hit by the pandemic, with 34,955 infections as at March 2020 which amounted to a rate of almost 1 in 10. This was significantly greater than elsewhere: 55% more cases per 100,000 than the UK and 26% greater than the London figure. At the point of writing in March 2021, there have been 762 deaths in the borough. The lockdowns were particularly hard for a community already facing the hardship of low income and precarious employment, poor housing and poor health including high levels of long term health conditions. Many people found themselves in desperate situations with sudden loss of income, and denied access to many critical support systems like faith groups and schools. Some faced destitution.

Bonny Downs Community Association with its deep relationships in the local community, immediately set about adapting to meet changing needs, providing emergency response to many desperate people as well as creating new services and redesigning delivery for existing activities.

Emergency response is critical but necessarily temporary. The path to recovery and healing will not be straightforward, creating uncertainties and challenges for our communities and for BDCA. As ever, BDCA centres its work on the priorities and needs in the community. Developing people-centred services, with an unwavering focus on what people want and need is crucial. As such, BDCA determined first to listen deeply to local people, to hear their stories and perspectives as the basis for shaping plans and designing services in the aftermath of the pandemic.

With funding from the Community Fund, BDCA set out to implement a community based participatory research programme to provide crucial insight and learning. This would shape the organisation's 5 year strategic plan, informing the priorities and key objectives for the organisation as it seeks to serve and empower local people, working with them to build a healthier and resilient community - adapting to the changing needs arising out of the pandemic and into recovery.

There are a number of ambitions for this piece of work, not least the insights gathered would inform, influence and shape the work of BDCA, supporting the Trustees and SMT as they consider the next phase of the organisation's development. The findings will also be shared with local people, through an exhibition using online and offline platforms. We also want to share the learning with the wider voluntary sector both in Newham and London wide, and find ways of learning from others doing similar pieces of research.

There are of course indirect benefits which often go unstated but seem to have been highlighted in our lockdown world. This would include the connections our team have had with local people, many now lonelier, more isolated and more worried about the future than before. A number of those interviewed were grateful for the opportunity to share their experiences with someone willing to "listen to our troubles".

3. Principles: The underlying principles that drive this work

Taking an asset based approach

Focussing on the skills, talents and resources of local people, communities and organisations. We value assets as the 'protective (or promoting) factors to buffer against life's stresses' (Morgan and Ziglio, 2007).

Taking Action



Research aiming to foster change not just seeking knowledge

Maintaining Mutual Respect



Developing research relationships based on mutual respect, which includes a commitment from everyone involved to be prepared to listen and reflect on other voices, accepting that there are diverse perspectives

Equitable and Inclusive



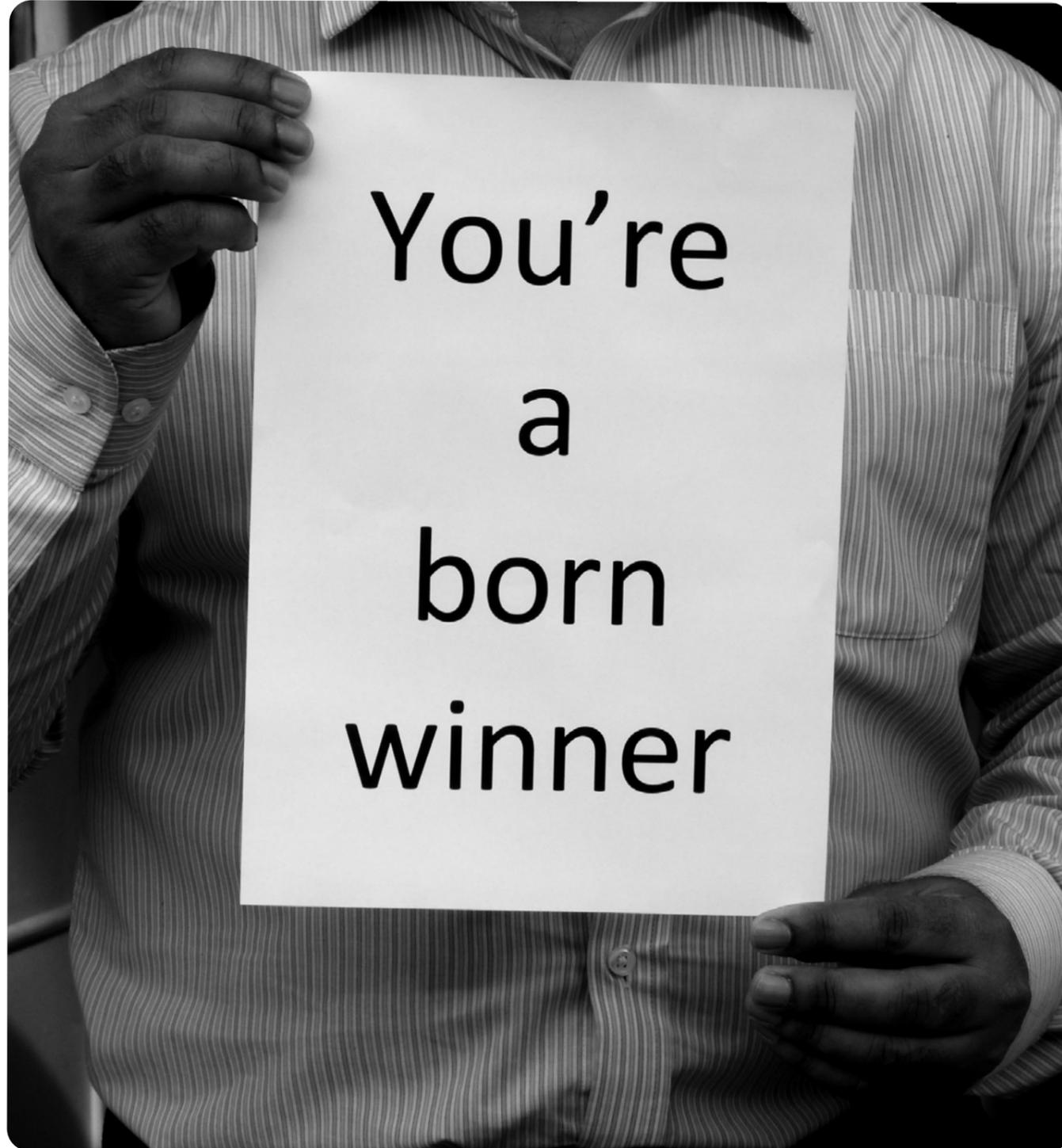
With a strong commitment to actively seek out those whose voices are less well heard, and encouraging and enabling people from a range of backgrounds and identities to contribute and take part in the research.



4. What we wanted to achieve



The research set out to gain new insights into the changing needs of the local community, hear views about the activities and services people want and need and design services that empower local people to drive change. To do this we were guided by three key questions.



5. Guiding Questions



- How have you managed during the pandemic
- How are you now
- What are your hopes, fears and plans for the future.

6. Aims of research



We also wanted to share the key insights and learning with local people, recognising that effective information provision can strengthen trust, build community ownership and encourage feedback and participation ... and making individuals and communities aware of the support they will be receiving can help them to plan their lives" (2)

This work was developed from the understanding that enabling people to tell their story contributes to greater resilience and is mentally healthy, not just for the story teller but for those who hear stories in which they recognise their own situation and receive a comfort from knowing they are not alone. (3) As well as sharing the key insights from the research we also wanted to find a way of keeping the conversation going. By hearing local people's reflections on the findings and continuing the dialogue about the services and activities that they would find most useful and how these might be developed and designed. We want to continue to empower local people to make their own positive change for themselves, their neighbours and the wider community.

We also want to share key finding with the wider voluntary sector, particularly in Newham and East London. BDCA recognises we are part of a broad network of community organisations who have all been hit with the tsunami of overwhelming need, they too have had to adapt rapidly, and to step up to meet the challenge. Many, if not all, of the issues raised in this report will be shared and recognised. We therefore offer this report and its key findings and insights as a small part of the learning that will enable the wider voluntary sector to adapt to emerging needs and the changing service models that will be required in the future.

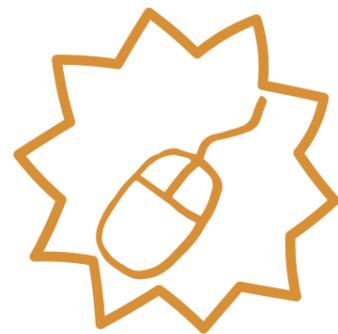


7. Methods

In order to hear people's views we used a Community Based Participatory Research approach, using peer researchers (called Conversation Facilitators) to reach out to local people through light touch 'forums' and one to one interviews. In addition to this we also developed a range of online tools including a digital questionnaire and a platform allowing people to tell their stories using as little or as much text as they wished.

Over a 5 month period the online and face-to-face engagement uncovered some deep insights into the issues facing our community and surfaced some emerging ideas of how BDCA with the local community can meet a number of the challenges of the future. We wanted to go beyond the statistics of what are the main challenges, but to also gain an insight into what has been worth celebrating over the past year and what enables people to just hang in there. And then ask the question, how do we capture and enhance these in the better times? Using these insights to inform service design and community action.

Over the course of the programme, we employed five peer researchers, plus one volunteer, who spoke to over 42 residents through in-depth conversations, plus 322 online questionnaires were completed and 29 hard copies. We recognised the need to hear from some of BDCA's most vulnerable users, those using the Food Bank, those who often have no settled immigration status and have no recourse to public funds. We therefore worked with the Food Bank and Fuel Bank team to drop a pre addressed envelope in each food parcel containing information of the programme, an invitation to use the online questionnaire plus a paper version of the questionnaire which could be posted back to BDCA. Twenty one hard copies were returned, plus an additional 18 online responses which mention food as a key concern.



322 online questionnaires were completed and 29 hard copies



42 residents through in-depth conversations



21 hard copies were returned, plus an additional 18 online responses which mention food as a key concern.

8. Peer research

Peer research, sometimes called Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a participatory research approach in which people with lived experience of the issues take part in directing and conducting the research. 'CBPR is an approach to research that involves collective, reflective and systematic inquiry in which researchers and community stakeholders engage as equal partners in all steps of the research process with the goals of educating, improving practice or bringing about social change' (4). It aims to move away from the 'extractive' model of social research and to empower people to affect positive change by participating in research and in their own communities (5)



9. Research Tools

We developed a range of research tools to enable people's views, opinions and stories to be gathered. These included online and offline tools:



A questionnaire

Which was available online. This comprised of 17 questions, with a range of open and tick box questions, taking approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.



An in-depth questionnaire

Conducted as a one-to-one interview either face-to-face, online or over the telephone, typically lasting 1 hour



Creative input

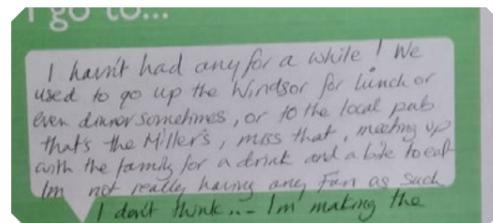
We used creative methods to enable people to share their experiences and perspectives. We ran a series of poetry workshops, culminating in a community showcase event.

We also worked with Community Albums to produce a music video taking a participatory approach working with a committed group of local people to write, sing, play instruments and dance. All the workshops were intergenerational with age range covering 10 – 60+ years. This approach added a richness and depth to the work, enabling participants to share not just their experiences, but also how they felt, adding nuance and texture to our findings



My Story

This was an online platform for free text allowing an individual to write as much or as little as they wish.



Speech bubbles

A light touch tool using open prompts exploring challenges and hopes. Peer Researchers used this tool to prompt short conversations, typically undertaken during existing activities (ie during the elders coffee morning, or parents craft sessions or following a keep fit class) or online forums

10. Challenges

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge in doing this work was the government restrictions due to the renewed spikes in Coronavirus infections. Things were relaxed slightly in early December but strict 'stay at home' restrictions were reintroduced on 19th December and continued for the rest of the project.

Therefore the bulk of the work was undertaken during the third national lockdown. All our plans for community events, 'piggybacking' on other events and activities, plus high-street pop-ups had to be abandoned. We had to be both persistent and creative with our outreach. We developed accessible, engaging online tools and launched an energetic social media campaign to generate interest from early January. We distributed posters and banners in shops, launderettes and take-away shops and cafes. Each carried a QR code which provided easy access to the survey. We also delivered 2500 flyers through letterboxes in priority neighbourhoods.

During the short period when restrictions were eased in December our energetic, committed team of peer researchers were able to engage some participants at the Well and the Garden. Unfortunately this window was short lived. Peer researchers were able to follow up a with people who had completed the online tools and indicated they would be happy to share more, inviting them to an in-depth one to one interview or an online forum via zoom.

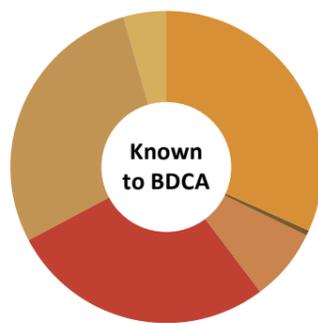
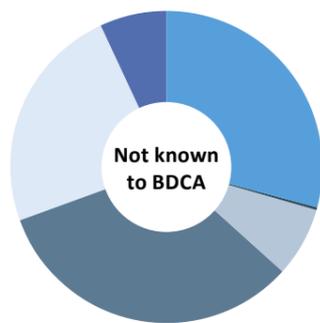


11. Who engaged?

We were delighted to have recruited a diverse group of peer researchers. They were able to reach into networks in their own communities, ensuring that we heard from individuals from a wide range of backgrounds. Nevertheless our team could not be expected to cover every demographic in a community as diverse as Newham, and our inability to do physical outreach hampered our ability to engage as widely as we would have liked. These findings do not claim to be representative of the whole borough or even of East Ham. As the research phase progressed, we were able to identify gaps and target our efforts accordingly. Lastly as stated we were forced to move the vast majority of our efforts to online tools, this too may have skewed the data, being less able to represent certain demographics or those not digitally active.

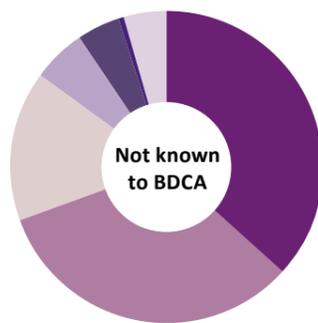
11.1 Demographics

Ethnicity



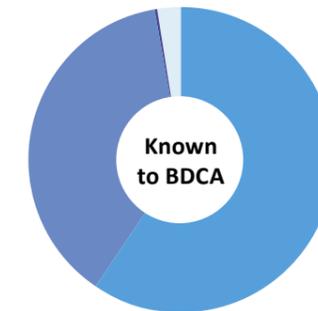
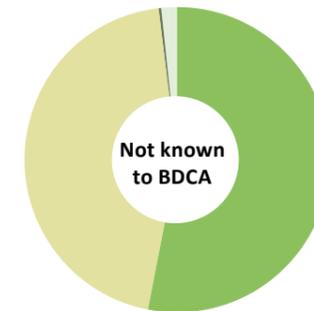
- Asian - 29.4%
- Arab - 0.2%
- Black - 7%
- White - 32.8%
- Mixed - 23.8%
- Other - 6.8%
- Asian - 32%
- Arab - 0.4%
- Black - 7.6%
- White - 27%
- Mixed - 28%
- Other - 5%

Age



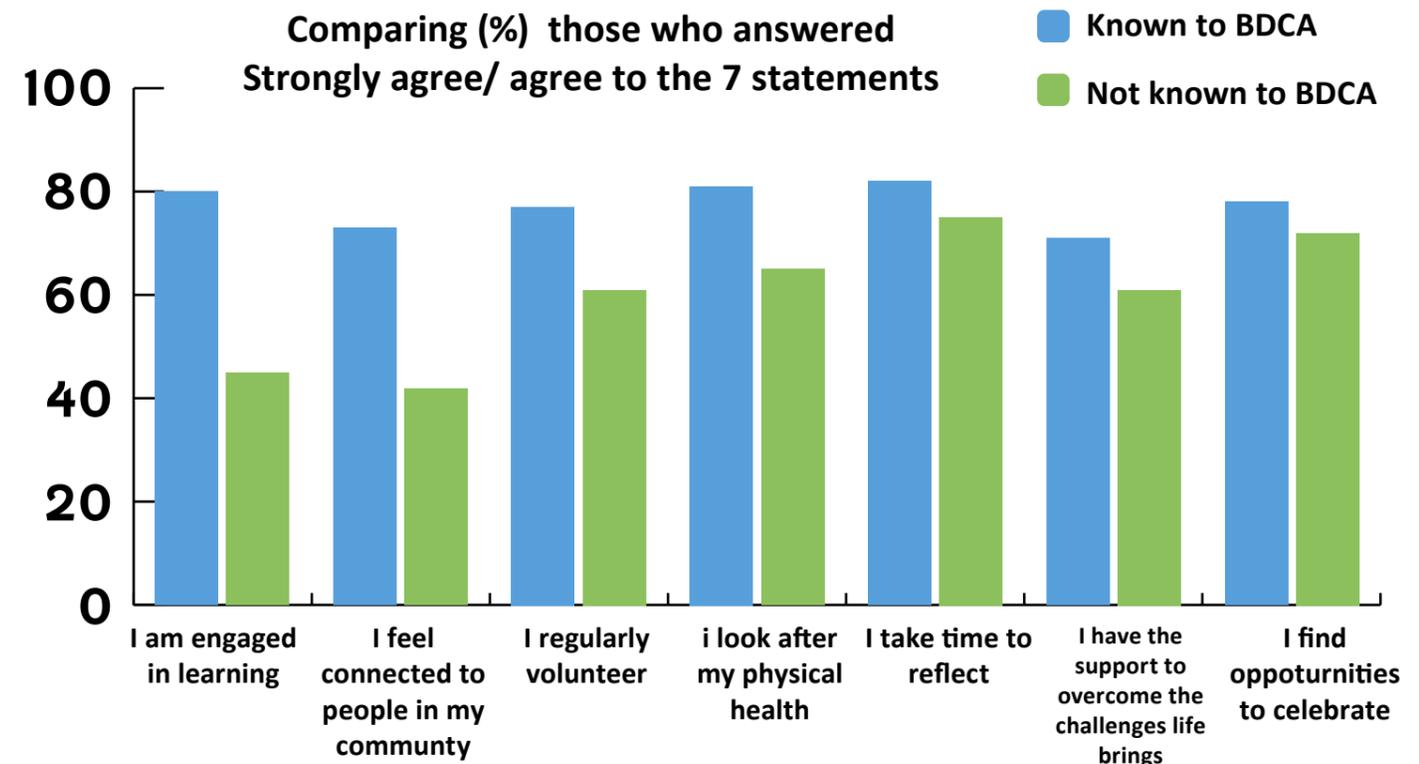
- 18-29 - 34.6%
- 30-39 - 30.7%
- 40-49 - 14.6%
- 50-59 - 10.1%
- 60-69 - 5.3%
- 70-79 - 4.1%
- 80+ - 1%
- 18-29 - 42%
- 30-39 - 31%
- 40-49 - 12%
- 50-59 - 9%
- 60-69 - 1.1%
- 70-79 - 4%
- 80+ - 1%

Gender



- Male - 53.3%
- Female - 44.9%
- Transgender - 0.2%
- Prefer not to say - 1.6%
- Male - 59.5%
- Female - 37%
- Transgender - 0.3%
- Prefer not to say - 2.2%

People with connections to BDCA have higher scores compared to those with no connection. This suggests that there is a protective factor against isolation, feeling 'disconnected' and poor mental and physical wellbeing, by being part of a 'community hub', engaging in activities and regularly engaging with others.



12.1 Themes and findings: Loneliness and Isolation

In Newham, like much of the country, one of the most prevalent impacts of the pandemic has been loneliness and isolation

Recent research on **loneliness** during the pandemic had three main findings:

- People who felt most lonely prior to Covid in the UK now have even higher levels of loneliness. This increase began as physical distancing, shielding and lockdown measures were introduced in the UK, in March 2020.
- Adults most at risk of being lonely, and increasingly so over this period, have one or more of the following characteristics: they are young, living alone, on low incomes, out of work and, or with a mental health condition.
- The impact on wellbeing from people at risk of loneliness is likely to be compounded by other economic and social impacts experienced by the same people, such as those experiencing job losses and health anxieties. (6).



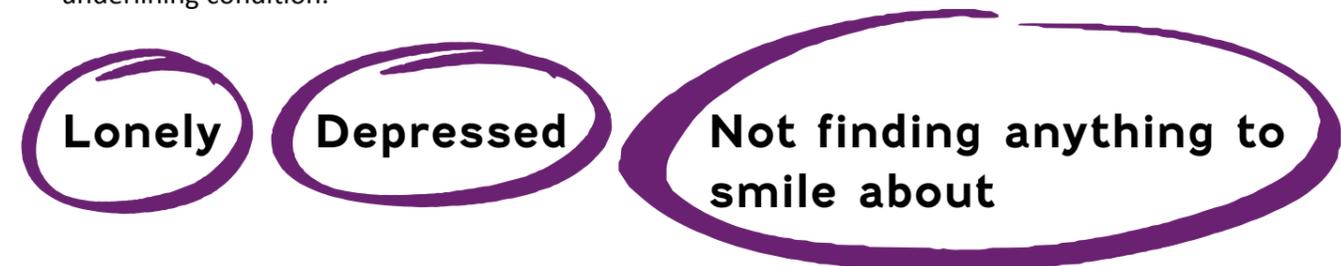
Isolation - "Friends of mine have moved away and I know very few people in the area. Work from home fulltime, spend all my time in East Ham but don't know many people. I live alone and currently don't have a bubble. I applied to volunteer at BDCA but there was no need for me earlier this year Isolation is my biggest issue. I live alone and have really struggled during this period. Linked to this I guess is the challenge of working from home. Like many I live in a small flat and being in the same space all day everyday is demoralising. The boundaries between work and home have disappeared and psychologically it is more difficult to switch off from work. My sleep has been hugely affected. I've had insomnia on and off since November."

12.1 Loneliness and Isolation



In a recent ONS report 50% of older people reported poor mental health and over 70% were worried for the future. This has been reflected in Voices for Change responses with many speaking of a sense of loneliness, isolation and its impact on their mental health. In fact 85 responses mentioned loneliness and isolation as a key concern which is around 24% of respondents to the questionnaire

The main factors that contributed to a sense of isolation and loneliness were; missing family, being indoors and lack of social interaction, which was compounded for those having to shield due to an underlying condition.



"Firstly, difficulty in travel and not being able to visit my loved ones, friends and others who are a pillar of support for me..."

just being away from people, I just hate it, its like everything has just been taken away...its like its been snatched away and having the freedom to do what you want has just all gone, I feel trapped and scared at times... What I'm finding hard right now is staying away from people, cos when we come out of this lockdown its gona feel even stranger I think...like how do you say Hi, or give someone a hug? How do we react to people around us now? Ive been shielded, now its gona be weird aint it?"



12.1 Loneliness and Isolation

When asked about positive aspects of life during the pandemic

Some people expressed a sense of connection with their neighbours and wider community, while others valued having more quality time with family, being able to volunteer and stay connected with people in that way, plus the benefits of technology in allowing some sense of connection. Others expressed gratitude for the work of BDCA in reducing their own isolation and enabling them to connect with others through Zoom.

Seeing parts of our communities in Newham come together. Lots of grassroots initiatives are taking place which is so good to see

I realised how strong my community links are - when we were ill with Covid- So grateful for the help and support we were given

Seeing more people day-to-day in the community when I go out for walks etc

My mother also used to feel alone as all her kids would be out or at work. [Now we are all at home] she gets to be occupied with us and we get her company more than usual somewhat eradicating that loneliness. Makes me feel better for her too

For me, personally, it's, you know, my network of neighbours that I have. .. I am not surprised, that's not the right thing to say, but how we've helped. Helped one another and looked out for one another, ... that's not actually a surprise. It's just the fact that we've got some very vulnerable people in our area, and you know, I'm just proud that we've been able to support them really



Online activities and connections were appreciated by many.

Online communities, online activities, I can enter the museums, theatres and art galleries of the world without leaving my bed - my disability is irrelevant

My friends got married and sent parcels to all their "guests" so that we could all have a tea party at home and share photos and video online. This feeling of connecting was one of the best moments of the whole year

Online activities such as Pilates, environment group meetings etc which have been great

12.1 Loneliness and Isolation

When looking to the future

There were also many suggestions of activities for different sections of our community, these included befriending, doing/learning things with others, intergenerational activities. There was a strong sense that activities that enhanced a sense of community and social cohesion were essential in the future; how this was done appeared less important than the act of building community and social cohesion.

The community should add some interesting activities so that more people can join in

Community connections - ways to build communities to talk to each other and build bridges.

I'd be interested in any projects that got community neighbourhoods doing stuff together and building relationships that can last.

More community based wellbeing activities related to wellness therapies, food projects, healthy living, art therapy, trips etc that build emotional resilience and bring back/replenish joy and happiness after we exit the long dark tunnel of pandemic/lockdowns/isolation.

More opportunities for ordinary people to discuss mental health and learn tips through support groups. More community support for those in need. Mental health support. More for young adults.

Weekday services am & pm for working-age disabled adults who are mentally capable but physically disabled we are always left behind in day centre provisions

Unsurprisingly there was a great hope that as the pandemic subsides people will be able to reconnect with family and friends

Just to start living again. Life has been on pause in so many ways- spending time with friends and extended family. Celebrating together. Maybe a holiday!

To obviously just survive this Pandemic and face a better future with my family.

To just be able to relax and be kind to people in my life



12.2 Mental health and wellbeing

Mental ill-health is experienced at any one time by around 1 in 4 people within the UK, with 1 in 5 in London. Poor mental health is often triggered by social and economic circumstances. We know that living in poverty, poor housing, and unemployment contribute to poor mental wellbeing. Traumatic events such as an attack or a car accident, a relationship breakdown or other experiences which cause fear, such as pandemic can lead to poor mental health. Some believe that the pandemic has contributed to trauma at a national level. 'COVID-19, and the response to the pandemic, could have a significant impact on the nation's mental health through increased exposure to stressors. This has been exacerbated by the loss of usual support systems for many, and the much reduced access to mental health treatment.'(7)

These concerns and challenges around mental health were cited by **20% of survey respondents** and were a prominent feature in the interviews and stories. People told us they were struggling with anxiety and stress, with the loss of freedom, lack of human contact and the disruption of daily routines. They also described feeling depressed, fearful and alone.

Anxiety and fear about the disease, fears about their own safety and that of their families, friends and community. The combination of anxiety and lack of control was recognised as especially difficult by some people.

Worries about overcoming the fear of going out. About overcoming the fear of Covid and how to be positive about the future.

Worrying and distress at death rates, hospitalisation and people's jobs and livelihoods- worry about continued employment for members of my family

There will probably be more people in your workforce struggling with their mental health. You're going to have a much harder time spotting the signs.

Feeling unable to help enough or make a difference in these difficult times

Worrying about our young people and their economic future and mental health

About university students: *We've seen people drop out, or defer their place; we've seen people take on essentially full time jobs (alongside studies) to help their families; we've seen a deterioration in mental health – the stress levels are off the charts. I think when all is said and done, there's going to be a very damaged generation on our hands –we're suffering a collective trauma.*

The sense of being trapped or stuck in one place and without usual structures was also difficult for some:

I find it hard to think about the future beyond the next few days because it's overwhelmingly scary. I hope we can get some normality back so that my baby can start to socialise with other people and have more varied experiences, as I worry about the impact this is going to have on his development

It's like it's been snatched away and having the freedom to do what you want has just all gone, I feel trapped and scared at times.



12.2 Mental health and wellbeing

For people with ongoing or pre-existing mental health issues the pandemic has been extremely challenging:

Mental Health – there's a huge wait for help and it's getting longer.

Lack of free mental health services

Mental health, addiction, conflict with people in my network

When asked about any positive aspects of the pandemic

A small minority had found ways to focus positively on their wellbeing and were using the time and space created by the changes to spend time outdoors, exploring the area and enjoying nature. Some people expressed hope around mental health and wellbeing, saying that they were now achieving a more balanced life, and had found moments of peace and positivity. People looked forward to a return to normality, being able to connect with others again and being free to go where they chose, including travel.

I got involved with the outdoor swimming group down at the Royal docks – and that was a bit of a mental health life saver – and good exercise. Since that closed with this second lockdown, I've been struggling.

Using my time well - usefully and creatively



When looking to the future many longed to feel safer, less anxious and more positive.

No fear, no tear, no hatred ; just love for each other

I hope to get fitter physically and mentally

Keep a healthy mind and body

New services and activities

When asked about new initiatives people would like to see in the community – provided by BDCA or by others – people prioritised social activities, things that brought them together with others. They mentioned dance, , dance, gardening, opportunities to be creative, physical activities, things that bring joy. There is a clear desire for activities to improve mental health including support groups, counselling, wellness sessions.

Any activity that make us stronger and less stressed out

Activities to give people chance to keep their mind occupied so they don't have dull and depressing moments.

Food projects, healthy living, art therapy, trips etc that build emotional resilience and bring back joy and happiness after we exit the long dark tunnel of pandemic/lockdowns/isolation

12.3 Physical health

Nearly a quarter of survey respondents (23%) cited concerns and challenges around physical health and also in interviews and stories. Key concerns focused on Covid, other illnesses, disability, fitness and weight gain.

Lose the 'lockdown' weight for sure, that's the first thing I want to do before we get let out again.

Keep up with my healthy meal planning

Protect the health of your family

Worry about Covid-19 as clinically vulnerable which increases isolation.

Weight gain and fitness were often described as a challenge:

The biggest challenge is my physical strength

We're getting way fatter during lockdown. Forcing ourselves to go outside is difficult.

This was a particular issue where there were compounding difficulties:

My health was tested, my landlord was about to evict me from his house, and there was not enough food

Challenges with being able to exercise (I am disabled and usually swim a lot)

When asked what positive things have taken place during the pandemic...

More than 20 people had something positive to say about health during the pandemic. Many people were grateful that they and their families had stayed well during the pandemic, or had recovered from Covid. Some had managed to maintain or even improve their fitness:

Opportunity to spend more time with family

I want to embed my daily exercise regime that I started during lockdown

When looking to the future

30 people in the online survey mentioned something health related when describing their hopes for 2021. A commonly expressed hope was to stay healthy and well – both for themselves and their family:

Family can live a healthy life

Being a healthy person and cancer free

Sometimes this referred specifically to Covid:

We can follow NHS rules, we can help the peoples. We can save our lives.....

Some people wanted to improve their fitness:

I hope to pull through the pandemic stronger and better in all aspects of my life and continue to maintain my mental and physical wellbeing

Establishing a balance between my own work at home and physical exercise.

Getting my fitness levels back on track



12.3 Physical health

Others wanted to continue health and fitness routines already in place:

Exercise every day to maintain a healthy body condition

There were many activities suggested in relation to physical fitness.

Sports and exercise classes, community games, organised walking and dance sessions. There were requests around making activities accessible for all – or for specific target groups:

More free exercise classes

Walking group that supports those who enjoy walking in all weather's that understands, the pain of Osteoarthritis and Rheumatoid arthritis of the spine.

An exercise group for those who are unable to motivate themselves alone through either physical/ mental challenges

More physical fitness opportunities for beginners

Fitness for woman kids learning classes and more activities for women

Fitness classes for women and children

Ladies gym

Organised walks might be something that would be good for me - a walking group. Slow paced walking for people like me or wheelchair users

Can you bring back walking football for women on a Wednesday please. I love it and it stopped because of the virus.

Fitness more learning activities specially for women

And some for specific activities: including basketball, football, walking groups, Fitness/circuit training, indoor sports such as badminton, boxercise, line dancing swimming group.

Getting back to line dancing would be great but a bit impractical via zoom.

More football/a football training session. Fitness

Health and fitness group classes,



Joan's Story

Joan is disabled and house bound. She lives in accommodation for disabled and elderly people even though she is not elderly. She is closely connected to people who live there – that is her community. The pandemic hasn't really changed her day to day life. She faces the same challenges of loneliness, isolation and lack of services as before pandemic. Newham has no day centres that accept working-age disabled people who are mentally capable. Joan feels such a day centre would enable her to socialise, form friendships and have a safe place to go during the day. It would also help her partner to have bit of time for himself.

Joan engages in online learning. She can't attend local colleges because they are not wheelchair accessible and the times don't suit her. Many venues that claim to be accessible only meet requirements for the smallest wheelchairs. Sometimes Joan can't fit or move around inaccessible toilets or lifts. This makes it impossible to use local leisure and community centres. She didn't know BDCA existed.

Joan has to exercise to stop her condition worsening. During the pandemic she has exercised at home, but she lacks the necessary equipment.

During the pandemic lots of activities have been made available online. This has been a game changer for Joan because she can enjoy world-wide art and culture without leaving her bed – her disability is irrelevant.

12.4 Employment

It's still too early to know the exact impact of the pandemic on employment. Newham Council estimates that up to **42000 jobs** could be affected, a figure that is higher than the London average and twice the rate of Tower Hamlets. (8) In addition in November 2020 there were **"more than 27,000 additional people on benefits, and 17,000 on furlough"** (9)

Among survey responses, **24%** related to work. Most of these focussed on lack of work, reduced hours and unemployment. A number also expressed concerns about managing their present work situation, finding the 'new normal' of working from home difficult and stressful.

A recent study by the University of Birmingham found that many more people were experiencing work related stress. The study revealed two key COVID-19 induced working from home enhancers of job stress: including being unable to separate personal life from work whilst working from home, and the general stress created by working from home. "Working away from office is more stressful because it has breached work and family boundaries," explained Dr. Shiu. "Home working can also lead to disruption of circadian rhythms – contributing to sleeping and eating disorders, which then lead to psychological stress." (10)

When I look ahead, I'm not sure what I see. If I don't get a job soon, I'm going to have to look at another plan. I may need to rent my house out and move in with my mum down south. That would break my heart to do, but I'm really struggling with my bills and I'm not sure how I'll ever get ahead. ...I fee like I'm failing, and I'm not sure how to get out of it. I just need someone to give me a chance, and give me a job – but I'm also scared about how well I'll handle it if they do after the year I've had emotionally. No job, no money

My husband and I lost our jobs because of the virus...'

I worked from home for the first few months of lockdown one, but then all my work dried up – I didn't get another job until this month. It was very stressful. I found my life shrank quite a lot, and I didn't get out of the house much as there was no where to go.

Some have reduced hours

At the moment I can't really work much if we were going to work maybe just one shift a week because of childcare and everything.

Another challenge I'd like to add on is that although I like not working all the time I am also deprived of funds to meet my needs. To pay up contributions to bills and essential shopping has been a struggle. I've never had to watch how much I've spent before like I've had to during lockdown months. "



12.4 Employment

Other are finding the working from home a challenge

Missing family and friends. New routines especially balancing work and home learning with children. Keeping positive as restrictions drag on and virus gets worse before it gets better.

Not being able to have a routine outside of home and going to work etc and a feeling of being trapped while all the time hearing sad news/bereavement/covid cases etc etc.

Trying to juggle home schooling and working feeling 'mum' guilt "

I've been furloughed for months and the union is now in negotiation for redundancy. We could all see it coming, but it's still a blow. I've worked there for 18 years

I sit here and whilst thinking what to write I think I have the biggest cheek to feel sorry for myself. I've been lucky to remain in employment as has my husband although its been reduced. When the first lockdown was announced we were told to work from home, this is something that's never been allowed before. Add an 2 and 3 year old and the closure of nursery the novelty quickly wore off. I had some really bad days that only got worse the next. The children were having more and more time in front of the TV so I could work and less and less structure. Most evenings I'd be left feelings really sad or really wound up. We are still now trying to undo the bad habits we have allowed them to pick up. My parents had to shield and there was nowhere to go. I realised although in the area I know of other parents I haven't made any friends. Days would pass before any communication on my phone would be from a personal contact. At this point I realised I am fairly lonely and probably mildly depressed. I've never spoke to anyone through fear they will inform social services and question the care of the children, as this is definitely not a concern

When asked what positive things have taken place during the pandemic

Many expressed gratitude for being in work and finding hope for the future, including gaining new skills, having plans for further training, accessing online classes, and finding a new or better job or starting their own business



Despite being made redundant last March I found work stacking shelves in Tesco, which got me out the house, and then found work at another job really quickly.

More time at home, less time wasted travelling to work

Swapped driving to cycling to work each day

I am not unemployed and work well. Although I work from home, I will not feel bored. With a job, I can live a better life!

I hope to do more professional learning in some way

I hope to get employment in community work.

Start a new business

12.4 Employment

When looking to the future

There was a range of suggestions about future provision to support people into work

Ways to connect generations together, skills swaps etc

Services to help people to re-train or use their transferable skills in new ways

Courses to help get back in to work"

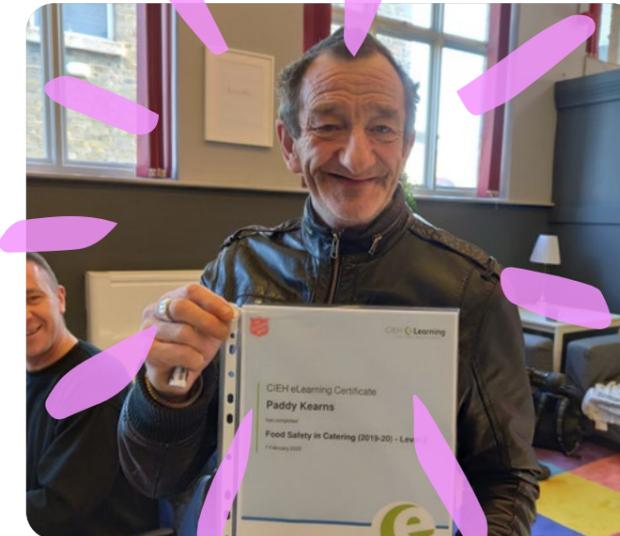
Employment advice

Back to work activities, Further education advice

I would like BDCA to offer work experience to students.

I hope we can provide more employment opportunities to help relieve the economic pressure

Opening hours are often excluding people in work (who still need support)



Reeva's Story

Reeva and her children are active members of BDCA and also engage with the community through the Trinity Centre and local library.

Just before the pandemic Reeva lost her job. Since then, she has been applying for work but is starting to feel hopeless and demotivated. She is worried about a long gap in her CV.

Early this year her entire family got Covid. She didn't get any real help and support from her community. They used whatever food supply they had in the house. She had to cook and look after her family even though she didn't feel well. She tried to call for support it was difficult to get through. Now they all feel fine but she is very cautious and anxious about Covid and its new variants.

Reeva would like an employment training programme to help find a job. She finds online classes difficult due to wifi issues and lack of a laptop. It is hard to stay motivated with online learning because it is not as interactive. Home schooling was difficult for her children without a laptop and with unreliable wifi.

Her suggestions for services that would be useful through the pandemic include support with homework, mental health and domestic abuse. She would also like help to grow vegetables at home. This could happen through online classes with seeds provided from the community garden.

12.5 Food Insecurity

BDCA adapted many of its services including providing emergency food and essentials to help the community through the crisis. The Food Hub assisted **over 3889 people between April and June 2020**, up from **622 for months Jan- March, an increase of 625%**. Many of those attending were in desperate need, many had no recourse to public funds. We wanted to hear their stories and consider their needs for future services. We spoke to people queueing for the Food Bank about Voices for Change, and worked with the Food Bank and Fuel Bank team to hand information to each visitor. This included a pre-addressed envelope enclosing a paper version of the questionnaire plus an explanatory letter in simple English. From this group we received nearly 40 responses and were able to follow up with more detailed interviews with 4 people.

For some food insecurity had been very intense.

My landlord threw me and my family out of the house so we had to stay at the homeless centre and I didn't have a job so I had no money for food or for anything

It was very tough to get the food. My health was tested, my landlord was about to evict me from his house, and there was not enough food

We were jobless, faced difficult to get food, also pay the rent.

I worry about poverty too. My company was very helpful and kept me on the books to enable me to get furlough payments for a little while, which were a lifesaver – but that wasn't the case for many of my friends. It was shocking how quickly you could flip from doing ok – to being worryingly close to the breadline. It must have had knock on effects on everything – I struggled to pay non urgent bills like council tax which I felt guilty about, but had to come second to paying for food and utilities etc. I managed to catch up – but I can only imagine there are going to be huge cuts to provisions coming, which will effect the poor more.

Many are conscious of the social economic factors in our community

We faced huge problems with poverty response and food insecurity. These are ongoing in Newham. We have large numbers of residents on zero hours contracts; working in the cash economy; working in the grey economy of minimum wage; have have no recourse to public funds etc. Losing their jobs overnight meant they had no money to eat. Full stop. Or pay bills etc. Lockdown meant they couldn't return home either.

When asked what positive things have taken place during the pandemic

a number of people spoke highly of the BDCA foodbank

Volunteering as Bonny Downs Food Bank Administrator learning new processes like being a food voucher assessor, doing all the paperwork and data entry

Your wonderful food bank and community activities.

Money card, food, etc provided by charities supported to overcome the work situation which was affected by Covid 19

We found ourselves needing Food Bank help. I decided to donate my time and volunteer here so I don't feel ashamed of getting food for free. Yes I stopped shielding and risked my partner health, however, healed my mental health. I found support and a motivation to get up every morning and help feeding families like ours

12.5 Food Insecurity

Among suggestions, some respondents suggested a more culturally appropriate food offer.

You are doing a great job. Try to cover the foods according to their taste

Would be helpful to Indians to skip tins food and include meats grains flour, eggs and fruits in their diet. Dividing Indian food and English food, it is often returned as we do not know how to use canned food

A few suggested that the food provided should remain free to those in need

Free food for some people

I'd like to see a service that brings food home again.



12.6 Money

Newham has a long history of low incomes. Even before the pandemic almost half (49%) of Newham households were living in poverty, with 52% of children growing up in low income households. Average earnings in Newham are £6,000 below the London average. (10) The full impact of the pandemic on rates of poverty is yet to be determined but we can be confident that the effects will be long lasting, particularly as Newham faces historical inequities. These concerns were echoed in many of the responses in the surveys and stories. Money related issues were expressed as a major concern. Around 36% of responses mentioned money issues as a key area of concern.

*No Money
Financial insecurity - worried about long-term finances
Credit cards are late, rent is not paid, there is not enough food*

My husband , my daughter and me lost our jobs because of this virus .we find it difficult to look after our household , food stuffs , house/electricity /water bills, moreover as my daughter is student studying in university I have pay her fees

*Losing lots off family members, staying in a lockdown financially desperate
Financial challenge due to Losing my job... challenge in my small business*

When asked what positive things had occurred during the pandemic

a few people had expressed gratitude to BDCA for assisting with essential services and for government schemes

I receive a subsidy from the government.

You are giving us food and clothes, and money card If we didn't have this I dont know how we would manage or how to give children food

When thinking about the future people suggested a number of areas that would help them to achieve their goals. Including financial literacy and budgeting advice, advocacy and signposting to available services

Budgeting skills

A need for maybe some financial support for people in the future and kind of signposting or advocacy in getting to that.

I think financial support and where to find it. And also if they like benefits system can be explained in very simple terms and like, signposting where to go and that kind of thing

I'm worried that the progress Newham was making may be halted by the effects of Covid. I've lived here for over 25 years now. I was excited to see the direction the new council was taking us – trying to green our spaces and improve services for youth, clean up the streets and even start to work on the issues about poor rental housing. With so many people losing their jobs, and revenue from council tax and gov funding going down, I'm not sure what can be achieved going forward. I wouldn't say I feel hopeless, but I am concerned.

Isha's story

Isha lives in one room in a house of multiple occupation, she shares the room with her husband and 2 children, a 6 year old and a 6 month old. She shares a kitchen and bathroom with 2 other families and 2 single people. Isha and her husband have 'no recourse to public funds' which means they have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit or tax credits. This also means they cannot apply for social housing, so the cheapest private rented housing is their only option.

When the pandemic stuck and the country went into lockdown Isha's husband lost his job, he was working in restaurants for cash in hand jobs. This was a very difficult time, as they were earning no money and unable to buy food or other essentials. Others in the house helped them on occasion 'an aunty in the house bought diapers and milk for my baby' but they were rapidly running out of options. Fortunately, a health visitor referred them to Bonny Downs and they were able to get support from the food Bank, plus some vouchers for essentials items. In addition, they got an appointment with an immigration adviser to assist with their visa application.

Isha stated, "They are very helpful. I am only one person, there are lots of people in here struggling, over time I know how many people come there to weekly Food Bank, lots of people coming to there because of no food..no money for buying some items. That's why I think they are very kind , Bonny Downs are very useful for local people... I don't know what to say, lots of migrants are in here they can't (get) any government support because of no visa status but Bonny Downs not asking any visa status or anything like that. They give food and food vouchers, that is very useful for every person'.

Isha hopes that in the future she will be able to find a part time job to supplement the family income and eventually find better housing. 'For Bonny Downs in the future ...I wish they help everyone, all the same, ... every human is equal. Equality is the most important thing'.

12.7 Children and Young People

The pandemic has been significantly challenging for families. Parents are concerned about the impact on their children's education, and on their mental health. People struggled with juggling the tasks of working whilst also educating their children at home and they also expressed concerns about the strain on relationships. 24% of respondents referred to the wider family as being a concern. These ranged from missing family, concerns about children or elderly parents and relationship difficulties.

Loneliness - Being a single parent to two young girls during lockdown has meant that I haven't been able to access baby groups like I would have if they had all been running so I've felt quite lonely at times. Very little for toddler to do in terms of activities and places to visit outside the house.

Young people's mental health was a concern

Not being able to access support as a new parent with MH difficulties

Children not understanding why they can't see family and friends

Offer help to parents

*Motivating and empowering children
My children feeling bored and frustrated. Feeling disconnected from social support*

Supporting children in home schooling and wellbeing

Worrying about our young people and their economic future and mental health

Access to learning has been challenging for some

We only have one laptop for my children, my son is in exam year so he uses it mainly, which means by one child cant do lessons

When asked what positive things have taken place during the pandemic many expressed gratitude for having more time with children and the wider family.

Being able to spend more time with the children

My daughters have developed a lovely bond and I have become closer to my family.

It was very hard time, but we are overcome, that only hope for life and our children's smile

I'm glad I have a happy family

Being fortunate enough to have work, a loving family and close friends and neighbours"

A few mentioned BDCA and the appreciation of the activities and care that's been shown throughout the lockdown.

(BDCA) the care they give to children especially they try to meet needs of infants and toddlers

Celebrating Christmas we also had the opportunity to make the window displays supplied by BDCA. Attending the parent support group for the Christmas party was amazing!



12.7 Children and Young People

When looking to the future many were looking forward to schools reopening and reengaging with the world

Children to be free again to go to school and play with friends

My daughter starting nursery school and making new friends

Following the challenges of 2020, I will be happy to get through the year with me and my children being happy and healthy, anything further we achieve will be a bonus.

Do more structured stuff with the children in the community

To see my children out the house and reengaged with the world. I worry that they've forgotten how to do that.

There was also a range of suggestions for future activities including sports & fitness, clubs, child care and playgroups, outdoor play space, after school clubs and homework support, and holiday schemes.

Supporting physical activity/health for children

Host a community basketball game

More youth clubs to give young people safe spaces to meet and engage.

More activities for young people - children of secondary school age and beyond. More activities for f At present we doing good enough but in future we need some more activity for kids under 12, like Basket ball and Judo ext.

Please keep / provide books for children

A number suggested activities for women and girls

A workshop for young girls that can go on the weekend to chill and have fun.

Sports clubs for kids especially team sports for girls

Can you bring back walking football for women on a Wednesday please. I love it and it stopped because of the virus.

women basketball activity, women education for facing daily challenges

Family focused activities, a space to connect with other families

More playgroups and parent support groups

Groups for Mums and toddlers. More opportunities for outdoor play and learning.

Activities for new mums to learn on how to take care of new born babies. "

Exercise classes with a crèche or that babies can be brought to. Parent and children's activities (family) to promote friendship in the community.

Offer help to parents



A parent's story

I sit here and whilst thinking what to write I think I have the biggest cheek to feel sorry for myself. I've been lucky to remain in employment as has my husband although its been reduced. When the first lockdown was announced we were told to work from home, this is something that's never been allowed before. Add an 2 and 3 year old and the closure of nursery the novelty quickly wore off. I had some really bad days that only got worse the next. The children were having more and more time in front of the TV so I could work and less and less structure. Most evenings I'd be left feelings really sad or really wound up. We are still now trying to undo the bad habits we have allowed them to pick up. My parents had to shield and there was nowhere to go. I realised although in the area I know of other parents I haven't made any friends. Days would pass before any communication on my phone would be from a personal contact. At this point I realised I am fairly lonely and probably mildly depressed. I've never spoke to anyone through fear they will inform social services and question the care of the children as this is definitely not a concern

12.8 Environment

In July 2020 the Big Lottery Community Fund released a report ‘Small enough to care, big enough to make a difference’ which considered how environmental community action, at the individual and community level, proves to be both empowering and impactful in making a difference to the environment and social cohesion. Food growing and food distribution, reducing waste and improving the street environment impacts people’s health and wellbeing, increases community pride and supports skills, training and jobs. “There’s a wealth of evidence to show that nature is good for us. And a World Health Organization review found that increasing and improving urban green space can deliver health, social and environmental benefits, particularly among groups with lower socioeconomic status. The most effective projects combine improving space with social engagement..” (11)

Themes relating to wider environment issues run through many of the responses received through Voices for Change. These were often framed positively with many experiencing a sense of gratitude for our green spaces which has sustained many people’s sense of resilience, especially during the lockdown. As the lockdown eases a number expressed a desire to travel and go on organised day trips in to the countryside. In addition, there was a desire to see improved recycling in the borough along with ‘quiet’ street initiatives to encourage walking and cycling.

Along with this is a desire for cleaner streets and less fly tipping, with a number calling for community action to support this aspiration. 24 people mentioned rubbish, litter or fly tipping as a concern.

Stop dumping rubbish, clean their front yards, feeling proud of their street

Throw rubbish away. Pick up litter. Care about others.

Don’t dump rubbish. Clean up their own rubbish

Not dump rubbish and litter ... How do we educate people and help them want to take responsibility for where they live?

I know compared to many things it seems trivial, but I spent my exercise time in the last 2 days clearing some fly tipped items and picking up litter. Why can’t people take their rubbish home - or at least put it in someone else’s bin. The borough would look so much better!

When asked what positive things have taken place during the pandemic many found things to be grateful for

I have a new greenhouse, it is wonderful!

I have always walked a lot but to prevent my walks from becoming boring or repetitive I have loosely themed each one eg. linking parks, canals, docks, airport and various combinations.

Almost daily walks around the area alone or with one other

Being able to go for walks in my local park

When looking to the future a number expressed a desire to see local action in improving and enjoying the local environment

Improving the environment together

I’d like to see some activism in the community - doing something about litter, flytipping etc.

Countryside walks and day trips.

I think environment is something we can have some control over locally. The council has revealed some plans for beautification of certain areas – planting, murals, shop fronts etc. All that helps. But I think art has a huge part to play in how we feel about the place we live, It can lift the spirit.

Conclusion

At the time of writing we are emerging from the 3rd lockdown. This report has amplified the voices of those that have struggled over the past year, some feeling more lonely and isolated than usual, others fearful, still others overwhelmed by the economic circumstances in which they find themselves. But it has also shown that our community is resilient and caring and generous to others.

BDCA can be proud of its Covid response and clearly there were many that expressed their appreciation. There is much in the report that confirms that BDCA provides services that meet the needs and aspirations of its community. However, there are new insights which create opportunities to strengthen the programme further. Significantly, one of the most consistent messages was that people want to build community, which lies at the very heart of BDCA’s mission.





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Credits

**To all those that contributed to the voices For Change programme.
Thank you for trusting us with your stories.**

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The Pandemic reminded us what life is for. It revealed what is our greatest weakness but our most precious strength too: our need for each other.

The Guardian Weekly The Lost Year 16th December 2020



"Working together to change lives and transform our community"

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