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Learning from the Lewisham COVID-19 Response Hub

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Introduction

This report is based on a study of the official, borough-wide *Lewisham COVID-19 Emergency Response Hub*, referred to here as *the Hub*. The Hub was operational March-August 2020 with the aim of delivering information, food and a befriending service during the national lockdown to isolated, vulnerable people with the help of volunteers.

The study was commissioned by Lewisham Local/Rushey Green Time Bank (Lewisham Local) and London Borough of Lewisham (Council). It came about because the Hub was keen to capture the specifics of the borough's experience. Their aim was to use lessons learned from participant reflections to inform the development of the voluntary and community sector and future recovery plans. This report is therefore primarily a case study of the London Borough of Lewisham experience, documenting how and why the Hub was developed, what it achieved and what is to be celebrated. Importantly, this report also identifies the challenges that were faced, points to lessons learned, reflects the unrelenting intensity of the work and makes recommendations based on an analysis of the data.

At the time of writing, other relevant reports were emerging. The most salient of these is published by the Carnegie Trust¹ on the operations of four other Hub areas in the UK. These were Scarborough, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and Lancaster. The main findings of that report were also evidenced in the Lewisham Hub. However, the larger size, extensive partnership and demographic profile of Lewisham makes this Hub particularly distinctive. This evaluation foregrounds the experience, critical reflections and voices of the partners and their associates, including the challenges they faced and the road ahead. Where participants mentioned the significant contributions of the many local organisations, faith groups and individuals that contributed in the area independently of the Hub, they are also noted.

Background

By the end of 2020, a COVID-19 vaccine was being rolled out and more were in the pipeline. While this offered much needed new hope, the pandemic that led to a worldwide shutdown at the start of the year was still continuing to threaten lives and livelihoods. In the UK, 2020 saw two national lockdowns and a series of area-based restrictions based on a 'tier system'. The disease killed many thousands and the lockdowns destroyed businesses, produced mass unemployment, threatened an economic recession and impacted people's long term physical and mental health.

To protect the health system from total collapse and reduce the spread of the virus, the UK government urged everyone to limit their contact with others. Those with particular health vulnerabilities were to be 'shielded', which meant they were not even to go out for essential supplies. This left many people isolated and without food and medicine. There were others who were socially or economically vulnerable because, for example, they worked in precarious jobs. They were left with the impossible choice of continuing to operate or facing economic ruin and hunger. More than three million people went hungry in the first three weeks of the UK's COVID-19 lockdown.² School meals, breakfast and after school clubs collapsed. Existing economic and social inequalities grew, increasing poverty and pushing larger numbers onto universal credit. Though everyone was at risk of catching the virus and being harmed by the consequences of the lockdowns, some groups were particularly

¹ Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency, Pippa Coutts, Hannah Ormston, Lauren Pennycook, Ben Thurman, September 2020 https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/09/30090419/LOW-RES-4685-C19C-Community-Hubs-Case-Studies-1.pdf accessed 28 December 2020

² Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown, Rachel Loopstra, 14 April 2020 https://enuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/report_covid19foodinsecurity-final_1_3.pdf accessed 18 December 2020

vulnerable because of pre-existing social inequalities. Reports pointed to people in some social groups being at greater risk of death³, a decline in mental health⁴ and/or destitution⁵.

Early on in the first national lockdown, Rachel Loopstra⁶ reported on the hunger crisis during lockdown. Key findings included that:

The COVID-19 crisis has also created new economic vulnerability for people experiencing income losses and self-isolation.

In addition to economic vulnerability, self-isolation and a lack of food in shops has created new dimensions of food insecurity in the UK: people being unable to acquire the food they need because they cannot go out and/or because food supplies are not available.

There are some key groups who are more likely to experience food insecurity than others, including those with incomes that are in the very bottom of the income distribution, people who are unemployed or not working for other reasons, and people with disabilities.... adults with children and adults from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups.

The extent of food crisis was also expressed by Anna Taylor, Executive Director of the Food Foundation:

*millions of people in the UK will need food aid in the coming days... as the coronavirus outbreak threatens to quickly spiral into a crisis of hunger unless the government acts immediately to reinvent the way we feed ourselves. In just a few weeks, the pandemic has exposed the extraordinary fragility of the food system.*⁷

In addition to economic inequality, there were concerns about existing social inequalities. In particular, there were anxieties around the disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and other groups recognised under the Equality Act 2010. Issues facing Black communities, leaders and organisations⁸ were highlighted by organisations and activists at a national 'Emergency community conversation' in April 2020.⁹ The event featured three recurring themes:

- Emergency resource needing to reach BAME communities

³ Covid-19 death rate in England higher among BAME people, Denis Campbell and Haroon Siddique, The Guardian, 2 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/02/covid-19-death-rate-in-england-higher-among-bame-people>, accessed 15 December 2020

⁴ Testimonies collated from people with protected characteristics in: rapid evidence review of the impact of COVID-19, October 2020 London. <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/7479db42-892f-4a05-bbc5-ce1d7c2a0390/rapid-evidence-review-inequalities-in-relation-to-covid-19-and-their-effects-on-london> accessed 28 December 2020

⁵ Destitution in the UK 2020, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Glen Bramley, Janice Blenkinsopp, Jenny Wood, Filip Sosenko, Mandy Littlewood, Sarah Johnsen, Beth Watts, Morag Treanor and Jill McIntyre, December 2020, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020>, accessed 15 December 2020

⁶ Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown, Rachel Loopstra, 14 April 2020, https://enuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/report_covid19foodinsecurity-final_1_3.pdf pages 1-2, accessed 18 December 2020

⁷ COVID-19 latest impact on food, Anna Taylor, March 2020 <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-latest-impact-on-food/>, accessed 23 December 2020

⁸ Impact of COVID-19 On The BAME Community and Voluntary Sector, Karl Murray, The Ubele Initiative, April 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f9e592440243412051314a/t/5eaab6e972a49d5a320cf3af/1588246258540/REPORT+Impact+of+COVID-19+on+the+BAME+Community+and+voluntary+sector%2C+30+April+2020.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2020

⁹ The Emergency Community Conversation, hosted by the Ubele Initiative, streamed live 27 April 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWTLx0Snqag&ab_channel=TheUbeleInitiative, accessed 15 December 2020

- A need for community voices to be included in the solutions
- High food insecurity and need for culturally appropriate food

More reports of the lockdown experience were published from summer 2020:

- August 2020 - confirmed that police use of stop and search increased by 40% during the first national lockdown¹⁰
- September 2020 - APPG report on the increase in collaboration between local authorities and faith groups.¹¹
- September 2020 ¹² A Greater London Authority commissioned review of the impact of COVID-19 on existing inequalities
- October 2020 - Partnership Young London report on how the lockdown was impacting on young people, pointing to a looming mental health crisis amongst young people¹³
- October 2020 - testimonies from people with protected characteristics in London¹⁴
- December 2020 - the Office for National Statistics highlighted BAME communities facing ‘threats to their mental health, incomes and life expectancy’¹⁵
- December 2020 - the Local Government Information Unit circulated the findings of The Carnegie Trust report into four Hubs in the UK¹⁶
- December 2020 - Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported on the rising costs and reduced incomes facing disabled people and their carers¹⁷

¹⁰ Stop-and-search use in London rose 40% in lockdown, figures show, Martin Beckford, The Guardian, 25 August 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/aug/25/stop-and-search-use-in-london-rose-40-in-lockdown-figures-show>, accessed 15 December 2020

¹¹ Keeping the Faith: Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic, APPG Faith and Society, 2020 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa7ae58266c07fe6b48eb76/t/5fabcd1475ae8b92bcf64f30c/1605091658307/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf, accessed 30 December, 2020

¹² Rapid Evidence Review – Inequalities in relation to COVID-19 and their effects on London, Greater London Authority, James Nazroo, et.al., <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/7479db42-892f-4a05-bbc5-ce1d7c2a0390/rapid-evidence-review-inequalities-in-relation-to-covid-19-and-their-effects-on-london> accessed 28 December 2020

¹³ Checking in: Voices of young people during lockdown, Partnership for Young London, October 2020 https://3532bf5a-d879-4481-8c8f-127da8c44deb.usrfiles.com/ugd/3532bf_56fa265265814f3c81435adf51fafa5c.pdf, accessed 15 December 2020

¹⁴ Rapid Review Of The Impact Of COVID-19 On Those With Protected Equality Characteristics in London, Karl Murray and Yansie Rolston, The Ubele Initiative, October 2020 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58f9e592440243412051314a/t/5f7d95645a8dd315c8ec4dd8/1602065770242/Ubele+Rapid+Review+-+VCSE+Analysis+report%2C+October+2020.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2020

¹⁵ BAME Groups hit by Covid ‘triple whammy’, official UK study finds, Philip Inman, The Guardian, 14 December 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/14/bame-groups-hit-by-covid-triple-whammy-official-uk-study-finds?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other, accessed 15 December 2020

¹⁶ Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency, Pippa Coutts, Hannah Ormston, Lauren Pennycook, Ben Thurman, September 2020 https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/09/30090419/LOW-RES-4685-C19C-Community-Hubs-Case-Studies-1.pdf accessed 28 December 2020

¹⁷ Briefing: The financial impact of COVID-19 on disabled people and their carers, JRF, December 2020 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/financial-impact-covid-19-disabled-people-and-their-carers>, accessed 15 December 2020

Methodology

This study was commissioned by two of the Hub partners - Lewisham Local/Rushey Green Time Bank and London Borough of Lewisham. Goldsmiths, University of London was asked to carry out this research as the local university. The Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies was well suited to this as it has a strong ethos of community engagement research and an appreciation of cross sector collaborations. A locally based senior academic with expertise in community development and youth studies was appointed to conduct the work. The researcher co-designed the study with the commissioning partners but gathered and analysed the data independently. The data gathering commenced in September 2020 when the crisis measures put in place in March 2020 were transitioning into their next phase.

A new emergency service for the people of Lewisham had been formed during the first national lockdown and the purpose of this study was to gather the reflections of those involved in delivering the service during the six months of operation. There was a sense amongst the commissioners that there had been a uniqueness to the shape of the emergency response in Lewisham and that it needed to be identified and showcased along with key areas of learning to strengthen future local collaborative partnerships. This informed the approach to the report, which aims to show how Lewisham Council and some of its funded voluntary sector organisations changed their operations to work together in delivering a response, detailing some of what was achieved. The voices of people who were delivering the response and receiving feedback directly from users is at the centre of this work, noting the main features, successes and highlighting challenges they faced and lessons that can be learned. Alongside this, there is a recognition of the recovery issues and prospects for continued expansion of community engagement.

Carrying out any qualitative social science research study during the pandemic and lockdowns was challenging, not least because most people were limited to working from home and operating through online platforms. One effect was a mushrooming of online surveys during the first national lockdown. For this evaluation, however, the commissioning group and researcher agreed semi-structured interviews could be more effective in gathering different perspectives and reflective accounts across the Hub partner organisations. It was agreed that emerging themes would be presented to a wider voluntary and community sector event to launch conversations allowing for online participant observation of the conference.

Methods

The broad framework of open-ended questions was co-produced with three people from the Hub leadership group. The questions were adjusted depending on whether the interviewee was a politician/strategy lead, hub partner staff member or volunteer. 17 people were interviewed for the study after they responded to an invitation that was sent out through Lewisham Local. Additional data was gathered from a two-day conference in November 2020 organised by Lewisham Local on the experience of the Hub response.

As the first lockdown was ending at the point that the interviews took place, they elicited retrospective accounts and reflections on the experience of intensive work that had just been completed. Questions were agreed with the commissioning group and centred around 4 main topics:

- a. the participant's role, involvement and hopes for the work
- b. their perspective on what worked and any unanticipated challenges that arose
- c. how far particular social groups were reached and how well their needs were addressed
- d. hopes for future work

All interviews were transcribed, anonymised and uploaded to Nvivo 12 for thematic coding. An initial analysis based on key themes was presented to the conference and revisited in the context of those discussions, desk research and responses to the initial findings. Desk research included a review of relevant selected reports and guidance documents. These included the guidance for the phone line staff, example case reports, questions used for internal monitoring and review, and a report of agencies that referred people to the Foodbank. Relevant websites, YouTube videos and publications were also reviewed.

Unexpectedly, the interviews gave people who had just been through the intense experience an opportunity to process some of what they had been through. People spoke proudly and positively about the achievements of the Hub whilst also recounting difficulties and frustrations. Fatigue, a sense of responsibility, the unique pressures of that period and sometimes also an experience of loss were seen and heard in the mix. One interviewee reflected that being able to recount what happened as part of the interview process felt *almost cathartic*. It was evident that the lockdown experience overall was intense and impactful for everyone involved.

Initial themes and findings from the interviews were presented to the conference, which included workshops and speakers related to the future of the voluntary and community sector. The conference, attended by 117 people, proved to be valuable in highlighting new stories, activities and issues that are included in this report. New voices and perspectives were heard at the event allowing for a more rounded analysis of how the partnership worked and the challenges they faced. Through the event, it was possible to include new reflections from organisations that had been involved around or alongside the Hub. It also clarified the new context that local authorities were operating in, including severe fiscal struggles caused by central government's austerity policies and inadequate funding for the COVID-19 response.

Huge thanks go to the people who so generously shared their memories, reflections and experiences during the interviews and conference and made this report possible.

Executive Summary

London Borough of Lewisham has long had an established commitment to partnership work and a Main Grants Programme supporting Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations. Just before the national lockdown came into force in March 2020, Lewisham Council and VCS organisations came together to form an effective local emergency response. They created a Hub of five partner organisations that coordinated emergency support. There were three strands to the Hub's purpose: food parcels, befriending relationships and practical help.

The Hub was a dynamic and evolving partnership. It was based on strong pre-existing relationships between the VCS organisations and their structural links to the Council. These were solidified through the success of the operation. The partnership demonstrated strong leadership and initiative in setting up the Hub. A high level of dedication from everyone involved in the delivery process was evidenced. VCS and Council strategy leads provided essential facilitation, expertise and connections in community development and cross-sectoral work. During the crisis, organisational boundaries became temporarily permeable, allowing some staff to be redeployed in support of the Hub. This was especially valuable where people had relevant skills for the role. In addition, organisations embedded in local communities were willing, responsive and agile collaborators, able to mobilise existing networks effectively.

The Hub created a valuable new website and a telephone line, which was the single point of entry into the open access system. A one entry system supporting delivery by multiple organisations enabled calls to be triaged and duplication to be minimised. The emergency phone line proved essential in the crisis and some form of open access service continues to be needed for people pending or otherwise unable to secure referral.

A large number of volunteer opportunities were generated and there was a surplus of applications from potential volunteers. In the process, the partnership engaged newer communities, received positive feedback from residents and gained new local information and expertise in managing the complex process at scale.

The combined impact of the virus and lockdowns increased unemployment, poverty, homelessness and other significant social issues. Given the challenges identified through the study, a connected three-pronged approach is needed as part of a Lewisham recovery plan based in collaborative partnerships:

- Relieving residents' immediate problems - through a mix of casework, advocacy and an infrastructure of support. These could aim to identify needs and process them holistically. A mix of social prescribing, open access provision and mutual exchange that takes account of the full range of basic needs and local diversity is recommended.
- Creation and investment - in local jobs, businesses, cooperatives, affordable housing, public health and connecting communities. Partnerships have a key role in facilitating these.
- Democratic renewal and community engagement - addressing root causes of social and economic inequality. It is recommended to promote a shared sense of agency through local deliberative democracy, promoting solidarities and supporting wider campaigns or movements for change. This involves recognising individual problems or cases are part of wider social issues requiring policy and structural change.

As the size and profile of the Lewisham population is considerably different to case studies reported on by the Carnegie Trust¹⁸, this report begins with some important details about the Lewisham profile and what makes the borough distinctive.

¹⁸ Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency, Pippa Coutts, Hannah Ormston, Lauren Pennycook, Ben Thurman, September 2020 https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/09/30090419/LOW-RES-4685-C19C-Community-Hubs-Case-Studies-1.pdf accessed 28 December 2020

London Borough of Lewisham Demographic Profile

Notably, the population of London Borough of Lewisham is significantly larger and more diverse than the areas considered by the Carnegie Trust. Lewisham is also growing, expected to reach 318 000 in 2021, with 46% of the population falling into the ‘BME’ category.¹⁹ According to London Borough of Lewisham’s Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee review²⁰:

- In the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation, Lewisham ranked 48th most deprived nationally of 326 local authority districts. This compares to a ranking of 31st for 2010, and 39th for 2007.²¹
- Lewisham is the fifth largest inner London borough and the thirteenth largest in London.
- The population has increased at around 1.7% to 1.8% per year and this growth rate is accelerating very slightly each year (less than that of most inner London boroughs).
- Within the resident population, occupational class is changing. In Lewisham, between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of the work force in higher-skilled occupations rose from 46% to 57%, the third biggest percentage point rise across all London boroughs.
- Lewisham has a slightly **younger age profile than the rest of the UK**. Children and young people aged 0-19 years make up 24.5% of our residents, compared to 22.4% for inner London and 23.8% nationally. Lewisham has approximately 39,000 pupils within its 90 schools.
- Statistically Lewisham also **has a lower percentage of the population over 65** than the national average and comparatively with other London boroughs.
- Lewisham is the 15th most ethnically diverse borough in the country with approximately **40% of Lewisham residents being from black and minority ethnic backgrounds**. This rises to 77% within the school population, where over 170 different languages are spoken by pupils.

The Lewisham Way

Although the borough has high levels of deprivation, residents of Lewisham take pride in their ‘blue borough’. They turn out in their thousands to ‘Lewisham People’s Day’ festival, organise neighbourhood events and many join community organisations. The current Corporate Strategy under the leadership of the Mayor Damian Egan notes:

*Since the early 1970s, when the Council was led by Andy Hawkins, we have fostered and developed a proud tradition of working alongside residents and community, voluntary and faith groups in the Borough. We like to call this way of working ‘the Lewisham Way’, and it’s part of what makes Lewisham different.*²²

By the early 1980s, this approach had allowed Lewisham to develop a large and well-funded VCS to support and engage marginalised communities. At that time, there were additional funds available from central and regional

¹⁹ Corporate Strategy 2018-22, London Borough of Lewisham <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/corporate-strategy>, accessed 13 December 2020

²⁰ Overview and Scrutiny: Demographic Change, Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee, June 2017 <https://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s52135/Demographic%20Change%20in%20Lewisham.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2020

²¹ Office of National Statistics, File 10: local authority district summaries on English Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>, accessed 30 December 2020

²² Corporate Strategy 2018-22, London Borough of Lewisham <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/corporate-strategy>, accessed 13 December 2020

government. Cutbacks and a rolling back of the state began in the mid 1980s and remain evident in present day austerity measures, leaving local councils with limited scope and close to bankruptcy. Local authorities repositioned themselves from the 1990s as less about direct service delivery and more about ‘enabling’ and engaging their citizens. Lewisham also restructured its governance arrangements, introducing a directly elected mayorality led by Sir Steve Bullock, the commissioning of more Council services and new structures of citizen engagement, ranging from local ward assemblies to Young Mayor elections. The thinking behind the Lewisham Way has been that:

If local action is to be realised by citizens it is important that public agencies provide opportunities for people to engage in decisions which affect their localities, and that these processes are characterised by disclosure, transparency and informed participation. (Quirk, 2006:370)²³

For the current directly elected mayor, Damian Egan:

We are aware of the challenges that face our citizens locally and of the important role our partners play in addressing them alongside us. We know that it is only through strong and effective partnership working that we will deliver better outcomes for our citizens.²⁴

The Lewisham COVID-19 Response Hub exemplified this partnership approach.

Food Banks in Context

Foodbanks were normalised in the UK years before the 2020 crisis and the number of food bank users was rising.²⁵ The causes of food poverty and food insecurity were not just individual problems caused by a lack of self-management and idleness. They were located in the macro-economics of high global food prices and rising energy bills, national austerity policies, low benefit payments and a labour force in precarious jobs, under-employed and low-paid.²⁶ A report on ‘Feeding Britain’ in 2014 called for a renewal of the welfare state *so it can better reflect and encourage the relationships which contribute to the wellbeing of our citizens, including the poorest.*²⁷ The strategy included the promotion of *horizontal cooperation, a local point of contact, coordination of food waste and local action.*

Food bank need grew further, just before the national lockdown, when supermarket shelves were stripped bare through panic-buying and the supermarkets were unable to keep up with demand. Food banking was a direct response to austerity:

²³ Innovation in Local Democracy: The London Borough of Lewisham, Barry Quirk, in *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 357 – 372, June 2006

²⁴ Corporate Strategy 2018-22, London Borough of Lewisham <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/corporate-strategy>, accessed 13 December 2020

²⁵ Biggest Ever Increase In UK Foodbank Use, Trussell Trust, April 2013 <http://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/06/BIGGEST-EVER-INCREASE-IN-UK-FOODBANK-USE.pdf>, accessed 30 November 2020

²⁶ Putting Food on the Table, Roger Green, Tom Henri, Jim Campbell and Bethan Greaves, Goldsmiths, May 2014 and Food Poverty and Charity in the UK: food banks, the food industry and the state, Pat Caplan, Goldsmiths, May 2020

²⁷ Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, December 2104 https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/feeding_britain_report_2014-2.pdf, accessed 20 December 2020

*Social action, particularly faith-based social action, is a significant driver in the development of the food banking model. As Dinham has noted, under New Labour, faith groups and religious actors became increasingly involved in the provision of social welfare (Dinham, 2009). Yet as the socio-economic-political context shifted from Blairite communitarianism (sic) to Osbornian austerity and Cameron's Big Society we can see how food banking provides a model to continue social action, increase voluntarism, localism, and at least a partial filling of the void left by welfare retrenchment.*²⁸

It seems counter-intuitive to think that supermarkets that donate to foodbanks might benefit from doing so, but some analysts have pointed to the emergence of a foodbank industry²⁹ that suits corporations that need an outlet for their waste. Unfortunately, such food normally can't meet people's nutritional needs. Food banks were used as an emergency band-aid during the national lockdown but, on their own, are clearly not intended to be a solution to food poverty. Key findings from evaluating the Hub are presented in the next section.

Key Findings

Partnerships are not new to Lewisham but the COVID-19 situation threw up new circumstances where a joint Council and VCS response was a suitable option. This section evaluates the creation, purpose, development and achievements of the new formation and some of the challenges that arose.

A PURPOSEFUL AND EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

The Hub started life as a unique collaboration of five organisations, gradually expanding to include a wider range of partners, as can be seen in Figure 1. The Hub was a dynamic and evolving partnership that allowed for gaps in provision to be filled with additional expertise. This became evident from an analysis of the composition of the partnership, an examination of the core group and what partners brought to the emergency response.

The core partnership was a cross-sector collaboration. Four VCS organisations came together with Lewisham Council to form the Hub. Each gave up much of their normal operations in March 2020 to combine their expertise and coordinate a borough wide service in the face of the first national lockdown.

Lewisham Council was funding some of the work of the lead organisations involved in the partnership through its Main Grants Programme. The Council also had a large staff resource and connections that it mobilised. Many different departments were involved, most notably the Culture and Community Development and Public Health teams. As the Council was already providing funds to some of the main partner organisations, it was this particular relationship that allowed the organisations to agree a suspension of normal duties and redeployment to the COVID-19 emergency response. Age UK (Lewisham and Southwark) was a specialist in supporting older people; Voluntary Services Lewisham (VSL) had expertise in befriending, volunteering and transport; Lewisham Local /Rushey Green Time Bank had an existing volunteer recruitment and project management base. Lewisham Food Bank, while not funded through the Main Grants Programme, was brought into the core partnership after the initial discussions because it was already operating the essential food distribution and was ready to scale up.

²⁸ Putting Food on the Table, Roger Green, Tom Henri, Jim Campbell and Bethan Greaves, Goldsmiths, May 2014 p.10

²⁹ It's not the hungry who gain most from food banks – it's big business, Kayleigh Garthwaite, The Guardian, 25 March 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/25/big-business-food-banks-subsidise-reputation#comment-127309325>, accessed 3 December 2020

The partnership was continually expanding during the lockdown to address emerging needs, involving organisations such as Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency (GCDA), Advice Lewisham Partnership (ALP) and Fareshare.

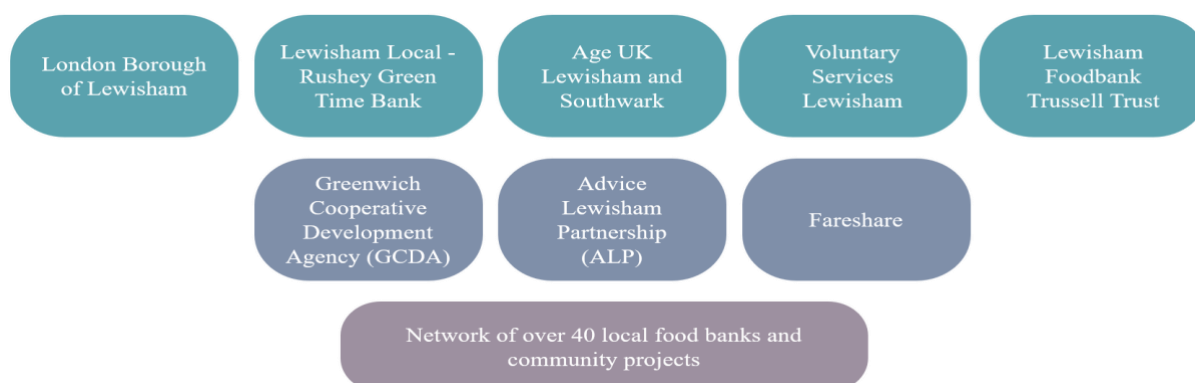


Figure 1: The first row shows Core Partners, the second row shows Key Associates and the third row shows the network of Associate Organisations

There were also parallel or independent activities operating in the borough. While it is the official Hub that is at the centre of this report, some of the other work in the borough was mentioned in interviews and became more visible at the conference and through desk research:

- Shielding team
- Mutual aid groups
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups
- Faith organisations
- Businesses, employers
- Educational institutions

The original partnership came about because proactive leaders in the VCS and Council, who held strategic roles within their own organisations, were seeing the upcoming emergency and experiencing a growing demand on their own services. The VCS organisations began to coordinate their ideas back in February 2020 and approached the Council. Leaders in the Council had been having parallel internal discussions, so when the sectors came together in mid-March, they were able to plan an emergency response.

While some local authorities were keeping their COVID-19 response in-house and separate from anything communities might organise, Lewisham and the local authorities considered by the Carnegie Trust collaborated with VCS organisations. These Hubs created new structures based on existing relationships and values that were flexible and responsive and served to strengthen partnerships. In Lewisham, the aim in coming together as Hub partners was to coordinate emergency support across the borough to people who needed food, friendship or practical help. The significance of this is not to be underestimated given that in 2014 a local report³⁰ had recommended greater coordination of organisations involved in food redistribution. During the pandemic, Lewisham’s response stood out:

At points I was involved in the conversations with the government teams as well, so we got a sense of what was going on in other boroughs...it felt like we were probably one of the few to

³⁰ Putting Food on the Table, Roger Green, Tom Henri, Jim Campbell and Bethan Greaves, Goldsmiths, May 2014

lean so heavily on the voluntary sector delivery of a response. Others used internal teams, resources and systems to do it.

The collaborative and cross-sector approach was not pre-designed or planned. It was based on a calculated risk, grounded in project work, existing structural relationships between the Council and some of the organisations and the Lewisham Way ethos. The original groups had already built up a high level of trust and cooperation from working together on another partnership, called Community Connections. The pre-existing relationships allowed the organisations to rapidly agree to work together with the Council on the Hub. Those relationships were the basis of the resilience that was needed in the face of the unexpected challenges they met during the five months of the Hub's operation.

RAPID RESPONSE OF AGILE ORGANISATIONS

Once the partners had met and agreed to go forward in mid-March, the Hub was quickly set up. Within a week there was a website and an open access telephone line that people could call for emergency support centred around 3 key offers: food parcels, practical help and befriending. There was daily problem solving and system checking in meetings.

In the extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic there was no time to go through normal lengthy approval processes, so a channel for direct communication between senior Council staff and VCS agencies was put in place. The new Hub partnership relied on trust between the organisations, pre-existing connections, a willingness to be flexible and pooling assets. The Council's commitment to using some of the organisations it was already funding was key to delivering the official response. The VCS organisations responded speedily, redeploying their assets with funder approval. Emerging from grass roots movements in the past, these organisations had identified unmet needs and established themselves as experts in their field. Their governance structures were able also to withstand the increasing complexities involved in a mixed economy where mutuals, community interest companies, consultants and social enterprises were also seeking contracts to deliver local authority services.

The success of the Hub filled Lewisham's Main Grant Funded VCS with confidence in their capabilities, recognising that in order to survive and thrive in the future, they may need to work in multiple partnerships, see their boundaries as more permeable and seek funds from elsewhere, especially given the Council's anticipated budgetary crisis.

CROSS-SECTOR COOPERATION –BEYOND INDIVIDUAL ORGANISATIONS

The experience of VCS partners was described in positive terms:

It was amazing what can happen when there is suddenly enough money and manpower that can be spared. It becomes very enjoyable to work with the Council in this way. To be asked 'what do you need' and to be given what is needed. If not all then at least some.

Another innovation was that the Council redeployed a large number of staff to work on the Hub - some went into community organisations as volunteers and others were redeployed to work on the emergency response in other ways. Overall, the spirit of the operation was one of organisations re-orienting their work and individuals pulling together with clear purpose. Staff from the VCS felt:

There was a commitment to creating something bigger than our own organisations

...we're all in this together and not just top-down decisions. It was all co-produced – not with the whole community but with the partners involved it was all equal partnership. There wasn't really one imposing force.

In this instance, each partner organisation was respected for what it brought to the table and responded with full commitment.

A SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT

The key mechanism for accessing the service was a telephone line described as *the single point of contact*. People who answered the calls assessed people's needs with the following offer in mind:

- People who could afford to pay: VSL delivered a standard parcel for £20 (broad dietary options available, eg vegetarian). Age UK Lewisham and Southwark Food2You could arrange supermarket delivery. People aged 50+ with an underlying health condition or symptoms of COVID 19 could be referred to Good Gym for a volunteer to do a tailored shop for them up to the value of £20. Or they could be supported around gas/electricity top ups and dog walking support
- People who couldn't afford to pay; they would need a referral and the phone line could help identify a suitable referral pathway and direct people to other sources of free food
- People who were asked to self-isolate for 12 weeks by the government or their GP: they were to have government delivery of free food parcels. If the parcel didn't arrive, the service provided parcels through VSL
- A VSL volunteer 'befriender' could be offered to call someone who was lonely or isolated once a week for a social chat or the phone line could call back if there were concerns about the individual
- People identified as having a low mood, unsupported mental health illness, at risk or needing financial advice could be referred to a range of specialist agencies
- People wanting to volunteer or make donations helped by the phone line

Every partner was proud of the front door created by the Hub: a website and contact telephone line that was the single point of entry into the open access system. A one-entry system supporting delivery by multiple organisations enabled calls to be triaged and duplication was minimised. All concurred that having one way into the service allowed it to be effective. The telephone assessment process was thorough and guidance was given to people carrying out the assessments. The process ensured that the people being supported were genuinely in need and guided to the most relevant support available. In addition:

The phone line is massively empathetic to people, people felt listened to ...It reassured people, it gave them somewhere to go when they didn't have anywhere to go.

Similarly, the feedback from service users to the organisations was that the coordinated websites were consistent and clear.

One of the benefits of the coordinated partnership was that when an organisation came across a need that they couldn't help with, they could refer it back to the Hub for it to be addressed in another way:

There were lots of people with very different dietary needs, family needs, that sort of thing. They could refer them across and we could pick that up.

THE SHIELDING TEAM AND CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

The Council set up a parallel *shielding team* to process data sent over by central government on people in the borough who were to be treated as *clinically extremely vulnerable* and not to go out at all. The residents on the shielding list had underlying health conditions and the role of the team was to find out which of the people on the list didn't have a network of support. They could be provided with emergency food parcels and practical assistance such as dog-walking, shopping and befriending. The shielding support was a huge and complex operation that involved up to 80 Council staff phoning the 11, 000 people on a shielding list. 44, 000 contacts were made in six months.

It was just crisis management, there's no other way of describing it. The hope was we would do that well. The fear was, which was probably driving us more than the hope was, that we would find somebody that we hadn't got hold of and they'd been dead for two weeks because we hadn't got them in time or we hadn't got the food to them.

Fortunately, the shielding service and Hub between them ensured that the worst did not happen. During the three weeks it took for the shielding team to fully set up its operations, the Hub was the only essential open access support across the borough. Once the shielding team was fully functional, it used a mix of telephone calls and door knocking to check in with people who were shielding. They could refer cases where food or befriending support was needed to Hub partners. The shielding team also found *complex cases* that were well beyond the Hub's scope and needed to be referred to NHS responders or social work specialists.

One of the key lessons learned by Hub leaders and the shielding team was that a data analyst needs to be involved:

Having a data person gave so much reassurance that we weren't going off on the wrong position and gave us this level of constant scrutiny. I don't know how we would've functioned without it.

The data analyst also resolved a major software incompatibility issue that arose because the Hub used a CRM platform called *Salesforce* but the shielding team decoded the government supplied data on a different platform. This complicated the coordination process and data from the shielding team had to be manually transferred until a data analyst *built a whole new CRM from scratch to support the Hub*. At a time of urgency, complexity and extraordinary demand, resolving the complications around data systems was time consuming.

All partners found the shielding responsibilities confusing. For the Council, the problem was that the government was making frequent changes and updates to the duties and guidance.³¹ The Council's shielding team and strategic leads supporting the Hub tried to keep up with constant alterations to communicate them to the partners. But the government's changes caused confusion around who was and wasn't eligible for shielding support. This was also reflected amongst local residents: in June 2020, Healthwatch Lewisham, an independent healthcare champion organisation, surveyed Lewisham residents and found:

confusion around shielding eligibility. Numerous residents that felt that they were at high risk of getting seriously ill from coronavirus should have received a shielding letter. People were not aware that they could raise this issue directly with their GP.³²

Added to this, the shielding team came across wide ranging and complex problems that were sometimes beyond the remit of the Hub:

We identified social care cases that weren't known to Social Care, we got people prescriptions where they were really struggling to get anything... they weren't able to get to their hospital appointments so they were getting worse, their clinical waste was piling up.

The breadth of offer, in an ideal world, would've been a bit more... if you can't empty your clinical waste bin and its piling up, that's no good to anybody, and it's only going to escalate to a hospital admission or whatever. So we needed to work out ... things like housing issues ... not to solve the problem, but we may have been able to get the maintenance team there.

³¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/guidance-and-updates-for-gps-at-risk-patients/>, accessed 29 December 2020

³² Healthwatch Lewisham (2020) The Impact of COVID-19 on Lewisham Residents p.45

Individuals did their best to identify ways to support residents with wider support needs. Now the issues have been identified, future planning needs to take account of them.

THE FOOD PARCELS AND LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

There were two types of food parcel. There was food provided directly by the government for people who were shielding and there was the partnership's food box for anyone who came through the phone line. The government's food parcel was very limited and didn't have fresh food so people found it inadequate. Instead people were requesting the partnership's box which was more thoughtfully put together. This was clear from the feedback organisations were getting from service users:

we were getting texts every day, people would call up to thank us, emails, it was just lovely. It really made you feel 'yes I am making a proper difference'.

The demand for help with food had existed before the pandemic.³³ The need rapidly escalated as more people were plunged into food poverty by losing jobs. Others were told to shield which meant that they couldn't go out to buy food, causing worry early on that it might not be possible to keep up with demand. There was also concern that there might not be sufficient food, as there were supply chain issues causing national shortages of many essential items. Indeed, a lack of food in shops was identified as the cause of 40% of food insecurity experiences in the first weeks of the lockdown and exacerbated food insecurity for adults who were economically vulnerable to food insecurity.³⁴

To address this, the partnership extended to the second tier of organisations identified in Figure 1. They included GCDA, Fareshare, Phoenix Community Housing working in partnership with Lewisham Local and Lewisham Council. Lewisham Council arranged bulk purchasing of food for the Hub and Lewisham Local and GCDA set up a surplus food hub based at the housing association's Green Man location with surplus food donations from Fareshare. The size of the operation escalated to 1.5 tonnes of surplus food delivered each week to around twelve community organisations. The Hub distributed over fifty tonnes of surplus food. This scale-of-demand raised logistical issues that meant, for example, that a storage depot had to be found. Despite this, the partnership succeeded in getting food parcels out quickly and helped people in desperate circumstances.

VOLUNTEERS AND ACTIVE CITIZENS

The partnership coordinated the humanitarian response of local organisations and people. This was especially extraordinary given that individuals were, like the general population, largely working from home. They had family commitments of their own to take account of alongside these rapid changes. Without help from major national NGOs or the military, they set up the logistical operations with an army of volunteers:

Food banks require large amounts of volunteer labour: collecting donations, sorting and storing them, date-labelling, making up food parcels, greeting clients and checking their entitlement via vouchers, and attending training sessions and meetings.³⁵

³³ below the breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain, Niall Cooper, Sarah Purcell and Ruth Jackson, June 2014 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/01/Below-the-Breadline-The-Trussell-Trust.pdf>, accessed 23 December 2020

³⁴ Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown, Rachel Loopstra, 14 April 2020, https://enuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/report_covid19foodinsecurity-final_1_3.pdf pages 1-2, accessed 18 December 2020

³⁵ Food Poverty and Charity in the UK: food banks, the food industry and the state, Goldsmiths, May 2020 p. 38

There were a large number of people wanting to volunteer. Nearly 2, 500 people signed up as volunteers across the Hub as a whole. In addition, there were people *spontaneously volunteering*³⁶ with other organisations. This phenomenon was reported by the National Council for Voluntary organisations when large numbers of people responded to the Grenfell fire using volunteers' knowledge of their communities, supported by local networks, which helps them to be more flexible, responsive and innovative.

In Lewisham, during the lockdown, the volume of sudden interest was so large that not every volunteering request could be accommodated. Most of the Hub partners had expertise in supporting and managing volunteers and they took on as many as they usefully could. One of the partner organisations went from 100 to 700 befriending relationships and from 70 volunteers 300 on weekly telephone calls. With the donations they received, they employed a volunteer coordinator and social media manager to support the work. There were similar stories across the VCS partners around the tremendous growth of volunteering.

Going forward, there is scope not only to review emergency plans, but create a wider range of opportunities for people who want to and can volunteer. The volunteers were repeatedly described by interviewees and conference participants as 'heroes' who ensured people received essential supplies. Their skills and experience were invaluable to the Hub:

They were just able to problem solve quite well and brought lots of different ideas and there was definitely a difference in the energy ... It was very good.

People were turning up to deliver food on their bicycles. There were people from refugee backgrounds, normally perceived as receivers, who were helping partnership organisations. There were also many examples of mutual aid groups, businesses, individuals and employers responding to calls for help with food and money.

There was little involvement of under-18s amongst the official volunteers. This was partly because schools and colleges remained operational, even where students had to study from home. In addition, the VCS Hub partners worked primarily with adult volunteers and didn't have expertise in engaging the younger age group.

Remarkably, people who could, sought to use their time and skills in a humanitarian response. They demonstrated their empathy and solidarity within their community, contradicting the view that people are inherently lazy or greedy. The Furlough scheme helped to demonstrate that a universal income regardless of employment status would most likely significantly increase citizen engagement and improve localities.

COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

The Hub partners coordinated the service through daily online Zoom meetings and the telephone line. The meetings became the mechanism for working through complications, developing solutions and maintaining the wider relationships. The implications of the frequently changing government guidance and data monitoring were among the key issues. Frequent but necessary discussion of such dry and complex issues was frustrating at times. However much they may have felt like a burden at times, the meetings were core to the democratic approach. Transparency was needed to maintain trust and manage problems at a time when staff and volunteers were themselves dispersed and away from the workplace.

³⁶ Five Lessons From the Past About Spontaneous Volunteering in Emergencies, Oliver Chan, NCVO, 9 April 2020
<https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2020/04/09/five-lessons-from-the-past-about-spontaneous-volunteering-in-emergencies/> accessed 8 November 2020

The coordination by the partnership meant that huge resources from food and money to volunteer time was channelled to support thousands of people. A coordinated collaboration that pooled partner resources, knowledge and expertise mitigated the risk of duplication and missing people. Each partner drew on its assets and wider networks. Going forward, a higher profile could be given to the full range of organisations delivering in communities through, for example, the central Lewisham Local website.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Residents supported by the Hub and the Shielding Team appeared to be struggling more as time went on:

At the start the calls we were making, of course with exceptions, everyone was quite jovial, 'oh this is fun, bit of a lockdown, its fine, its great'. Then there was a marked increase in anxiety, stress, pressure. Sense of loneliness, isolation, despair, some really serious things coming out of people and were really tricky and challenging. Some people were dying, or family members were dying, COVID linked or not.

The extraordinary level of humanitarianism took a toll on those who were organising it. By August, people running the Hub were exhausted – physically and emotionally. They were also concerned about whether the Council could continue to fund them when they returned to their normal roles. Staff from the Council and the VCS running the partnership spoke about long hours of work, *working on adrenaline* and a feeling of fatigue towards the end of the lockdown: *those 14-hour days were pretty standard, and I knew that everyone else was doing pretty similar.*

Through all of this, the people interviewed from across the sectors kept those they were trying to support at the forefront of their minds so that people who were hungry could eat, people who were lonely could talk to someone and people who could be helped by a volunteer were.

The pressure that I felt was that there were people out there that had every support network they've ever had switched off, and desperately needed that contact to check they were okay.

While they were proud of their achievements in the crisis, there was also evidence of sadness, grief and a deep sense of loss amongst some of those who had worked the emergency response day in and day out:

We lost half a dozen members (service users) during that three to six months. Which is quite hard when you're doing all the other work... It's very hard to grieve, and we talked about that as an organisation and with other organisations about how we support each other's organisations to grieve the losses that we've all been through, and there's not been very much time to do that either, because so much needed to still happen.

Amongst the volunteers there were some qualified therapists who might have been able to provide some grief counselling or other forms of psychotherapeutic support. Post-lockdown, there is potential to explore this with Lewisham's providers of therapeutic services and create some therapeutic scaffolding for people who contributed to the first emergency support service. Some free counselling and bereavement support for those who can't afford it is also needed. This also suggests that there is potential for training up more mental health and well-being professionals whilst broadening projects that promote physical and emotional resilience.

THE REACH OF THE EMERGENCY SERVICE

Issues of food poverty and health vulnerabilities were a national issue during the lockdown and needed to be part of the local emergency response. There were also concerns amongst BAME organisations and the youth sector about support for particular communities and young people. All four areas are considered in this section of the report.

The reflections from interviewees produced a rich sense of what may have been taken for granted under the unprecedented pressure to deliver a borough-wide speedy response:

We know this pandemic hit the BAME community hardest, we know that it hit people with low socio-economic status hardest as well. The assumption is they were the people coming to us by default.

Equalities data to verify how far particular groups were reached was collected part way through the lockdown. At the best of times, it is difficult to obtain data on service user backgrounds. In the context of an open access emergency response, this was less of a priority in the early weeks when arrangements were being put in place to ensure supplies were issued fast to people who were calling in. When equalities data collection processes were introduced, the information was taken on the telephone calls. It was complicated by concerns around the sensitivity and potential intrusiveness of asking for personal details of people *calling you in desperate need of something*. The dilemma was resolved by supplying people on the telephone lines with prompts they could use in the conversation. Lead partners reported that the data showed food parcel requests were coming in from areas of the borough characterised by the highest levels of deprivation:

We were certainly reaching demographically and geographically representative populations. As would be expected, we did get a lot more calls from the more deprived parts of the borough. We reached the people we should've reached.

Hub partners concluded that they were supporting those most in need. The borough's population has, however, been undergoing rapid change over the years. Some areas of deprivation have seen population churn, with an increase in higher earning professionals migrating into the borough. To verify who was served, interviewees were prompted to reflect on the reach of their work to people who might be considered vulnerable, were from households with a low-income, people from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds and/or young people, so the findings on the reach of the service are viewed from those lenses. Given the demographics of the borough outlined earlier in this report, many people who were vulnerable are also likely to have been low-income and/or from BAME backgrounds.

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV)

At the start of the lockdown, the government recognised that particular people were in need of protection from contracting the virus due to their health status. The broad category of *clinically extremely vulnerable* was created and those who fell into that group were advised to *shield*. Whereas most people were permitted to go out for an hour's exercise or visit shops for essential supplies, people in the CEV group, and their household, were advised to minimise the risk of contracting the virus by not going out at all. The government issued food parcels for people in the CEV group and provided local authorities with data about that population.

London Borough of Lewisham set up a parallel phone line dedicated to the CEV cohort, known as the 'shielding team'. There were up to 80 redeployed Council staff calling everyone on the lists to find out if they needed additional support that couldn't be provided by friends, neighbours or relatives. While the data from the government was being processed and the shielding team was being set up, people were helped with food and befriending through the Hub's single point of contact. The Hub's food parcels were seen as better and were received more positively than the government's food parcels, so when the government's parcels arrived, people fed back that *they wanted the VSL food parcels and not the governments*.

Hub partners were satisfied that they were able to supply people in a wide range of crisis situations with food and befriending:

I think we definitely reached the most vulnerable people in Lewisham. We could see that from the profile – we got a lot of calls from people who are currently homeless, people with really severe mental health issues managed to get in touch with us. We also initially were able to refer to the food bank directly.

An additional strain was placed on the system when the food bank reaffirmed its referral system. The hope was that the referral partner could also support people to tackle issues that made them need food. However:

We had to find, for each person, a suitable referral partner. That made us see that we were working with the clients who take up a lot of time because we could see that people are involved with so many different services that are not aware of each other. We had to work contacting Mind, Athena, 999 club, all these different partners who would be working with one client.

Pre-COVID, food banks operated through people coming in to collect their food parcel but during the pandemic, food parcels were delivered. This proved to be a mixed blessing for people who were vulnerable:

For large families, people with disabilities, those with anxiety about travelling during COVID and older people, it is much easier to have parcels delivered. A 7-day parcel for a large family is very bulky and heavy. On the other hand, there are many clients who missed the chance to come to the centre, have a chat and a cup of tea and see familiar faces.

There were a wide range of support needs encountered by the shielding team that went beyond the food and friendship that the Hub offered:

- Fuel poverty
- Need for advice and information (employment/benefits/legal)
- Access to the internet
- Access to Council services – waste collection/ cleaning/ disability badges
- General household needs – from changing lightbulbs to home adaptations
- Housing need
- Anti-social behaviour reports and concerns
- Increasing and severe mental health need
- Health issues
- Need for carer
- Support/assessment
- Support and activities for children
- Transport and travel support
- Worry or concern about others (neighbours/family members)
- Translation services

These are important areas to provide support around in the future.

Children and Young People

Very early on in the pandemic, it became known that older people were particularly at risk of complications if they contracted the virus whereas young people were reported as showing fewer symptoms or being *asymptomatic*. In this context, it seemed fitting that the phone line was run by Age UK Lewisham and Southwark - an organisation that specialised in supporting older people.

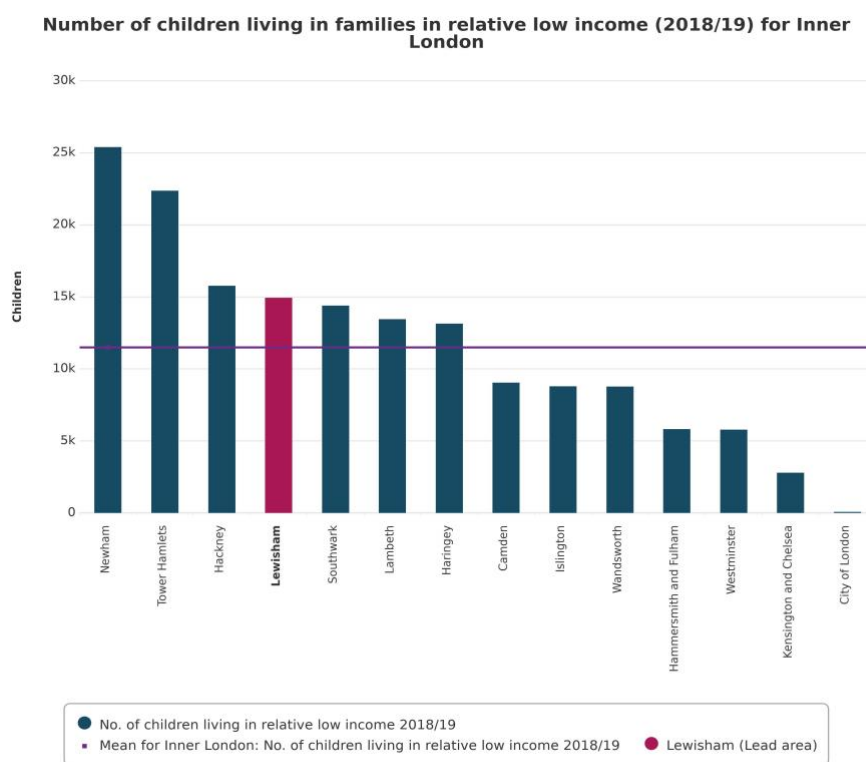
While children and young people may have been more physically resilient to the virus, they were nevertheless significantly affected by the lockdowns in other ways. Many organisations across the country were raising the alarm and between the two national lockdowns, football celebrity Marcus Rashford shone a light on the vast numbers of young people with inadequate access to food in Britain. His campaign mobilised so many people to organise that it forced a government U-turn. In Lewisham, the Mayoresses of Lewisham and Mayor Damian Egan

supported the Marcus Rashford campaign to provide a free school meals service out of term time and mobilised communities and businesses to support school students during the October half term³⁷.

London Borough of Lewisham has a high number of children living in relative low income families who may have been in need of support during the lockdown. As Figure 2³⁸ shows, in the year before the national lockdown, the borough ranked fourth highest of inner London boroughs with children living in relative low income.

Except for children of critical workers and students in alternative provision, children were at home during the first lockdown. They had to adjust to online schooling, disruption to assessments and isolation from peers. There was no special provision for young people through the government’s food box. Indeed, it wasn’t even adequate to support families with very young children:

The service catered for family. We did a lot of requests for people with young children struggling to access diapers. The thing is, we were able to cater to babies, but we weren’t able to cater to children, so people would call and say can we have sweet things, breakfast cereals, stuff for children, because the boxes were all standard, we weren’t really able to do that.



Source: Department for Work and Pensions

Powered by LG Inform

Figure 2: Number of children living in low income families across London

³⁷ Lewisham to fund free school meals over half term, Newshopper, 23 October 2020, <https://www.newshopper.co.uk/news/18818324.lewisham-fund-free-school-meals-half-term/>, accessed 28 November 2020

³⁸ Number of children living in families in relative low income (2018/19) for Lewisham, Dept. for Work and Pensions, https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lstandard?mod-metric=13621&mod-period=1&mod-area=E09000023&mod-group=GreaterLondon_Inner_London&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup, accessed 29 December 2020

The Hub assumed children to be included in the context of being part of families in need.

I think it's very hard to tell when you're in the midst of things and I think that could've been a better strength, actually.... We knew we were benefiting some under 18s through food parcels for family sizes. We collected data on household size when someone requested a food parcel. In terms of direct provision to under 18s, I'm not aware of any provision that the Hub had so it was definitely more focused on adults.

Staff and volunteers working the food packing and delivery had made small adjustments to the food boxes that might make a difference to children:

We always like to put treats in the bag, and we try to make them age appropriate. We picked up things like if somebody had a birthday, we would go and get a cake from Co-op or wherever and chuck that in and things like that. I think it's one of those things that the packers really enjoy, that they can select those things. Because obviously everything else is pretty standard, we have a set of things we put in each week, but those little bits make it so it's like you've really personalised it.

Organisations that worked specifically with young people were not part of the planning. For example, the phone line was organised by Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, whose area of expertise is with the over 50s age group.

I think what we struggled to do was effectively join the dots between the different bits of Council response. I feel we struggled to engage colleagues from our Children and Young Peoples Department effectively enough, and initially they were doing their own deliveries and their own thing for families. Once they saw the success of the Hub they just stopped that. So we didn't necessarily have the strategic conversation around children. The food bank did a lot of work supporting people to access free school meals and vouchers associated with that but I think it's an area we didn't explicitly explore in enough detail.

There was no VCS youth specialist organisation in the partnership but the Council held responsibility through the Children and Young People's Directorate. Youth First, the organisation delivering youth services, and Young Mayor youth democracy programme were not invited to be part of the initial crisis response:

we didn't think about age group at all. That was a fault in our system. I suppose we only started to clock that because the phone lines started to tell us they had some young people. Not a massive number, but they did emerge over the course of the pandemic.

Consulted for this report, Lewisham Young Advisors group suggested future offers be extended beyond family parcels to *mini food packs* for young people. Supplies for children and young people would require consideration in any future food related emergency response.

Nevertheless, there were some examples of redeployed Council staff and volunteers who were familiar with local provision ensuring extra information went out to young people in the family packs:

We would give people a lot of information in the bag, we made people aware of the SE London energy company advice around bills and energy use, we sent out a lot of the Borough of Culture news that was going around, all the arts that was going on live, we had Youth First leaflets. I contacted a lot of the organisations that I work with, saying 'just send us the leaflets, we'll put it in there', we put in some wellbeing leaflets, so the national '5 ways to wellbeing' leaflets, all sorts of things like that to personalise them.

Similarly, redeployed Council staff working the shielding phone lines improvised when needs went beyond food and befriending, using their networks and knowledge:

I certainly had a few conversations about what they can do ... or what the virtual Youth Offer looks like and how it may be helpful. That kind of feeds into the variants of support, so I would only do that and by the chance that that's my world, not because we thought that was important and met the needs.

The schools were not part of the Hub response but they played an important role in supporting young people and their families:

What we noticed during COVID was that many schools (primary in particular) decided that they needed to prioritise helping their vulnerable families to get food. They invested very much time in helping people to access free school meals vouchers, refer them to us or provide food and other resources directly. If school staff hadn't been available to divert their time to this, it would have been very difficult for families to receive help. Single parent families and those with three plus children are disproportionately likely to be foodbank users. We had conversations with a number of school staff about how they would like families to be able to access more advice and support in the community.

Lewisham Young Advisors³⁹ reported that young people had vital needs that extended beyond food, such as:

*Educational equipment ...the government did promise computers but didn't provide them
People need access to mathematical equipment like scientific calculators or folders
Travel support and bursaries (cost of travelling to school or college)
Mental Health support
Physical activity opportunities
Activities to relieve stress*

The Hub partners had come across issues around internet connectivity:

because schools were closed the pupils were all at home and had to do their homework online, a few families called us who didn't have access to technology, so we were able to refer them to one of our partners, who was able to provide devices and train people on how to use them and link up to Wi-Fi of a neighbour or someone willing to help. I think we had about 20 people maybe in that scenario.

There was a gap in knowledge across the Hub about how older young people may have accessed support:

I think from a gut feeling, that we're probably missing the young people, the 16-25, I don't think they've got many organisations that can refer them. I don't think there's been a lot of youth work, it doesn't exist anymore. It's possible we're not really connected well with those groups.

Some of those young people may have been furloughed, on precarious contracts, in further or higher education, self-employed or out of work. Given the age profile of the borough's population, this is an important area to address going forward.

³⁹ Feedback from Lewisham Young Advisors Meeting 7 December 2020

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Communities

During the lockdown, BAME organisations at national level raised questions centred around access to emergency resources, the involvement of BAME voices in solutions and the availability of culturally appropriate food. Though these matters are important even where people from minority ethnic groups might be small in number, the 2020 Carnegie Report focus is limited to ‘vulnerable’ people – the report does not identify racialized backgrounds. Lewisham has one of the largest BAME populations in the country, so these are important questions for this study.

A challenge acknowledged by Hub partners was:

how you make sure everyone’s needs are catered for, while working at such a capacity. I think we did that to some extent but I think there’s always more that can be done, and particularly learning for the future.

The key to enabling the speedy, coordinated response to emergency need was the new single point of contact, which was universally viewed as a success. In order to access the phone number, people needed to know it existed. Some interviewees reflected that:

not everyone knew how to get help or knew that help was out there, so how do you get the messaging out to people, how do you do that for people who aren’t online, who might not speak English, making sure as quickly as possible that people could get food that met their needs.

Hub partners ensured that their users knew about the phone line. Other community organisations could do the same when they were linked in. Spreading the word about the Hub was a key task that wasn’t easy to achieve when staff were working from home. Leaflets and other forms of publicity were circulated around the borough, including through letterboxes, the communications of Hub partners and their project networks.

Further challenges were around the accessibility of any publicity for people who couldn’t read English and the fear of people whose status meant they had no recourse to public funds:

A lot of people are much more likely to come forward for help if they see someone on the street or a neighbour or a trusted person or group they’re already working with.

This sort of snowball effect was also in evidence at other times. For example:

We had lots of Spanish speakers all of a sudden. Part of that was someone from the Spanish community had been referred to us, they told other people, but what we found out was that a lot of them were from, I think the Dominican Republic, who had come to mainland Spain, got their EU status, moved here, and they were working in office cleaning contracts. Which obviously went overnight. A lot of them didn’t really have much English, they didn’t know they were entitled to benefits. Some of them, if they did know, were paying people to fill in their forms, because they couldn’t speak English. Where they had families, they didn’t know they were entitled to free school meals. So there was this huge amount of stuff that we were able to link them up with, so it wasn’t just about getting them some food, it was about trying to ease that situation for them.

Lewisham is a sanctuary borough for migrants and refugees⁴⁰. This was reflected in the referrals:

⁴⁰ Lewisham Borough of Sanctuary Strategy: A welcoming place of safety for all 2020-2025, London Borough of Lewisham <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/community-support/refugees/migrants-and-refugees>, accessed 28 December 2020

We had a lot of referrals from refugee organisations ... It highlighted for me how many different communities we have who are struggling and the breadth and depth of the food poverty.

For Hub staff, these were experienced as new community engagements:

I'd say one good outcome is that we are working with many more people, we know how to signpost them better. And I think having that information and the Council seeing the information about people, that can't be ignored anymore. I hear now about these people who've got these complex needs and are living on the edge and anything like [the COVID crisis] could tip them over. I think it's really good those people are being brought into the light, as it were. So we now know who they are, where they are, what their situation is. The example for us is the Latin American Community who in April, end of March, a lot of them suddenly lost their income. They were in very insecure work, they didn't have employment rights, they were in hospitality, cleaning, sectors like that. Some of them [have] illegal status and very afraid of the authorities. So I think we've got something like 150 households that we've been helping. We had to recruit a Spanish speaking volunteer to work with them. We just put in an application for a Spanish Speaking advice worker, and we're setting up a Latin American foodbank with another organisation. We're capacity building that community organisation as well because they would never have gotten that level of support.

Such encounters were successful in building new connections and understandings. Particularly around facilitating support for new international migrants.

The borough is also home to settled BAME communities, with over 40% of the borough's population being from BAME backgrounds and the largest ethnic groups being from African or Caribbean backgrounds.

I know a lot of places are very ethnically diverse, but Lewisham does have the third largest BAME community in the UK.

Several BAME-led VCS organisations linked up around the periphery of the Hub response as time went on, but none were at the centre or involved at the start. This affected the balance of volunteers:

Two of our centres were based in Black-majority churches, so were mainly Black volunteers in those two centres. The other two centres were more mixed, probably more white but with a few people from ethnic minorities. Since lockdown, we've lost a lot of those volunteers, and the volunteers we've picked up for the moment, it's more white.

On Saturday, we're reopening up our Catford centre, which is in a black majority church and the volunteers are all Black there.

We attract a lot more white volunteers than we do BAME volunteers which is disproportionate to Lewisham's population

...maybe people with more middle class professions were more likely to be furloughed, so they weren't doing front line care work, they weren't doing transport type jobs.

This wasn't the case across the board. There was a partner organisation where most of the 400 volunteers were *Black, and older people and some with disabilities* while *the staff team are all white*. It was the staff team rather than the volunteers that were engaged in shaping the delivery. All the core partner organisations were staffed by white people, except for some of the Council staff. Involving more BAME-led organisations in the partnership might have helped to engage more BAME communities in volunteering for the Hub and provided input into culturally relevant food. This may also have helped with befriending. A white volunteer reflected that while they had been able to provide essential practical support to someone from a Caribbean background, they also

felt slightly unfamiliar with the cultures of the people I'm speaking to... I suppose I feel I would be able to support them more if I was more familiar ... or they'd appreciate someone from their direct community.

It may well be that there are people that better understand what is appropriate, what questions to be asked and where they should be seeking particular types of matches. They do brief you on various things... but I suppose they could potentially have some suggested questions or conversation points that might help a cross-cultural understanding.

The borough has a long and proud history of Black-led VCS organisations providing services in the borough during the 1970s and 1980s when there was a sizeable and influential Black community sector. While funds for the VCS have decreased over the years, London Borough of Lewisham Main Grants Programme supports the development of a BME Network. The network has 90+ organisations and aims to bridge the gap between BAME communities and *the mainstream* through *collaboration*. Going forward, they may be a further source of potential partners.

Hub partners recognised that there was an issue relating to *dietary requirements and more relevant food*. The Hub partners were responsive to the issues as they came to light, making adjustments to the offer and significantly improving the government's food parcel:

The breadth of diverse food offer changed throughout the process. At the start it was vegan, or vegetarian or not, and then it grew into halal or diabetic. But still, there's a million variants of that which probably weren't quite right for everybody. But we certainly did better than the government's approach which was 'like it or lump it'. We certainly tried to be more variable than that, but there's always probably more that you can do.

A significant segment of the borough's older population is from African-Caribbean backgrounds but the food parcels did not appear to take sufficient account of the extent of this need. The Calabash Centre, a day centre primarily for Lewisham's Black elderly since 1985, which has supported the social connection of elders from that community along with the availability of a meal was closed in March 2020 in line with government guidance around shielding of vulnerable older adults. This meant that an organisation that might have been mobilised to provide culturally relevant meals was not immediately available. To support Asian, African and Caribbean elders with culturally relevant food through a hot meals delivery service, a small fund was directed to the Familia Project. They also provided some phone befriending, virtual well-being activities and Zoom based healthy walks, working in collaboration with a network of Black and Asian businesses, including local shops and restaurants. In addition, an independent surplus food hub was set up by a local Black businessman with strong roots in the Black community⁴¹. This experience compelled some of the BAME-led organisations to prepare the construction of a new formalised infrastructure that could build partnerships to access funds in support of those communities and organisations.

There was more diverse involvement through local faith and independent organisations. At the VCS conference, some of Lewisham's mutual aid groups reported being supported by faith groups:

A local church provided some food including 'cultural food' like yams that Fareshare couldn't source.

⁴¹ Ziggy, Voices of Lewisham, London Borough of Lewisham, <https://www.iamlewisham.uk/voices-of-lewisham-ziggy>, accessed 17 December 2020

Some of the faith organisations were involved around the Hub's periphery through their links with Lewisham food bank, which is a franchise of the Trussell Trust and a faith-based organisation:

So a lot of our centres are based in church buildings, and we have connections with the churches, and certainly ... church people have been very generous with their donations, but also them being able to refer people they knew that were in need. In some cases, churches set up their own mini food banks. This is across the borough. Some had little projects and they made them bigger, so we were working with Salvation Army for instance, their hubs. I know other churches were expanding what they were doing, just offering some food parcels, not just to their congregations, but to anybody in need around them of some faith or none.

I personally have been part of the interfaith forum, so have a good relationship with the local Imam, and the representatives of the local synagogue. We've seen some gifts coming by the synagogue. I haven't had much contact with the Imam, but they tend to be brilliant at doing food and acts of mercy and kindness, again not just for Muslims, but anybody in need around them.

In a situation where food banks stock standard tinned, processed and packaged items, there may be space for engaging a wider range of faith groups with expertise to provide support to diverse communities, taking account of nutrition for medically vulnerable people and meeting culturally diverse needs at the same time.

When the number of new independent surplus food stores began to increase, Hub partners were essential to help with coordination:

As the stores were estate based, there weren't major transport issues in distributing the food and Lewisham Local proved vital in bringing together different community groups to share food and resources... we were all linked in and able to share what we learnt and make requests for what was needed.

Mutual aid groups that contributed independently to the crisis during and after the first lockdown included Familia (African-Caribbean meals); Create Without Borders (with a Refugee Café); Legendary Community Club (organising food through schools and hot meals in Youth First youth clubs on rotation), Feed the Hill (a social supermarket/pantry). The two-day conference provided a valuable opportunity for the mutual aid groups to link up with wider VCS networks.

Future Hopes and Recommendations for Partnerships

The benefits of working in partnership were strongly evidenced in the Lewisham response to the first COVID-19 national lockdown and it remains vital to build on this way of organising in recovery. The Hub's partnership approach, rooted in the Lewisham Way, demonstrated that a coordinated collaboration that pools partner resources, local knowledge and expertise can be stronger and wider than delivery by a single agency. Participants were keen to see it continue:

I would want to see the partnership grow, which it kind of is doing.

I think it's been really good to come together and work in that way and I think it gave us a lot of visibility.

At the start of the crisis the robust response was centred around addressing people's basic physiological needs, providing essential food items and some social connection through a volunteer befriending service. However, as a report on foodbanks stated:

*Food poverty is rarely a thing in itself but also involves issues of housing, debt, and mental and physical health.*⁴²

In Lewisham, as in most parts of the region, the issues that have come to the fore include:

- Mass unemployment – grown significantly since the end of the furlough scheme and business closures
- Digital exclusion – greater need for connectivity, free broadband and access to appropriate and accessible technologies
- Food and fuel poverty – growing extensively
- Homelessness - more people in fragile housing situations, rent arrears and other debt
- Mental and physical health crises – deepening issues
- Policing – rising and disproportionate use of stop and search on particular groups
- Economic and social inequalities – exacerbated during the pandemic

Given the scale and seeming intractability of these, the question is not whether partnerships should address them but how they can contribute going forward. It is recommended that partnerships working on any of these issues frame their work using a connected three pronged approach:

- Relieving people’s immediate problems
- Creating and investing in new jobs, housing and public health
- Democratic renewal and community engagement

Relieving people’s immediate problems

Providing coordination and support for a short term and immediate response through casework, advocacy and emergency supplies remains necessary. Thinking about the future, one participant commented:

My desire is that it becomes absolutely the same beacon for people to access what they need through the voluntary sector, a simplification of our referral processes and access systems. Something that is well recognised by partners at the NHS, police, housing associations etc, but also in the public mind as well in the way that I think Lewisham Local really was. That’s my vision for the Hub and what that needs is a wider, vibrant voluntary and community sector, and is able to sit beneath or behind that. Physically meet the needs because there’s no point in having a central point that everyone goes to if there’s very little behind that in terms of actual delivery. So what I want to ensure is we don’t get too focused on how do you access stuff, and remember that what’s important is there’s stuff there to access.

The Hub infrastructure, now called Community Connections Lewisham (CCL) continues to grow its triaging work. It is recommended that this work is developed so that support for individual and families increasingly takes account of broader individual circumstances and issues noted above. CCL was revised in September 2020 to provide a strong response to the immediate problems people faced after the first national lockdown with the same core partners: Lewisham Local/Rushey Green Time Bank, VSL, Age UK Southwark and Lewisham, working closely with Lewisham Foodbank. CCL merged pre-existing projects ‘Community Connections’ and ‘Lewisham SAIL’ to provide a phone line. CCL is focused on social prescribing to support adults with befriending, practical assistance, finding social and leisure activities and general signposting to appropriate partners. Another free phone

⁴² Food Poverty and Charity in the UK: food banks, the food industry and the state, Pat Caplan, Goldsmiths, May 2020 p.18

line was set up by Advice Lewisham Partnership providing information, advice and guidance about bills, work, renting or family matters including advice on debt, housing, welfare or employment issues.

It is recommended that the Hub's experience of partnership working is used as a basis for growing new collaborations. Conversations with mutual aid groups, faith organisations, BAME community groups and other sectors can identify ways to nurture CCL and foster other partnerships. Funders are increasingly keen to support joint work and knowledge exchange and multi-party bids can consciously support smaller organisations and increase organisational learning. The Hub is a strong case study to showcase Lewisham's successful and reflexive partnership approach. Already, learning through reflection and new conversations is leading to potential new partnerships and ideas to support young people.

Collaborating groups can actively address gaps by reflecting on who isn't in the room:

Now it's about the blind spots, how we can improve... working with groups on the ground that know their local communities and people that might not come forward or have a voice.

This does not mean that established organisations do not have a role. It means that established partnerships can use their experience to support the development of work with additional groups and under-represented communities to address the wider issues as part of a Lewisham plan. The Council has already piloted a new measure around this:

an insight tool that is really helping people think about what they can do better in terms of equalities... CCL is going to be audited using this insight tool to see what it is about our operations, about the way we run that is meeting or not meeting equalities. That's one of the ways we're going to address some of the issues around representation.

Developing partnerships based on a range of expertise with multiple partners and sectors extends community reach and allows a fuller range of needs to be addressed. Until this is effected, the valuable existing social prescribing work is recommended to be supplemented with an open access route to guarantee service accessibility for people struggling with referral processes.

Creating and investing in new jobs, housing and public health

It is vital to look beyond the short term in developing existing and new partnerships. It is recommended that they focus on supporting the growth of jobs, housing, business, health and related areas. There is an urgency and hope for partnerships to address those wider issues:

We all do social things, mental health, isolation, but we need to do something about unemployment, it's on our doorstep. And young people need the affirmation and the hope and the ability to achieve, so let's create the employment. ... People are saying let's just invest in infrastructure, so let's ditch some of the stuff we were doing and do that instead. I have no idea how you create employment but get together and start thinking about something, or doing things differently, so there's a recovery, through employment. There may be other schemes and things we can do.

New collaborations around such major challenges call for some reimagining and planning activities:

Because the issues of poverty and unemployment are so big, you can't just do it on your own, but together you can. We've shown that by sharing our assets we can do a lot more. So, for me, that would be the way forward. Don't wait for another crisis. Have a look at what needs to be done and say we are going to do this together. I think the new thing should be proactive.

It's about getting together with the partners and saying 'what can we do now together', so don't go back to your normal work, and they deal with the potatoes, we deal with the carrots, they deal with the tomatoes, like before. There's a need, things have changed, let's get together and design a collaboration to do better together than each going back to our bubbles.

The government's Furlough scheme demonstrated the potential that is unleashed when people have an adequate income along with time to spare. Lewisham saw how people will volunteer to contribute skills and spare time if they are not trying to eke out a living on low pay or inadequate benefits. Similarly, it became clear during the first national lockdown, that people who are homeless can be supported when there is a will to do so.

It is recommended that partnerships are developed to:

- Kick start the creation and investment in local and regional jobs by developing projects, collectives and cooperatives that combine meeting immediate community needs with training and job creation.
- Grow employment and training in a way that links immediate needs with wider issues eg. develop community based cafés, kitchens, banks, gardens or stores
- Map and coordinate a wider range of training and volunteering opportunities as pathways to qualifications and paid work. The pandemic exposed the criticality of medical staff, teachers, social workers, creatives, mental health professionals and others who serve people's needs. Partnerships could explore the expansion of training in such lines of work
- Scope empty buildings and plan how they might be repurposed. The first national lockdown showed how people who were homeless could be sheltered and supported in otherwise empty hotels.
- Create communal neighbourhood centres and kitchens. Along with access to good hot meals, centres can provide information, support, activities and internet access. Groups from different communities could run these on a pop-up basis, supported by community workers. These could be varied, inclusive and act as spaces of community conversations that generate more ideas, neighbourliness, social activities and mutual support systems.
- Campaign for a universal income or another way of providing people with enough money to live on. This is needed as a central plank in socio-economic recovery to allow citizens to access the basic necessities of life with dignity and enable everyone to play an active role in revitalizing their areas.

An approach that addresses immediate needs and wider issues in this way needs to be grown democratically, in the spirit of coproduction, so that they are locally sensitive and culturally appropriate. Partnerships are needed to innovate sustainable projects and bring resources into the area. They can support post-COVID regional or national reinvestments in the local economy as well as coordinate jobs, apprenticeships, work experience and businesses support. The upcoming Borough of Culture is already an opportunity to create new work and skills that new collaborations can be cohered around.

Democratic renewal and community engagement

It is recommended that partnerships be developed on the basis of cooperation to grow democratic engagement. This is an approach that is familiar to the Council and VCS.

Lewisham is a borough that has long promoted democratic engagement and forums for deliberation. It has innovated a citizens' jury, a youth democracy programme, school councils, ward assemblies and much more. Moving beyond the wider crisis, it is recommended to involve all parties in Lewisham in thinking and planning together and refreshing some of the current structures as part of a Lewisham plan post-lockdown.

The development of new spaces of community education, coproduction and conversation across sectors and communities is recommended. Within the Council, *there is already:*

a thriving subgroup of the stronger communities partnership board and in governance terms it makes sense for that to be the coproduction space where lots of the delivery partners can come

together and work with us to do some of the designing... The other really important question I think, for us, is where is the service user voice in this?

Lewisham Local has initiated conversations through its coordination of a borough wide conference for VCS organisations to launch new future planning. The event highlighted the gap between immense social need and growing fiscal debt facing the Council. A collective effort to press for more national resources was called for. It is recommended that this go alongside the facilitation of service user and civil society conversations that engage people in designing campaigns and alternative solutions. While partnerships may not be able to resolve structural matters, they can stimulate engagement with wider campaigns or movements. Black Lives Matter, Climate Change and Free School Meals campaigns are examples where specific events have produced wider debate and awareness. Residents know what their issues are and partnerships can support them to campaign for the changes they need. Partnerships are well placed to grow solidarities by connecting people up and facilitating a shared sense of agency through local deliberative democracy.

It is recommended that other sectors be nudged to join conversations. The Council is already committed to Locality's Keep It Local Network⁴³ but it will also be important to cooperate across providers and borough boundaries. There is no shortage of models and ideas locally, regionally or nationally. At other times of high unemployment, people in the borough formed housing cooperatives, a law centre, community centres and a vast array of community-based provision, youth activism and wider political engagement. Today, the measure of the structural problems are such that wider efforts and social solidarities are indispensable because resolving problems so that they don't recur is beyond the scope of individual organisations.

Addressing challenges in partnerships

The success of the Hub resulted in widespread recognition that partnerships and collaboration need to play a central part in future service delivery. These need to continue. However, maintaining, motivating and growing partnerships is a challenge that requires a high level of commitment alongside a wider perspective. Keeping the purpose and urgency of the work at the forefront of minds during the Hub's work drove it forward. Legacy infrastructures like the food network continue to coordinate food distribution. The campaign to feed school students, led locally by the three Mayoresses and nationally by Marcus Rashford, energised and supported local activity too. The campaign reproduced the vitality of the first lockdown and drew attention to how local action, connected to a national campaign, can produce policy change.

The Hub's VCS organisations grew stronger bonds through working together. Their accomplishments increased self-assurance in VCS capabilities and contributions were highly praised by senior officers and politicians at the VCS conference. Likewise, there was an acknowledgement that Hub organisations had valued working with the Council. Accompanying this, there was a conviction amongst VCS groups that funders, including the Council, could extend greater trust and confidence in VCS organisations in the future. It was hoped there would be a reduced *bureaucracy* and a recognition that partnership with the VCS can't operate on the sort of *command and control* response to crisis seen to be preferred by many other local authorities. During the first national lockdown, partners felt *there was less red tape to cut through* and this was valued by the VCS. Complexity in funding applications, demands for monitoring data and reports were among the areas of activity that VCS organisations wished to see reduced.

After the first lockdown, the Council sought data so that it could review the work:

⁴³ The power of community: Lewisham's response to coronavirus and beyond, 19 June 2020, Locality <https://locality.org.uk/blog/lewisham-response-to-coronavirus-and-beyond/>, accessed 27 December 2020

... the Council is still asking us daily for data on how many people are calling the line, how many people are ordering food, and it's just so much work to get all that done.

Although there had been a *daily information flow and data that was coming through the Hub* during the lockdown, the Council hoped to *think about the metrics*. From the Council perspective, detailed data from partners was intended to support the VCS organisations by reporting:

to councillors, to other people to say look, this is the value that the VCS delivers.

It was hoped that data from social prescribing activities might help the partners to

track the resident from the point of contact when they approach us, all the way to where they went and what they got.

For VCS delivery agents, however, detailed data collection was experienced as a drain and a distraction from their purpose and ethos. It was testing for organisations that had proved their worth, significance and commitment during the lockdown. While intended to be supportive, it is recommended that funders, including the Council, reduce their focus on metrics and the measurement of social value and replace it with agreed purpose and trust in the spirit of partnership. The latter proved to work at the most challenging of times, with organisations being responsive, flexible and agile. Cross sector and community based partnerships rooted in experience and calculated risk are part of the Lewisham Way and proved effective in lockdown. A shift towards a more managerial approach risks losing the positive relations, momentum and good will that had flourished.

Short term funding regimes and frequent monitoring can breed anxiety and organisation-focused thinking. Funders need to see money well spent as much as VCS partners seek stability in order to plan and deliver. Both the Council and VCS partners have demonstrated they are keen to move away from short term and silo based thinking:

This is a massive opportunity for the local authority to get beyond the us and them thing. That we're the funders and we do this thing and we have a boundary. We don't want people to see us like that. We want people to see us as genuinely wanting to work with them for the benefit of the residents. For me that's been a massive value in this.

Similarly, VCS organisations increasingly indicate a willingness to work in multiple partnerships, see their boundaries as potentially permeable and seek additional funds from elsewhere. Assurances of longer term financial security, a reduction in data reporting requirements and less directive approaches could help maintain the high level of dialogue and trust that was established between the Council and VCS Hub partners. To avoid frictions, revised negotiated partnership agreements that balance accountability with trust are recommended.

Conclusion

I think what has been good, and I think what will continue, is those relationships that have been formed, that way of partnership.

The effectiveness of London Borough of Lewisham's COVID-19 emergency response was rooted in a partnership based on pre-existing relationships between a group of Lewisham Council funded voluntary sector organisations and the Food Bank. Strong leadership and initiative was demonstrated by all the lead partners. They proved capable of catalysing new work with agencies outside of their primary group, bringing additional resources into the borough. Together, VCS and Council strategy leads provided essential facilitation, expertise and connections to initiate and deliver an effective response to an unprecedented crisis.

A new open-access emergency phone line proved essential in coordinating and delivering the service. Some form of open access service continues to be needed, especially for people pending, or otherwise unable to secure, referral. During the lockdown, organisational boundaries were temporarily permeable, allowing some redeployed staff to work with the Hub. This was especially valuable where people had relevant skills for the assigned role. Future emergency redeployment planning could consider whether and how it is possible to match people to roles in disaster situations where time is of the essence. Similarly, a large number of volunteering opportunities were generated and there was a surplus of applications from potential volunteers whose enthusiasm now needs to be captured.

Organisations embedded in local communities were willing, responsive and agile collaborators, able to mobilise existing networks effectively. Community or mutual aid groups operating at neighbourhood level enhanced the success of the emergency response. Together, they engaged and reached newer communities and received positive feedback from people who were supported. Where gaps were identified, resources were deployed to address them and additional organisations were incorporated into the network as needed. New knowledge and expertise was gained around unplanned crisis management.

Investment in VCS leadership benefitted Lewisham as a whole and in the future, such opportunities could be extended to people from social groups that were not represented in the partnership. Enabling organisations from within newer communities to co-design and deliver future work and increasing the representation and engagement of the borough's established BAME communities and sizeable youth population are among the areas that need to be addressed in future partnerships. Collaborations could draw on the expertise of diverse faith organisations, LGBTQ+ and Disability groups, being mindful of intersectional experiences and other groups with protected characteristics.

Residents of all ages are a large, valuable and willing resource and more might be done to involve them in existing projects and creating alternative ones, offering a ladder of volunteering, work experience, apprenticeship and employment options with pathways to associated qualifications in partnership - ideally drawing on agreements with the local College and University. Equally, there is potential to extend mutually beneficial collaborations with other sectors, neighbouring boroughs and organisations.

A great deal of new knowledge was gained in the emergency response and can be used to shape future crisis support arrangements and grow local infrastructure in the face of future challenges. Firstly, a holistic approach to supporting individuals and offering access to a wider range of support services is needed. Secondly, there is scope to catalyse local democratic social movements and campaigns for social policy change, particularly around rising unemployment, poverty and hunger. A local economic development plan might address low pay, precarious work practices, under-employment, unemployment and self-employment as well as employment rights, business and enterprise development.

A post-lockdown renewal of local democracy mechanisms will be needed along with a revitalisation of neighbourhood community assets. Local centres can be used for neighbourhood conversations, self-organised groups and community connections as part of a civic plan and campaign for wider change. Lewisham, as London's Borough of Culture in 2022, offers an opportunity to generate and grow a recovery and development plan using

The Lewisham Way to ensure that the services people need are available when they need them and, crucially, that citizens' basic social needs and rights are met. This relies on cooperation, partnership and active citizenship.

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