



# Tales of Covid

By Simon Petherick  
for London Plus

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section One: Process</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Section Two: Experience</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Section Three: Tales</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>75</b>



# Foreword

**Four years on from the first lockdown announcement, I am proud to share our 'Tales of Covid' report.**

Volunteers, charities and community groups kept London going through the pandemic. Across the capital, people came together to make a difference and support communities through Covid-19.

This report is a celebration of their efforts, and an acknowledgment of the challenges they faced.



We wrote this report during the tail end of the pandemic and leave the temporal references unchanged. As a commentary four years on from the pandemic's start, it serves as a reminder of the breadth of work, effort, and the value of charities and community groups across London.

Thank you to everyone who spoke to London Plus as part of this project. It is your stories, your voices, that made 'Tales of Covid' possible.

**Emily Coatham**  
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**The voluntary and community sector is responsible for much of London's survival during this pandemic, and this report essentially remains a salute and a token of gratitude to the people within it.**

**Simon Petherick, Tales of Covid**

# Introduction

**This report is a study of how charity and community groups across all 32 London boroughs worked tirelessly to keep the city alive.**

There are lessons to be drawn from the pandemic years which need to be incorporated in a more formal way into any future London pandemic response and as we tell the stories of the people and organisations who combined to support their neighbours through these terrible times, we will try and draw out those lessons and evidence them. As well as covering all 32 boroughs (plus the City of London), we have endeavoured to explore how the voluntary and community sector supported Londoners across a range of criteria: Health/NHS; Employment; Ethnicity; Faith; Young people; Older people; Bereavement; Food and shopping; Families; Counselling; LGBTQ; Migrants; Vaccination; Homeless; Isolation; Digital exclusion; Domestic abuse ; Social capital; Animals and the Environment.

In addition, we have tried to be conscious of the many different ways in which individuals contribute towards the voluntary and community sector. There are those who volunteer for specific tasks, such as vaccination support or food delivery; there are others who volunteer across whatever tasks their local voluntary group requests; there are those who have paid jobs within charities but who in addition volunteer their own time by

working often gruellingly long unpaid overtime; there are faith groups and social enterprises who have reached out beyond their normal constituencies to offer help to neighbours; and there are countless often tiny mutual aid groups operating at local levels to remarkable effect.

London as we know it today is a relatively recent construct: the city's 32 boroughs date back only as far as 1965, when the London County Council held its last meeting and the Greater London Council took control of a radically altered administrative map of the city. Some of the new boroughs such as Harrow were similar in size and shape as before, while others such as Camden amalgamated previously quite distinct territories. It is useful to remember this when examining how the city responded to the pandemic, for no one London borough is really like another, and nor does one London borough represent London any more than another.

The ways in which charity and community groups engaged with Covid varied from one borough to another and, as our report indicates, the ways in which the three levels of government in the city — Central Government, the Mayor's Greater London Authority and the 32 Borough Councils — interacted with the voluntary sector varied considerably across London. Nor was there the time or the existing London structure to allow voluntary and charity groups to share experiences and learning — sometimes this happened within individual boroughs, but on the whole there was little evidence that a city-wide sharing of knowledge within the sector was possible.

We have deliberately structured this report in such a way as to indicate the endless diversity within London, the way people living in one area experienced life so differently from those in another. It is genuinely difficult, if not impossible, to point to a consistent "London" experience of Covid and lockdown and we have therefore attempted to reflect that reality by allowing a multiplicity of tales to tell their own story. We have done so in three sections: in the first, Process, we examine different examples of the ways in which the sector approached the task; in the second, Experience, we give a flavour of the breadth of emotion and understanding across the sector; finally, in Tales, we tell just some of the stories of the charity and community groups during the pandemic in London.

Our report concludes that the ability of London and its residents to cope with the impact of Covid-19 relied hugely on the many interventions of the voluntary and community sector. By profiling this through so many examples, we hope to flag up clearly the significance of the sector in any future disaster planning. It also leads us to believe that our own work at London Plus in co-ordinating the activities of the voluntary and community sector needs to continue to develop, to enable third sector groups to benefit more in future from the ability to share their experiences and learning. At the same time, the report will hopefully serve as a permanent reminder to all of us of the quite remarkable and selfless performance of the individuals, the many, many thousands of individuals, who collaborated over the last two years to ensure that London kept going. The voluntary and community sector is responsible for much of London's survival during this pandemic, and this report essentially remains a salute and a token of gratitude to the people within it.

**Simon Petherick**  
**For London Plus**

# Process

**The process by which the voluntary and community sector began to engage with the task of supporting London at the start of the pandemic and lockdown varied enormously from one borough to another. This first section looks at the experiences of volunteers in four separate boroughs to give an insight into that variety.**

**Bexley**, sitting on the most south eastern corner of London, is one of those boroughs which most reminds us of the administrative changes of 1965. Previously half of what is now Bexley had been part of Kent and there is still a strong sense of this being part of the commuter belt: a largely green borough with good access to the centre of the city, with a population made up strongly of families seeking a quieter environment in which to raise children. It held the Parliamentary constituency of Edward Heath and today has one of the highest rates of home ownership in London. The borough is not as affluent as some other London boroughs, and it contains the notorious Thamesmead housing project which was famously used by Stanley Kubrick as the backdrop to his apocalyptic film *A Clockwork Orange*. Overall, with a mixed voting record balanced fairly evenly between Conservative and Labour, it is a quiet borough made up of working people choosing to commute in order to live a more relaxed, green, suburban family life.

Dave (name changed at his request) is a good example of a Bexley resident. With over thirty years in the Metropolitan Police, he has raised a family in the borough, taking the boys to football at the weekend, the odd meal out in a local restaurant. In March 2020, as the Covid storm was about to break, a friend pointed out to him the Next Door app ([www.nextdoor.co.uk](http://www.nextdoor.co.uk)). The local Next Door group for his street contained a suggestion from a well-meaning resident that those who would be unable to leave their homes to do shopping during lockdown owing to vulnerability could put a red sticker on their front window. Dave's police experience kicked in, and he joined the group discussion to persuade people not to pursue the idea, as it could literally have become a red rag to criminals seeking to exploit the vulnerable.

During the online discussion, a couple of other residents suggested that a few of them get together to discuss how to help the more vulnerable members of the local community.

Many of the traditional volunteers in this area of Bexley were over 60 and as such, a fair proportion of them were being encouraged to stay at home; this was certainly an impact on the potential activities of Bexley Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), the traditional focus for voluntary work in the borough. Not being aware of the role or even existence of BVSC at this stage, Dave and his new online friends worked out a safe and sustainable way in which they could reach out to local residents who needed support. One of the group was a software engineer, and almost overnight he built a programme to enable them to geographically plot those that needed help and those that wanted to help, overlay the two on a computerised mapping system and appropriately match the two categories. Another member of the team was a retired postman who managed IHB's maildrop. Over the next few weeks, with a gathering number of volunteers and the generosity of local businesses, Isolation Help Bexley ([www.isolationhelpbexley.com](http://www.isolationhelpbexley.com)) managed to design and print and distribute 130,000 leaflets to homes in the borough.

Over the next few months, Isolation Help Bexley had a thousand volunteers on its database, all willing and able to respond to requests from residents who had received a leaflet.

They went to supermarkets to buy food, they went to pharmacies to pick up medicines, they stood on one side of a front garden wall and chatted to people living on their own. One elderly resident told a volunteer that: "If you hadn't put that leaflet through my door, I would have starved to death."

Looking back on it now, Dave is still amazed that in a prosperous London borough in the 21st century, individual residents could have potentially fallen through the gaps in the "system" so rapidly. We have to remember how the relentless media reporting of deaths and sickness from the end of March so terrified so many people that the possibility of starving rather than going outdoors to shop was a genuine reality. Today, he still feels the shame of admitting to himself that, before the pandemic broke, he had no idea that an elderly woman lived on her own in the house across the street.

The group encountered difficulties and problems along the way but, because they were a newly-formed collective of volunteers and as such had no formal constitution or rulebook to follow, they used their common sense wherever they could.

One of the most pressing problems was the fact that local supermarkets were on the whole unwilling to allow isolating residents to phone in to pay for the goods which one of the volunteers was picking up. On some occasions, volunteers established sufficiently strong relations with "clients" that they were able to pay for goods themselves and then get the client to refund them. Also, Bexley Council opened up a card scheme to pay for school meals to the group, which allowed some residents to upload money onto the card which could then be used by the volunteers in the supermarket. Essentially, the group's leaders risk-managed the actions their volunteers could take, and to their credit, they had no instances of fraud throughout.

Within just a couple of months of COVID, IHB and BVSC were collaborating brilliantly. It has developed good practice systems and carries out full DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks on all volunteers engaged in higher risk roles. Despite there not being lockdowns in place, the group continues to work tirelessly for local residents, and at Christmas 2021 delivered Christmas meals to those not able to cook for themselves and also provided lateral flow tests to any residents needing them.

There are many fascinating elements to the story of Isolation Help Bexley, but what stands out most of all is how the group sprang into life as a result of just six residents who had never met before, communicating with each other back in March 2020 and deciding to take action. They did so without consultation with or support from any other organisation, nor were they responding to any "official" request for help. They received no funding and they operated entirely as an unpaid voluntary service. Had they not done what they did, it is difficult to see how many vulnerable Bexley residents in the early months of the first lockdown would have been able to continue living in their own homes safely.



**“If you hadn't put that leaflet through my door, I would have starved to death.”**

**Elderly Resident in Bexley**



Diametrically the other side of the city, **Barnet** is another outer borough which contains many families who choose to live further away from the centre in order to experience a better quality of life. The borough is the most heavily populated of all London boroughs, although it does spread across a wide region of north west London. The North Circular road intersects the borough and the development of Brent Cross shopping centre in 1976 gave the area a distinct character as a focus point for consumer retail, years before developments such as Westfield elsewhere. Historically, it was Conservative controlled for almost its entire existence, although Labour would go on to form the administration from 2022.

As in many areas, Barnet's voluntary sector over the years has sometimes struggled to secure the funding required to run its services. This led a group of voluntary and community organisations in 2018 to form Barnet Together ([www.barnettogether.org.uk](http://www.barnettogether.org.uk)), an alliance between Inclusion Barnet, Volunteering Barnet and the Young Barnet Foundation to provide support, training, resources and advice to Barnet's Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations.

By the middle of March 2020, before the first lockdown started on the 23rd, Barnet Together produced a plan for a Joint Task Force to prepare the borough for what was likely to be around the corner.

Inclusion Barnet CEO Caroline Collier, Young Barnet Foundation CEO Janet Matthewson and Volunteering Barnet director Katrina Baker presented a proposal to the CEO of Barnet Council outlining how a cross sector taskforce to provide support during Covid. This was brought to the council who immediately saw the benefit of combining this structure with its own strategic planning for the Covid response. Barnet Together and the council then co-led a Community Response Strategic Group working across the following areas: adults, children, volunteering, supplies, communities and faith.

From March 2020 onwards, Barnet Together effectively co-ordinated the voluntary sector response to Covid in the borough, and the council significantly increased its funding to the partnership to enable it to fulfil this role. The Strategic Group set up a Covid support website for residents on 17th March and Volunteering Barnet began the process of finding and selecting volunteers. Barnet Together also collected sector data and intelligence to understand needs and highlight gaps in provision. The council set up a distribution hub to enable the provision of food to residents isolating at home. Barnet Together brokered connections with food banks across the borough, and when shielding restrictions were lifted the hub was handed over to Barnet Together to run.

The Hub continues to this day and still gives out around six tonnes of surplus food a week. The data collected by the partnership on the through the Hub and foodbank network now provides the Council and Public Health with accurate information on food poverty which previously it did not have. The Food Hub was one of many examples of innovative responses to the pandemic made possible by the proactive actions of the component organisations in setting up Barnet Together in the first place. Barnet Council quickly realised how impactful this joint strategic approach would be and from the start were appreciative and supportive of the partnership's activities.

The partnership set up a Barnet Community Response Fund to raise money within the borough, raising money from residents through online giving and from financial allocation from the Council; during 2020, they gave out £125,000 in small portions to groups that needed financial support quickly in order to continue to support their own clients. By the middle of the year, just four months or so on from the 23rd March first lockdown announcement, the wider sector had developed and delivered additional support across everything from debt advice to bereavement counselling, to vulnerable children identification. Within the first three months of the pandemic, the partnership gave out over 10,000 food packages to over 750 households and worked across a range of support measures to support both residents and the Council itself.

So impactful has the work of Barnet Together been that the Council has significantly increased the funding it provides to the partnership. This is enabling Barnet Together to grow its offer and achieve even more for the communities of Barnet. It is not an exaggeration to say that Barnet Together, working together with the Council, forms the backbone of the infrastructure of service delivery in the borough. Having created a CEOs network of voluntary and charity groups on the borough, the partnership created a Voluntary Sector Manifesto including all groups within the borough which was formally approved by the Council in 2020 as the strategic vision for working with voluntary services.

The success of Barnet Together has been significant within the borough. The years of austerity across London brought hard times for voluntary groups and often marginalised them as less important elements within the infrastructure of the city. In Barnet, however, this has been reversed through the intelligent strategic vision of the group combined with the dedicated hard work of its members, and now there does appear to be a powerful bond between the Council and the partnership in terms of a vision for the future.



Another somewhat different perspective on the process of Covid response in London in those early days of 2020 comes from Angela Spence, Chief Executive of Kensington & Chelsea Social Council ([www.kcsc.org.uk](http://www.kcsc.org.uk)).

**Kensington & Chelsea**, as with one or two other inner London boroughs, combines pockets of extreme wealth situated literally a stone's throw from areas of considerable poverty. The building of the Westway road in the northern end of the borough at the end of the 1960s created a new faster route in and out of London, but also inadvertently marked off the area of north Kensington as a poorer relative of the more prosperous south.

With the influx of wealthy overseas residents into the borough in recent years, that discrepancy is ever the wider.

Angela is candid about the lessons that both she and all her colleagues in the voluntary and community sector learned from the tragedy of Grenfell Tower in 2017. Looking back on that terrible event, she is able to see how co-ordination between the statutory sector and the many groups involved could have been better and her experience of the pandemic and lockdown have demonstrated to her how much they have all learned from that earlier period.



The Team at Kensington & Chelsea Social Council

She says the process began well in March 2020 when she received a call from Kensington & Chelsea Council inviting her to be part of an emergency response group which later became known as the Community Resilience Group (CRG). This group came to be made up of her own organisation (KCSC), the Kensington and Chelsea Volunteer Centre ([www.voluntarywork.org.uk](http://www.voluntarywork.org.uk)), the NHS in the borough via the West London Clinical Commissioning Group, senior officers from the Council's Communities Team and Public Health Team, the lead for the Council's Hub set up to support residents who were required to shield, Age UK and initially Mutual Aid. From early March, the group met twice a week and continued to do so for the rest of the year.

Before long, Angela invited up to twelve local organisations to fortnightly meetings where she was able to pass on news and information from the weekly meetings of the CRG. She lobbied the Council successfully to ensure that different BAME organisations were invited to share their experiences with council officers which resulted in regular briefings and feedback their own concerns. When in the early days the flow of food out to vulnerable residents appeared to be too slow, KCSC and Age UK teamed up specifically to deliver food and goods, and between them they established an effective working relationship with the major supermarkets which lasted through the initial lockdown period.

Overall, Kensington & Chelsea's response during the entire lockdown period appeared to stay consistent, largely as a result of the determination of the borough's existing community and voluntary sector organisations to maintain a formal structure based on regular direct communication.



**Lewisham** is the 13th largest London borough, an inner-city borough spreading south of the Thames across the water from Tower Hamlets. As an inner-city borough, it's not surprising that it has a higher percentage of young people compared to many outer boroughs, and a consequent lower number of older residents. It's highly diverse, with over 40 per cent of the borough population coming from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Almost half the borough population considers itself to be Christian. Like many other boroughs, Lewisham saw a significant decline in manufacturing during the 1970s and 1980s which led to a growth in deprivation in pockets of the borough. The last ten years have seen a growth in skilled residents moving in.

Sam Hawkesley is the CEO of Lewisham Local ([www.lewishamlocal.com](http://www.lewishamlocal.com)), the charity that has existed for over 20 years serving local communities in Lewisham. (The charity is also known by the name of Rushey Time Bank.) When the Lewisham Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) closed down two years ago after the Council cut its funding, Lewisham Local's role in supporting the community across a range of sectors became much more important. The borough, in other words, no longer had the voluntary infrastructure that most London boroughs retain of Volunteer Centres (VCs) linked to an overall Council for Voluntary Services (CVS), and therefore the existing charities within the area became the focus for those residents needing support.

Just before the March 2020 lockdown, Lewisham Council collaborated with four other organisations — Sam's charity Lewisham Local, the charity Age UK, the longstanding Lewisham charity Voluntary Services Lewisham and Lewisham Foodbank — to form the Lewisham Response Hub. The Hub was successful in a number of areas over the coming months as lockdown hit, and Sam puts this success down to a strategic commitment by all partners of the Hub to adopt a policy of "asset-based community involvement". The urge to combine forces came from both the voluntary and charitable organisations and the Council, so it was a genuine meeting of needs. What this meant in practice was that the Hub members, including the Council, gave each other considerable freedoms to operate in areas where they had expertise. For example, Voluntary Services Lewisham had always been strong in befriending, and therefore once lockdown had begun, they took the lead in this area and in the area of co-ordinating transport support for isolated residents. In other words, through effective joint leadership and a commitment to sharing data and information across the Hub, the partners were able to make impressive steps in supporting the community during the emergency.



The Hub operated primarily through a central telephone line set up in mid March 2020 which allowed residents to phone in their needs or issues. Those residents who were isolating and could not afford to pay were referred by the phone operator to Good Gym Lewisham, who arranged for one of their members to organise that resident's shopping. Those who could not afford to pay were routed through to the Foodbank suppliers. Those experiencing the mental health effects of isolation were offered befriending counselling.

The Council shared with Hub partners the details provided by central government of borough residents who were considered most vulnerable, and those residents were contacted by Hub telephone operators to enter them into the system.

Was the Hub system successful? Given this was an unprecedented global emergency, and given the fact that no real borough-wide voluntary infrastructure was in place before March, the achievements of the Hub were remarkable.

But by August, while many of the volunteers working for residents through the Hub were exhausted and burned out, there was no alternative but for those exhausted people to carry on operating as best they could. As lockdown progressed, more and more issues became pressing. For example, the Hub was quickly made aware of non-English speaking people from the Dominican Republic who were mostly working on minimum wage cleaning contracts before the pandemic. Many of these lost their jobs overnight and needed immediate support, but there weren't initially the facilities to provide Spanish-language support.

Lewisham's experience of the pandemic once more demonstrates the power within the community of volunteers from Good Gym members to faith community members acting in a selfless and community-minded manner. At the same time, it has highlighted the fact that the borough did not have a rigorous voluntary infrastructure system supported by effective data and communications in place before the pandemic hit, and therefore the voluntary response may have been more ad hoc than in some boroughs where a more deep-rooted shared voluntary infrastructure had been in place for some time.



Just as Bexley can be categorised as "half-Kent, half-London", **Havering** in the north east of the city is perhaps "half-Essex, half-London". The main town, Romford, was always primarily an agricultural town and retained its own cattle market up until 1958; even today, market day in Romford gives it a distinctly un-London feel. The borough is the second-largest in London with half of its land area within the green belt. It has traditionally returned Conservative MPs to Parliament.

Perhaps appropriately then, Havering's voluntary sector is one of the more traditional of the London boroughs. The Havering Volunteer Centre (HVC — [www.haveringvc.org.uk](http://www.haveringvc.org.uk)) is a charity formed in 2015 by the current CEO, Shelley Hart. She was prompted to establish the charity when the previous Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) closed its doors in 2015 citing "ongoing funding uncertainties". The now-defunct CVS, Havering Association of Voluntary and Community Organisations, had supported the work of over 500 local voluntary and community groups in the borough. Its demise in 2015 came after Havering Council announced that they were looking to cut £1.1million from spending on the voluntary sector over the next four years.



**Shelley Hart, Havering Volunteer Centre**

Shelley has spent 22 years in the voluntary sector. The 7/7 bomb blasts of 2005 and the Grenfell fire of 2017 remain clearly fixed in her memory and the experience of providing support to colleagues the other side of London in 2017 informed much of her thinking in the early months of 2020. Working entirely from her own initiative and supported by her trustees, she decided in February 2020 to prepare a Pandemic Plan for Havering. It was obvious, she says now, that the news coming from China was going to result in something massive. A week before the country was ordered into lockdown, Shelley's Disaster Resilience Plan was operational at HVC.

They had already put out a call for translators to provide support in the coming months — 90 different languages are currently spoken in the borough. She developed a Process Map for her team to follow and developed a Referral Form to allow them to screen both volunteers and applicants for support.

By early April 2020, HVC was the only volunteer agency that had stayed open in the borough and still, by this point, Shelley heard nothing from the Council. During those first few weeks of lockdown, the preparations the charity had made enabled them swiftly to begin to allocate volunteers to the much-needed immediate tasks of shopping and medicine delivery.



For the first three months, Shelley had a team of just three people to operate the entire voluntary service for the borough, which was increased to five when the Council finally came on board three or four weeks into lockdown and provided some additional financial support which, ironically, was then taken away three months later.

The details of those early weeks in Havering are instructive in a number of ways. Shelley and her team worked constantly, seven days a week, and were always on the lookout for opportunities. One day, she heard that a local pizza parlour had gone bust and she happened to be walking past its closed doors when she saw someone inside. She knocked on the door and asked if they had any food to share, and went away with 150 pizza bases to put into the newly operating foodbank. The local Mecca Bingo Hall was persuaded to offer hot food to elderly residents on Mondays and Wednesdays. Her tiny team found themselves dealing with residents on every matter: the local NHS Trust had contracted the food delivery service Brakes to deliver food to those on the vulnerable list. HVC began to get calls every Thursday, the day of the Brakes delivery, from residents who didn't like the food they had been given. Some were offended that they had been provided with free food which went against their faith instructions; others complained that they had found industrial-size tins of baked beans on their doorstep, "and I hate baked beans!"

Turning this into a positive, HVC began to offer a food bartering service so that residents could trade the food they'd been given that they didn't want. This, while providing a practical solution to a problem, also gave the charity more immediate insight into the needs and more importantly the condition of their more vulnerable residents.

Having tackled the enormity of dealing with the impact of lockdown, HVC began on the vaccination programme on 23rd December 2020. At their peak, they were managing the work of 100 volunteers who kept the vaccination programme going, managing timesheets, absences, illness and so on. All this was being managed by Shelley and her team of three on top of their existing pandemic work, and without a single penny of funding. They continued in this manner throughout 2022 and to this day are still supporting the vaccination programme in Havering.

**At their peak, they were managing the work of 100 volunteers who kept the vaccination programme going...**

What other lessons can we draw from Havering's experience of process? The most obvious, perhaps, is the overwhelming importance of participants such as Shelley Hart. Without her solid experience, her instinctive strategic thinking and her absolute dedication to support her community (while also shielding a vulnerable husband), the support process for vulnerable residents in the borough simply wouldn't have kicked in; or, if it had, it might have kicked in too late to stop many people from suffering unnecessarily. The fact that she operated almost entirely separately to any input from Havering Council speaks volumes about the recognition of the voluntary sector within the overall infrastructure of the borough. Without individuals like Shelley, our society swiftly begins to lose its bearings and the hammer blow of a pandemic only serves to emphasise their singular importance.



One of the early successes of the voluntary and community sector as lockdown kicked in during Spring 2020 was the way in which key funding organisations — outside of the normal Borough Council or GLA processes — took the initiative to ensure that local community groups and charities in London could continue and contribute to the joint effort.

London Funders ([www.londonfunders.org.uk](http://www.londonfunders.org.uk)) is the membership network for funders and investors of London's civil society,

and on 27th March they put out a call for applications for funding from London charity and community groups. Over 10,000 applications came in and over 3,500 grants were made. London Funders then went on to set up the London Community Response (LCR - [www.londoncommunityresponsefund.org.uk](http://www.londoncommunityresponsefund.org.uk)), a collaboration of 67 funders which crucially provided several waves of funding in the capital over the coming months. In fact, during the first year after lockdown began, LCR gave out over £57.5m in grants. Working together, these funders recognised that the social, economic and health consequences of Covid-19 disproportionately impacted those already-marginalised in society, and the LCR funding programmes prioritised supporting groups led by and for Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, LGBT+ communities, Deaf and Disabled people and/or women.

Sam Grimmett Batt, Funding Director at City Bridge Foundation, one of the funding partners of LCR partnership, reports how jointly they took the crucial decision literally in the first days of lockdown to allocate small support funds to all their existing supported charities and community groups, on the basis that delays in processing applications would only result in vulnerable and isolated people not getting the help they needed. Such early and perceptive interventions by financial supporters of charity and community groups in London ensured that crucial support systems stayed open in those very difficult early weeks and months.

**Bromley**, one of London's largest boroughs lying at the south of the city, gives another example of the processes which kicked in during March 2020.

Bromley was created in 1965 by the city absorbing large swathes of Kent, and the sense of being part-London, part-Kent remains to this day. At 59 square miles, it is bigger than the total of all seven inner London boroughs north of the Thames, and there still remains considerable areas of farmland in the borough. Over the decades, the borough's leadership has reflected this position by maintaining a strategic distance from organisations like the GLC, and since 1965 it has been a Conservative-controlled borough for the entire period bar three years. Well known in particular for the iconic Crystal Palace site, Bromley retains its strongly individual streak.

The news arriving in the capital in March 2020 prompted the Council to act with noticeable swiftness — certainly more swift than some other London boroughs. Good links already existed between the Council and the borough's Council for Voluntary Service, named Community Links Bromley (CLB — [www.communitylinksbromley.org.uk](http://www.communitylinksbromley.org.uk)). Working collaboratively, they set up a volunteering and assistance programme in the middle of March, setting up a shielding distribution hub at the Civic Centre to support the distribution of food parcels to those in isolation.

Within weeks, 5,000 volunteers had come forward and were screened by both Council and CLB in order to be allocated to specific tasks. By the time of the second lockdown in 2020, nearly 22,000 Bromley residents were shielding, and the group Council/CLB effort ensured that thousands of phone calls were made to residents to check on their situation, as well as over 20,000 mailed letters, 5,000 text messages and 3,000 emails.

Councillor Diane Smith, Executive Councillor for Adult Care and Health at Bromley Council summed up the authority's response: "We know from our volunteers how rewarding they have found it to offer help when people really need it. Many people who have had to shield do not see or speak to anyone during the day so having a visitor, albeit briefly, and a chat on the phone has been a real boost to many, as have the vital deliveries made by these amazing volunteers. Working closely with Community Links Bromley, I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has come forward."

A traditional borough, perhaps, but also one which delivered a strong response by using traditional tools and existing networks.



Finally, it is important to remember, when considering process, that not all voluntary and community sector responses in London to the outbreak of the pandemic were formalised in existing organisations or structures. One of the many striking elements of the capital's experience of the virus has been the rapid formation and organisation of mutual aid groups, local groupings of residents who for a range of reasons did not feel that their concerns were being met either by national or local government, or by local statutory or charitable services. These mutual aid groups existed primarily on either Whatsapp or Facebook platforms, representing residents in tightly defined geographical locations.

**In just three days, eight mutual aid groups formed in north London, using Facebook and in some cases leafleting to offer shopping services, prescription gathering and befriending.**

Adélie Chevé, a teaching fellow in politics and international studies at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, investigated the emergence of mutual aid groups in eight north London boroughs - Barnet, Brent, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Islington and Waltham Forest - from the very first announcements of a pandemic, weeks before the first formal lockdown of 23rd March.

In an article published in *Social Movement Studies* in March 2021, she traced the timelines and activities of these groups and demonstrated that they had two primary impulses: a small group of neighbours in, say, a street or two, deciding to help each other with primary needs such as shopping and befriending; and those same neighbours taking action because they did not believe that effective solutions were being provided by existing bodies.

During March, before the first lockdown was announced on the 23rd, the UK government was not advising any formal measures beyond advice on increasing handwashing. During that period, in just three days, eight mutual aid groups formed in north London, using Facebook and in some cases leafleting to offer shopping services, prescription gathering and befriending. The very fact of their formation implied that the participants did not believe they could resolve these issues through other mechanisms.

Chevée comments: "Among other things, they centralized donations for foodbanks, delivered free hot meals, helped people find accommodation after expulsion, and created online workshops on community-organizing, or to raise awareness on issues like racism and domestic violence. They also organized social activities to respond to what became an anxious demand for social interaction. Online pub quizzes, window-drawing competitions for kids, and free online yoga classes proliferated, in addition to the 'friendly call' proposed on every leaflet. While physical interaction in London was drastically reduced under lockdown, Mutual Aid group members engaged in intense social interaction online."

Before long, these eight north London boroughs alone had produced between 100 and 130 mutual aid groups. While each borough appeared to have one primary mutual aid group, it was made very clear that the existence of a primary group did not imply any kind of authority or instruction; as the primary Haringey group said formally to all other mutual aid groups in that borough: "This group is for grassroots mutual aid across the borough of Haringey. We want to support coordination; we don't want to centralise or create a grand plan we want everyone to follow to the letter." Similarly, the primary Barnet group sent out a message to the myriad new mutual aid groups in the borough: "In basic terms, this group is a way of connecting us with our communities so that we can come together and help one another outside of state and charity structures and institutions."

This means that we support one another. The group is NOT a volunteer coordination centre, a professional operation, a charity, or anything to do with charities."

It is well worth remembering, therefore, when considering process and the early days of lockdown in London, that there was a significant element of residents at a local level who did not want to rely on any existing formal arrangement in order to meet the perils of the pandemic. Many State and charitable groups in London did go out of their way to work alongside these mutual aid groups as the weeks and months went by, but it remains an interesting element of the overall make-up of London's response that they existed at all.

# Experience

**The lived experience of volunteer workers in London over the pandemic period was a wide spectrum of emotion and sustainability. For some, the radical change in our shared circumstances presented opportunities for optimism and hope about how communities can rediscover their inherent strengths.**

**For others, supporting Londoners during a pandemic exhausted them, pushed them to their very limits and in some cases, made them doubt the values of the society in which they lived. In between, there were many examples of volunteers simply getting on with what they do best: supporting their community.**

**There really was this broadness of disparity across the capital and to make sense of the many stories which are recorded in the next section, it is important to try and get a feel for the human realities at the heart of lockdown.**



Certitude ([www.certitude.london](http://www.certitude.london)) is London's leading adult social care provider, supporting people with learning disabilities, mental health support needs and autistic people. The not-for-profit organisation supports around 1,800 people across 15 London boroughs.

One of the early recognitions from the beginning of April 2020 was that the government and media was focussing almost exclusively on "traditional" elements of care: the NHS operating inside hospitals and organisations supporting older people in care homes. There was little, if any, focus on the needs of people living their lives within the community — working in jobs, studying or living alone — who drew on support from organisations like Certitude.

Certitude's Director of Development, Marianne Selby-Boothroyd is forthright about the experience she and her fellow managers underwent in 2020. They became aware early on that the needs of people they support did not feature very strongly in much of the information and guidance being released.

So the organisation took steps to adapt their support so it would still focus on individuals' needs throughout the lockdowns.

Their peer-led Connect & Do creative activities, usually held in-person in Brixton, was quickly moved online. Connect & Do had always been a way for people to make connections through shared interests rather than through diagnoses, so it seemed more relevant than ever to keep this programme running.

The online workshops were a huge success, allowing for people to continue to meet, and for new people to join from anywhere. The [online aspect of Connect & Do](#) has continued, offering a whole range of collaborative courses, from printmaking and creative writing to sewing and relaxation.

The whole process of the lockdowns helped Certitude support teams to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals and their families wished to live. Some people relished certain elements of lockdown, particularly those less comfortable with in-person appointments and other interactions.

Other people naturally struggled, and Certitude's support teams went above and beyond to ensure everyone was as safe and happy as possible. Some colleagues moved into the houses where they were supporting people, not seeing their loved ones for long periods of time.

In other cases, support workers were speaking to people online for up to five hours a day, which many families recognised with huge gratitude — one mother of an autistic child said she wouldn't have been able to cope with the isolation without that daily support.

Elsewhere, some central office colleagues who were obliged to work from home found their own isolation difficult to deal with. Both Aisling and Marianne mention the remarkable way in which everyone at Certitude coped — and even thrived — with the additional pressures. There is reservation when talk turns to "Covid heroes" as the press likes to term key workers; what they saw was the more prosaic but equally inspiring ability of human beings to thrive, despite the odds.

As the medical impact of the virus has reduced, the impact on organisations like Certitude continues as they implement lessons learned. They have also learned that in a crisis they can depend on the resources and abilities of their colleagues, people they support and their families.



Fadi Itani is the CEO of the Muslim Charities Forum ([www.muslimcharitiesforum.org.uk](http://www.muslimcharitiesforum.org.uk)), headquartered in Westminster but working for British Muslim organisations across the country. He is therefore well placed to give an overview of the experience of Muslim groups in the capital during the pandemic.

The first point he makes is more of a fundamental one: that the issue of faith has been overlooked for years by civic society funders, and there has been historical underfunding of BAME and faith organisations. In particular, his experience is that smaller Muslim charitable organisations have struggled to access the kind of funding from mainstream sources which might have been available elsewhere. As Covid took hold from March onwards, donations to smaller Muslim charitable organisations in the capital dropped, just at the time when the need was greatest.

Despite this, Muslim faith groups in London supported their neighbours and, as Fadi stresses, without discriminating between the faith of the recipient. Muslim charities believed that their neighbours should be supported whatever their faith so, despite a fall in donations, they immediately responded to the early needs for food and medical supplies.





The Team at Muslim Charities Forum

For example, the Hand on Heart charity ([www.handonhearttrust.com](http://www.handonhearttrust.com)) based in West London formed a collaboration with other charities (Beta Charitable Trust, Sufra, Who Is Hussain, Nishkam SWAT and WF-Aid) to distribute 620 mini essential packs to the homeless in London. In addition, the group sourced over 600 cases of essential food supplies for food banks as well as laptops and printers for home schooling children from deprived families. On Easter Sunday 2020, Hand on Heart assembled 250 Easter Essential Packs for the homeless in London containing hand sanitisers, wet wipes, deodorants, socks/underwear, T-shirts and polo shirts.

Similarly, Islamic Help teamed up with the Ghulam Trust in London to serve those most in need in West London, delivering food and hygiene packs to the doorsteps of residents of all faiths who were in isolation.

Sufra ([www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk](http://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk)) is a grassroots charity based in **Brent** which has its roots deeply in the Muslim community, which has historically been the source of its funding. The charity is based around the alleviation of poverty in this part of north west London through the provision of food, and has been operating for almost ten years. Brent is the most ethnically diverse area of the UK, with a huge BAME population that is subjected to systemic inequalities and a welfare system decimated by years of austerity.

The pandemic, with its consequent job losses, left significant numbers of people in the borough without any form of income and demand for food aid increased by 371% in the first six months of the pandemic. Sufra teamed up with other charities in the borough and collaborated with Brent Council to set up a new Community Kitchen delivery service which operated seven days a week. During the first six months of the pandemic, the service distributed over 53,000 food parcels and hot meals. Sufra collaborated with the Freemasons in Brent to build a new professional kitchen to make the meals. This kind of on-the-ground co-ordination and collaboration between different faith groups is a remarkable example of how Muslim charities focussed on the entire community.

Fadi concludes that the lack of understanding between smaller faith groups at the start of the pandemic in some ways encouraged groups to build a bridge from both sides towards each other. He supports the way in which the London Community Response Fund made efforts to direct funding to some of those groups. He is however cautious for the future: does he believe that our society has learned from the experience to set aside preconceptions based on faith and ethnicity? He fears not.



**Islington** has one of the highest numbers of voluntary and charitable organisations operating than almost any other London borough, a consequence perhaps of the history of radicalism and progressivism going back to nineteenth century Finsbury and the fact that the borough, always having been very densely populated, retains to this day large swathes of poverty sitting only streets away from gentrified squares. The borough has welcomed refugees from other countries more than many London boroughs and has a high percentage of BAME residents, often suffering from economic inequality. Recent studies have indicated that almost half of Islington's children live in poverty and the borough has some of the highest concentrations of poor mental health and isolation. It was inevitable, therefore, that the impositions and restrictions of lockdown would impact hard.

Cripplegate Foundation ([www.cripplegate.org](http://www.cripplegate.org)) is a charity providing funding to charity and community groups in Islington. Its origins go back to fifteenth century Finsbury but today it works alongside partners such as City Bridge Foundation to source and distribute funds within the borough, using the mechanism Islington Giving to do so. Islington Giving was the inaugural London Placed Based Giving Scheme (PBGS) which empowers people, businesses and organisations in local areas to give something — time, skills, money — in support of people in need locally.

What Cripplegate and its funding and service partners discovered early on was that the combination of families living in poverty and the high numbers of refugees with little or no access to basic facilities meant that it was never going to be as simple as moving services online. What was the point of doing that when many people not only did not own digital tools such as laptops, but also had no experience of using them? Therefore, the group began to provide training packages alongside the distribution of laptops, 359 of which were distributed in the early stages.

The borough's high population density also meant that access to green space was limited, so a wide range of small initiatives were developed over the months, such as allowing people to grow their own food in Culpeper Community Garden, or Freightliners Farm offering outdoor experience to people experiencing the mental health results of isolation. Little Angel Theatre managed to set up some impromptu neighbourly outreach sessions on the street outside their studio space. Therefore, as the months went by, Islington's charity and community groups, encouraged by the lead partners Cripplegate and Islington Giving, combined providing support to individuals and families to enable them to embrace digital solutions, but also focussing on outdoor, realtime activities to counter the feeling many had that they were excluded even from the digital world.

Cripplegate and Islington Giving, together with the many small groups and mutual aid groups they assisted in funding, reported that, despite the trauma of the pandemic and lockdown, the experience actually increased the level and quality of partnership working in the borough. Many organisations reported that their reach into the community and those most at need had increased during the pandemic, with a much higher recognition amongst residents of the value of the sector, compared with say statutory authorities such as the Council, the Mayor or the Government. There was a real sense in the borough that the community and voluntary sector had been quicker and more agile than any other in responding to the crisis.



**Despite the trauma of the pandemic and lockdown, the experience actually increased the level and quality of partnership working in the borough.**

The borough of **Hammersmith and Fulham** has been much affected by road-building: the Westway constructed in the north in the 1960s freed up much of Shepherds Bush for eventual retail construction around Westway, while the the completion of the Hammersmith Flyover bringing the A4 into London cut the centre of Hammersmith in two in ways from which it has perhaps never recovered. As is so often the case with inner London boroughs, the high-rises and inelegant shopping streets in some parts of Hammersmith and Fulham sit beside highly valuable individual residential properties, while more recent developments such as the demolition of Earls Court exhibition centre have created new residential opportunities. It is a dynamic borough at the very heart of London with a typically mixed social profile and shifting political leadership.

Gareth Dixon, CEO of Young Hammersmith and Fulham Foundation ([www.yhff.org.uk](http://www.yhff.org.uk)) has been part of the charity for five years. The organisation is a member of the national Young People Foundation ([www.ypftrust.org.uk](http://www.ypftrust.org.uk)), of which Layla Hall is Head of Development. The purpose of both the umbrella organisation and the Hammersmith and Fulham branch is to support children and young people by creating positive opportunities for them across a wide range of areas. The background more specifically to the formation of YHFF is the gradual reduction in funding to this sector in the borough over recent years,

resulting in a loss of expertise due to job losses and the disappearance of more and more dedicated youth spaces.

As Gareth reported, the primary experience felt by YHFF workers during the pandemic was one of being constantly overstretched: they experienced little or no support from the primary city authority, the GLA, but had positive support from Hammersmith and Fulham Council, despite the lack in general funding. Funding during this period came from the John Lyons Trust via the Council and from the City Bridge Foundation directly. The sense of being overstretched came from the combination of needing to set up rigorous safeguarding measures to allow YHFF staff to continue to meet up with young people in outdoor spaces; the fatigue which many young people swiftly began to experience with online sessions, the sense they were feeling that YHFF and other organisations were effectively invading their digital space; the struggle to make sense of the constantly changing rules coming out of the Cabinet Office, sometimes on a daily basis; the sheer lack of numbers in their organisation following on from years of cuts.

In terms of positive support, the National Youth Agency proved to be strong, helping the team to understand the changing rules and to provide guidance on how to implement them.

Also, the young people themselves in many areas provided positive inputs, particularly in the area of research: as Layla Hall commented, the pandemic created an opportunity for more young people to carry out research into their own situations and feed that data into the centre. Layla and her team also used the opportunity to bring as many local authorities together in strategic ways with smaller local groups, and at the time of writing had over 1,000 membership agencies.

Both Gareth and Layla commented on the sense of disappointment in the way that issues were presented in the media. YHFF has been waiting for two years to hear the outcome of funding applications that will be crucial to its ability to continue supporting young people in the borough, and so it was doubly frustrating to see media reports of funds being promised for new building projects in relation to young people: what is the point of putting up new buildings when the funds to employ staff inside them have not been approved?

Lockdown and the pandemic tested the services that organisations like YHFF could provide. The dedication and professionalism of the staff ensured that services continued to run despite all the drawbacks, but there remains a strong sense of frustration that core funding issues for London's young are simply being avoided.



**Barking and Dagenham** in East London will always be known as the borough that used to host the massive Ford factory; the gradual withdrawal of the American car company over the years has hit the employment statistics of the borough, and like several other boroughs, it has spent decades battling the issue of deindustrialisation with all the consequent funding demands that entails. The largest proportion of not-for-profit organisations in the borough are faith-based.

BD Collective ([www.bdcollective.co.uk](http://www.bdcollective.co.uk)) is the organisation which brings together the social and civic groups of the borough under one strategic umbrella, and towards the end of 2020 they commissioned a fascinating report by Civil Society Consulting detailing how the voluntary and community sector experienced the pandemic. Many of the report's conclusions will apply to other areas of London, and are worth reviewing in some detail.

Over three-quarters of all organisations in the borough were able either partially or completely to move to online service delivery. Over two thirds of organisations developed new ways of delivering services to clients as a result of lockdown, although this process also highlighted the key issue of digital exclusion amongst more deprived residents.

Social distancing and online operations meant that there was significantly less interaction between different social, racial, ethnic and religious groups in the borough.

Many respondents to the report suggested that this reduction in social mixing risked increasing perceived differences between groups and could jeopardise the strong foundations of community cohesion which had existed before.

Forty per cent of organisations had a budget deficit resulting from the Covid-19 crisis, with half of them seeing funding as their biggest challenge for the future. Half of all respondents expressed significant levels of anxiety that many funding avenues have stopped with little information on their future viability. By the end of 2020, many smaller organisations in the borough were still waiting anxiously for the outcome on funding decisions.

Several organisations raised concerns about the medium term sustainability of their operations given the burnout and exhaustion experienced by their staff during the pandemic. However, organisations also noticed that the volunteers who joined up during the pandemic came from increasingly highly-qualified backgrounds, perhaps as many of them had been furloughed from their normal jobs.

Despite the many concerns, BD Collective concluded that the experience of the pandemic had brought about a refreshed civic infrastructure in Barking and Dagenham, with the sector robustly contributing to a strategic role in the borough's pandemic response, and giving vigour and enthusiasm to the Council's VCSE strategy.

# Tales

The stories of how charity and community group members came together to help out in London during the pandemic and lockdown are almost endless. Across every borough, individuals and groups kept the city going, protected and supported those who needed help and gave hope to those who were struggling.

Without their involvement, there is no doubt that the city would have suffered grievously. Of course, much of that support is ongoing, but here we have collected together a range of examples of this work across as many parameters as possible, as recognition of the invaluable work of each and every volunteer.



**Hackney** was a borough which experienced significant poverty during the 1960s, and as manufacturing declined, council leaders came to refer to it as "Britain's poorest borough". Over time, with fresh arrivals of a wide variety of ethnic and faith groups, and a burgeoning series of tech and art hubs around the borough, Hackney has developed to become a thriving inner city environment with one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the country.

Fifteen years ago, one Hackney resident, Nana Badu, founded Badu Sports ([www.thebaduway.com](http://www.thebaduway.com)), a company dedicated to providing support, encouragement and training in sports to young people of the borough. Over the years, the company has had an enormous direct influence on the lives and opportunities of young and older people, with a strong cadre of paid and volunteer trainers and physical education specialists and an impact on over one hundred schools in the borough.

Three weeks before the March 2020 lockdown, Nana Badu decided to focus their activities on providing as much support as possible to those impacted. Firstly, all the company's volunteers were retasked to focus on encouraging citizens to stay active. The scope was impressive, ranging from online PE instructions to hosting early morning yoga for homeschooling parents. To help families who they would normally see face-to-face, Badu Sports volunteer coaches ran weekly online challenges and exercise sessions and stayed in touch with clients via regularly phone calls.

As the lockdown deepened, it became obvious that some families were struggling more than others, and Badu under the One Community initiative created its own food bank with 36 volunteers between the ages of 16 and 21 delivering food to over 500 people. They didn't restrict their involvement to food, but also delivered toys and activity ideas to children forced to stay indoors for so much of the time. In addition, a mental health telephone line was set up so that anyone experiencing difficulties could talk with someone.

Nana Badu credits the success of their work to the sense of belonging which volunteer coaches and clients achieved by collaborating so closely. Many of the young people who volunteered their time to provide food or to host exercise classes were encouraged to create their own video blogs, and soon those vlogs came to demonstrate to people in the borough that there were practical things which could be achieved by the community coming together.





Like many experienced volunteer coordinators in London, Karen Chillman of Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA — [www.cvalive.org.uk](http://www.cvalive.org.uk)) found herself in March 2020 with a huge challenge. **Croydon** is another distinct outer London borough with such a strong sense of identity that in the referendum of October 2021, over 80 per cent of voters approved the move to an Elected Mayor system. The first mayor is due to be elected in 2022. Croydon has for decades been the largest office and retail centre in south east England and the council, for the most part Conservative-run, has always been in favour of development. Recently, however, the council has announced cuts of up to 40% in its funding of the voluntary centre in the borough and Karen fears that significant areas of CVA's work could well be obliged to close now.

Back in March 2020, however, the demands were obvious and pressing. As she recalls, the council was not ready to support vulnerable people in the first weeks of lockdown and therefore CVA immediately stepped in by establishing food hubs and recruiting volunteers to deliver food to residents. As Karen says, a lot of elderly and low-income residents of the borough would never normally have excess food in the house, relying instead on frequent trips to the local shops, and thus the stay-at-home orders created an immediate issue as residents began phoning the CVA's offices within a matter of days, asking for food.

Karen and her colleagues have years of experience of volunteering between them, and reliable systems in place which were improved significantly after the Croydon riots of 2011. The sudden increase in demand for their services led them to call for volunteers, but as they already had experience in this area they were able to screen volunteers professionally from the start. Very soon, they began to notice that a number of residents were phoning in to the food hub for individual items of food — it was obvious that these calls were being made more out of a sense of loneliness and isolation and to this day, CVA continues to speak regularly to over 150 residents who live alone. Within the first few weeks, Karen's team recruited 600 volunteers who began to provide services that were quite unexpected: at one point, 700 oxygen meters needed to be delivered; at another, someone was sent out to buy a bulk of men's underpants, because homeless men, on being offered shelter and baths, were found not to have any spare clothing.

Croydon had accepted a large number of refugees and lockdown exposed the fact that many didn't have a bank account or any kind of internet access. Those being accommodated in hotels had no cooking facilities in their rooms and while all hotels contracted to host refugee families were obligated to provide food, Karen's team soon discovered that many weren't; families were literally starving in their hotel rooms.

This kind of troubleshooting characterised CVA's work throughout all the lockdowns. One elderly lady was unable to get her rubbish sacks down the path to the bins because her husband was in hospital with Covid. A neighbour phoned in to complain about the rubbish piling up outside her house, so Karen explained as politely as she could that perhaps that neighbour could offer assistance. It was as though, she says, people were rediscovering what the idea of community actually meant.

The only financial support CVA received during six months of operating with 600 volunteers to cover everything from food delivery to counselling, NHS equipment delivery to refugee support, was a £5000 one-off grant. And yet, despite this, and with the threat of closure facing them owing to the council's budget cuts, CVA's volunteer programme proved more successful in the borough than the national NHS volunteer scheme which was operated via a Smartphone app. What Karen discovered is that the volunteers who joined up with CVA appreciated the local knowledge and support of the CVA team which they didn't get from the more anonymous NHS app service. She hopes that community sense will survive, but she is fearful.



The bulk of **Hounslow** lies in the areas of Hounslow and Feltham and Brentford, with green and prosperous Chiswick and Strand-on-the-Green a slight outlier at its eastern end. Much commercial activity follows the route of the M4 and A4 as they snake out west towards Heathrow. The borough has a high level of ethnic diversity, with 20 per cent of residents identifying as being from the Asian sub-continent.

The Acacia Community Centre ([www.acaciacommunity.org](http://www.acaciacommunity.org)) in Hounslow is a particularly gratifying example of the role of the voluntary sector in London during lockdown. The not-for-profit organisation was actually formed in 2020 as a response to the impact of the pandemic, and in 2021 founder Omar Salat Mohamed was given an award by Hounslow Council for his contribution to the borough's efforts during this period. As one nominee for his award said: "Omar helped bring communities together by playing a vital role. He brought vaccinations to the community and he made sure most vulnerable and young adults were vaccinated. He understands their needs and always is there to help them."

During the period following its founding, Acacia worked with young people on a range of motivational projects to encourage them to consider academic and vocational courses. They set up Project Aspire to challenge young people to look beyond their current environment to begin to plan a positive future, and gave their young clients access to computers, mentors and sports programmes.

For older clients, Acacia recruited volunteers to agree to spend 30 minutes on a regular basis with old people living on their own, reading books for them or just chatting. They called this Project Together, and many older residents testified to the enormous impact just those regular 30-minute sessions had. Other Acacia support functions during lockdown included offering help to any residents who needed help in filling out government forms, whether applications for Universal Support or housing benefit.

Starting from absolute scratch, with no funding support, Acacia demonstrated the power of community thinking even when it begins at such a small scale. The group plan to raise and spend over £200,000 in the coming months to further their reach.



**Greenwich** is another London borough with markedly varying qualities of life contained within it. From the affluent Georgian streets and squares on one part to the huge 1960s housing estates of others, it cannot be categorised simply by the grandeur of the riverfront. Some of the estates such as the Morris Walk estate in Woolwich are brutalist concrete structures while the nearby Ferrier estate became so run down that it had to be redeveloped.

The borough is notable for the organisational partnerships it has developed over time, and this is reflected by the work of the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency, which was originally established as an enterprise agency in 1982.

Over the years, GCDA ([www.gcda.coop](http://www.gcda.coop)) has developed its remit so that it now influences a wide range of individuals and organisations in the borough to promote healthier living and skills training. Much of their work is now based in community hubs, farms, allotments, market places and training centres — anywhere where residents are striving to improve facilities and opportunities. It's not surprising therefore that the organisation took an immediate leading role in the distribution of food once lockdown began. Working alongside both the Council and other third-sector partners such as Charlton Athletic Community Trust, GCDA became pivotal for the borough's food programme.

**“The first thing we had to do was to find a supplier that could deliver huge amounts of affordable food as quickly as possible.”**

**Sophie Taylor, GCDA**

Food Business Developer Sophie Taylor describes how they went about setting up a food distribution service in the borough: "The first thing we had to do was to find a supplier that could deliver huge amounts of affordable food as quickly as possible. Luckily Lidl came on board, which made all the difference. Then we turned Woolwich Common Community Centre into a packing hub and found a partner to help with deliveries. People needing food initially called the Council's helpline system, then the data came through to us to give to the packers and the delivery vans. The scale of the operation was massive. Lidl was delivering tonnes of food every week and we were also getting lovely locally-made sausages as well as locally-sourced fruit and veg to help support our community businesses. We were doing on average 125 boxes a day at the height of the pandemic, all containing enough food for two weeks."

Jane Downes, the GCDAs manager at Woolwich Common Community Centre, reported that they even had people knocking on the door of the centre asking for food. "We have that at WCCC anyway," she said, "but we saw more of it during lockdown."

GCDAs had become the custodians of the Royal Arsenal Farmers' Market in Woolwich the year before, running the market every second and last Saturday of the months.

When lockdown forced it to close, GCDAs Market Director, Christina Reynolds, created a special directory of traders so that local residents could contact them for home deliveries. "I felt it was important to keep a presence even when we had to shut," she says.



A very different and innovative form of local support took place in **Haringey** during the second half of 2020.

Haringey is another inner city borough with a tough tale to tell: incidents on the notorious housing estate Broadwater Farm, the riots following the shooting of Mark Duggan. Haringey's social services have come under much media focus over the years, giving the borough a particularly sensitive reputation. However, it is also a borough with a thriving business community of small shops and businesses and it was in this area that Albert Clegg and Zoe Alleyne from art studio Bud Studio, turned their attention.

The Green Lanes area of Tottenham is home to a strong community of restaurants and shops. Many of these were significantly affected by the requirement to close during lockdown and the high street itself began to empty, rows of grey metal shutters indicating the closures.

As part of an effort both to celebrate local small business and to keep these locked-down shops in peoples' minds, Albert, Zoe and their creative colleagues at Bud Studio, with Philippine Nguyen and support from Haringey Council, launched the Shutter Gallery project.

This was a volunteer art project offering a free shutter makeover to any Tottenham business. The first shutters were painted in September 2020 on Tottenham High Road and West Green Road and so far, 33 businesses have received a free, creative and colourful shutter makeover courtesy of Bud Studio. For example, estate agents Hunters had a football inspired design painted by artist Albert Agwa in reference to the owners' love of playing football together when they were both kids over twenty five years ago. Local lettering artist Archie Proudfoot designed a shutter for wine shop Tottenham Wine, which gave a vintage flavour to sipping a cocktail in the Caribbean. Hannah Elizabeth designed a subtle view of the swifts that are seen over the nearby Tottenham Marshes for gift shop Small Boulevard.

All the artists were paid for their designs - a big part of the project was about creating paid opportunities for local artists. Overall, these 33 designs and spraypaint pictures both boosted the morale of small business owners who were forced to close their shops during lockdown, and they also raised the spirits of the community who could now enjoy a high street with unique and creative shutter designs.

**Kingston Upon Thames**, with its reach into the heart of Surrey, is another London borough that combines the town and countryside in almost equal measure. Traditionally controlled by either Conservative or Liberal councils, it has a few pockets of deprivation amongst otherwise relatively prosperous environments. The heart of the borough is the bustling centre of Kingston which sits across the river from neighbour Richmond.

In 2019, before anyone had thought about a new virus emanating from China, Kingston resident Sarah Clay established a charity, Voices Of Hope (VOH — [www.voh.org.uk](http://www.voh.org.uk)), which would use the power of choirs to restore hope and dignity to people who were recovering from violence or abuse, dealing with long-term mental and physical health challenges, looking for a home or dealing with isolation and anxiety. As an Associate of the Royal College of Music, Sarah was and is passionate about using the art of music to support people within her local community. The community choirs she set up immediately began to have an impact on individuals across the borough.

Then came March 2020, and in one day, Sarah had to close down all the eleven community choirs that were up and running. It was obvious that there were immediate needs and, in partnership with Kingston Council and Sarah's local church, Kings Gate Church, VOH volunteers threw themselves into cooking and delivering food:



from March onwards, they cooked and delivered 30,000 meals to residents, gathering support — both financial and in kind — from local businesses and residents.

Soon, Sarah's team began to hear unsettling stories about how many low income families were suffering the combined impact of poor nutrition and lack of activities while lockdown rules continued. That's when she came up with an innovative proposal to support such families: BRITE Box. BRITE stands for Building Resilience In Today's Environment. Families in need across Kingston, Richmond, Elmbridge and Southwark were invited to enrol in a year's project in which every week, they would receive a box containing ingredients, recipes, photographs and child-friendly advice on how to encourage children to get involved in the cooking.

The innovative elements of this campaign, which is still ongoing and now reaching 430 families every week, were that it impacted on the issue of child food hunger through fun family activities; it created interest in cooking amongst children; it brought families together around food in the home.

Once lockdown regulations relaxed, VOH was also able to return to its choir mission and now runs Residential Choirs within several residential elderly and care homes in south west London and Sisterhood Choirs aimed at women needing support in their lives.

This latter is complemented by a Sisterhood Sanctuary inside Kings Gate Church where women can come for support and safety.



**Camden** is an inner London borough that has over the decades combined youth, music and entertainment with a leaning towards progressive politics. Camden Market is still the exciting, bustling centre that young people visiting London gravitate to, while Kings Cross is now undergoing dramatic developments which are giving it prominence in the capital as a centre of the arts. The borough has significant areas of great prosperity, particularly around the Hampstead area, but it has also been a borough of low income families. Some of London's most innovative social housing was built in Camden during the 1970s.

Natalie Wade set up Small Green Shoots ([www.smallgreenshoots.co.uk](http://www.smallgreenshoots.co.uk)) in 2020, specifically to encourage young people from a low-income background and/or a black or ethnic minority background to build careers within the music and entertainment industries. The charity has over 85 per cent BME staff and 100% from low income backgrounds. Early on in the pandemic,

Small Green Shoots received funding from City Bridge Foundation amongst other supporters which enabled the charity to continue to support and motivate their young people — their "shoots" — whose hopes of building a career in the music industry could have been destroyed as the industry itself reeled from the impact of lockdown.

For example, the charity's The Future Is Creative programme was able to survive and even thrive, giving young people the opportunity to become online programmers and content creators, to attend sessions to learn about visual design software and have Q&As with executives at businesses like Virgin and Google. All the focus was on ensuring that the shoots would still be able to work and build towards a career once the impact of lockdown released more opportunities within the industry.

In addition, Small Green Shoots linked up with Pirate Studios, The National Lottery and Sony Music to launch The National Youth Studio Fund: a joint initiative that provides studio access to charities who use music as a tool to improve young people's lives. The fund provides studio time, tools and teaching to boost young peoples' career opportunities.

Through measures such as this, Small Green Shoots worked really positively throughout the lockdown period to keep their clients on career track.



Metro ([www.metrocharity.org.uk](http://www.metrocharity.org.uk)) is a charity which was established in 1984 in response to the development of the GLC's Lesbian and Gay Charter, Changing The World. Originally operating under the name of The Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre, the charity broadened its remit in time to work in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisation serving lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trans people and those questioning their sexuality. Over the last twenty years, the charity has extended its services across the whole of south east London to become one of the most important organisations in the capital creating supportive environments for LGBT people.

For the last eighteen years, Metro has run a face-to-face weekly health support group for those needing support. Now, with lockdown, the drop-in centre manager Catriona was obliged to take the service online. Inevitably, not all users felt happy with an online service only and therefore the Metro team went out of their way to keep in touch by phone and by distanced meetings with them. As Catriona says, many LGBT people in their 60s and 70s can experience social isolation at the best of times, but lockdown increased this sense hugely. On top of that, a steady influx of asylum seekers into several south London boroughs created new demands for Metro's counselling services, particularly after the organisation was obliged to furlough over three quarters of its staff.

Metro's 73 volunteers gave over 9,000 hours of their time, skill and experience during the first three months of lockdown to move services online and to set up telephone counselling.

Metro took the lead in distributing funds for the LGBTQ+ Covid-19 Fund set up by Comic Relief. In addition, Director of Strategy Naomi Goldberg was successful in attracting £150,000 of funding from Greenwich Charitable Trust and the Royal Borough of Greenwich.



The English National Opera (ENO — [www.eno.org](http://www.eno.org)) in St Martin's Lane, **Westminster**, operates as a charity and is one of the two principal opera companies in the capital. Inevitably, given its position, Westminster is a borough with a lot of wealth concentrated in a small area, but it also has areas of deprivation within its northern borders. Containing both Parliament and the Civil Service, Westminster also hosts the city's iconic shopping streets of Regent's Street and Oxford Street, together with the nightlife of bustling Soho.

The ENO costume team is normally fully stretched designing spectacular outfits and stage props, but when the first lockdown turned the lights off, the staff turned their skills to stitching together face masks, medical scrubs and hats to support thousands of key NHS workers.

**Metro's 73 volunteers gave over 9,000 hours of their time, skill and experience during the first three months of lockdown.**

Then, once the effects of long Covid began to be noticeable, once more ENO staff volunteered to support. Suzi Zumpe and a team from the ENO set up ENO Breathe together with colleagues from Imperial College, an online programme using singing and breathing techniques to support patients suffering from long Covid. As Suzi says, most people aren't really aware of their breathing when they are well, so when you struggle to breathe, it can be difficult to "find a way back" to healthy breathing. Patients now numbering over one thousand have been taught to use breathing as a means of relaxation, while the lullabies Suzi has taught them have provided their own form of respite. Suzi's colleague at Imperial College, Dr Sarah Elkin, confirmed that the programme helps long Covid sufferers to become more aware of their breathing, give them tools and techniques to better manage their breathlessness, and stay calmer.



**Ealing** is a largely residential borough in west London and it combines the old areas of Ealing, Southall and Acton. From the 1960s on, huge new housing estates were built in the borough to accommodate the growing number of residents — places like the Grange Estate, South Acton Estate and Green Man Lane Estate. The borough now combines older-style terraced family housing with tower block living, with a rapidly growing population, much of it from the Indian sub-continent and from Poland.

Southall Black Sisters (SBS — [www.southallblacksisters.org.uk](http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk)) is a not-for-profit, secular organisation established in 1979 to meet the needs of Asian and African-Caribbean women. The organisation has always aimed to challenge all forms of gender-related violence against women and to empower them to gain control over their lives and live without fear of violence. Sadly, but inevitably, the group found that the lockdown measures introduced in March 2020 led to significantly increased risks and vulnerabilities, and that black and minority women were disproportionately impacted. By the time of the second lockdown in November 2020, women in the borough were beginning to suffer excessively from a wide range of issues: persistent illness, debt, delayed hospital appointments. At the same time, the pandemic decimated the services normally supplied by several specialist frontline charities.

On top of that, many women without formal immigration status found themselves with no recourse to public funds, and therefore risked being homeless if they were forced to escape abusive domestic situations.

SBS already knew that 60% or more of the women who contacted them both suffered from gender-based violence and had insecure immigration status. The latter means that these women are unable to go to the local authority for help, because of the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) rule applying to them, and they often end up with abusive partners who hide their passports and steal what money they have. One of the steps SBS took early on was to set up remote online surgeries for agencies and professionals working with clients who were subject to NRPF.

In May 2020, SBS in association with Solace Women's Aid set up its Covid-19 Crisis Project offering safe crisis accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic abuse. As Solace CEO Fiona Dwyer reported: "We saw a 49 per cent rise in calls to our London Advice Line the week before lockdown...never has the need for safe accommodation been greater." Each client was provided with crisis accommodation for three months and was given access to specialist help.

In December 2020, SBS collected together the stories of some of the women it had helped during the dark days of lockdown.

**"We saw a 49 per cent rise in calls to our London Advice Line the week before lockdown."**

**Fiona Dwyer , CEO, Solace**

One woman said "At this point I still have no funding from the government because of my no recourse to public funds. With my caseworker, we are trying to appeal that so we are working on an application. I am trying to get my life sorted."

Another said, "I have no immigration status, because of this I didn't get any financial help. I was very stuck in this pandemic. Only SBS was my hope. They provide me every week necessary food in this risky situation."

Yet another said, "I called the council. but obviously they refused me, because I have no recourse to public funds. So I kept on calling loads of organisations and none of them could help me. Finally I got to Southall Black Sisters and they told me they'd take me in." And finally, one terrified woman said, "I'm going to have to be stuck at home with my mentally ill dad who gets violent when stressed and trapped in a place. Being home with him 24/7 is very scary."



Inevitably, one of the outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a rise in burials. The Coroners' Courts Support Service (CSSS — [www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk](http://www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk)) is a national charity providing free emotional and practical support for families in locating bodies and arranging funerals — largely for those who have English as a second language and who struggle to navigate official channels.

During lockdown, the CSSS has acted as part of London's Pandemic Multi-Agency Response Team (PMART), who are the first to attend when someone dies from coronavirus in the community. All the charity's workers are volunteers, and soon the charity was taking almost double the numbers of calls every day, sending out its volunteers — all of whom are trained — to assist families all over the city. By the beginning of June 2020, CSSS had taken more than 3,500 calls and had assisted 1,000 families.

At the most dangerous early stages of the pandemic, there were reports of lines of hearses queuing outside the Newham mortuary. The sudden impact of so many sad deaths created backlogs within the system, and sometimes CSSS volunteers had to counsel family members who were unable to bury their loved ones because the system was overloaded. All the CSSS support team work as volunteers and during this time found their workload massively increased and the levels of emotional distress significant because of so many delays occurring in the system.

Several temporary morgues were set up in April 2020 — including a "super morgue with the capacity to hold 3,000 bodies on the borders of Redbridge and Newham. Some of those temporary morgues have now closed down again, but other remain in Hillingdon, Wandsworth and Havering.

And in a heartwarming end to a particularly tough element of London's pandemic, the City of London Corporation — which protects and conserves 11,000 acres of green space in London and south east England — has now returned the land in London Flats to a wildflower garden as the temporary mortuary has now been disbanded.



**Enfield** is the northernmost borough in London, with its most northern areas bordering on the countryside of Hertfordshire. At the same time, much of the borough is urban with major housing estates such as the Alma estate in Ponders End and the Highmead estate in Edmonton, and very urban centres such as Southgate. Considerable migrant movements have led to Cypriot, Turkish and Greek communities now living alongside Somali, Nigerian and Ghanaian communities, as well as many Eastern European ethnic groups.

Food, and the delivery of good quality food to isolating and shielding residents, became a priority very early on and the challenge was taken up simultaneously by churches, charities and the Council, working separately and collaboratively at different times.

The North Enfield Foodbank ([www.northendfield.foodbank.org.uk](http://www.northendfield.foodbank.org.uk)) linked up early in the pandemic with local churches and mosques, facilitated by Jubilee Church ([www.jubileechurchlondon.org](http://www.jubileechurchlondon.org)) which is an influential Christian church in the borough. The foodbank reported that while they provided 13,338 meals for vulnerable families across Enfield in March and April 2019, in the same two months the following year they gave 35,820 — a massive uplift.

In order to deal with the crisis, the foodbank and Jubilee Church brought in partners — Love Your Doorstep, British Gas, Exodus Youthworx UK, The Felix Project and others, including Enfield Council — to create a network of volunteer delivery drivers to collect and deliver across the borough. Foodbank manager Kerry Coe said: "It has been incredible to see the way the community has pulled together during this time. People's generosity has been overwhelming — not just financially, but also the giving of their time. It has really demonstrated the strong sense of community and the resilience of people within Enfield."

Meanwhile, the Enfield Caribbean Association teamed up with Street Watch Edmonton to offer care and support to over 150 elderly people with weekly food parcels, as well as offering befriending telephone support. The Association's Chair, Oveta Mcinnis, said: "We came together in collaboration to support our African Caribbean elders and most vulnerable." Oveta mentioned that they had received strong support from Enfield Council which itself has set up a Community Pantry early on in the pandemic, working with groups such as the Enfield Caribbean Association but also St Monica's Church, the Nigerian Catholic St Edmund's Church in Edmonton and the Bright Future Foundation. Enfield Council's Leader, Nesil Caliskan, said: "Food plays a very important role in giving comfort and a touch of happy nostalgia during difficult times. The Community Pantry provided two very important functions. Firstly, the very active groups of volunteers and charities were best placed to identify those in need, who may be extremely vulnerable. Secondly, these groups provided an important social connection for people, even with distancing measures in place."



The Outside Project ([www.lgbtiqoutside.org](http://www.lgbtiqoutside.org)) is an LGBTIQ+ community shelter and domestic abuse refuge in response to those within the LGBTIQ+ community who feel endangered, who are homeless or 'hidden' homeless and feel that they are on the outside of services due to historical and present prejudice in society and in their homes. Carla Ecola from the project summarises: "It gives you a step in the door to maybe start talking about your homelessness. LGBTIQ+ people don't recognise that they are homeless as the image is a withered old man in a sleeping bag. We're what the sector calls hidden homeless. But look at the stats: the street homeless population is the tip of the iceberg. The majority are in temp accommodation, B&B, sofa surfing, sleeping in squats or insecure housing with dodgy landlords. They are technically homeless but not recognised by themselves or the state or the services."

The project's community centre originally opened in 2019, taking up space in the empty Clerkenwell Fire Station — the London Fire Brigade offered the space while the building was being prepared for sale. For the next twelve months, in partnership with Stonewall Housing ([www.stonewallhousing.org](http://www.stonewallhousing.org)), the refuge came to be somewhere where people could meet, interact, socialise as well as crucially find shelter as an all-night winter shelter.

Then the pandemic hit in March 2020 and the centre, like all others, was obliged to close although the Night Shelter was able to stay open.

Financial support from City Bridge Foundation enabled the building to continue to offer support, and the addition of a square of pink astroturf on what had been the Brigade's drill area provided a safe, socially-distanced outdoor garden for clients. Community donations of games, sports equipment and food poured in. The group campaigned for additional crisis accommodation and were soon also running an emergency hotel in Soho. They also opened the first LGBTIQ+ domestic abuse refuge in London, Star Refuge, named to commemorate 50 years since the opening of Star House, a shelter launched by LGBTIQ+ homeless activists in New York in 1970. The group housed over 150 LGBTIQ+ people in its crisis accommodations across London during the pandemic.

With the backing of the GLA, The Outside Project was able to secure a new home in 2021 in Lant Street in Southwark where it continues to grow the support services it offers its client base, moving into new areas such as the Outsiders United sports project to encourage LGBTIQ+ people who often had poor sports experiences at school to take up a sport.

The Outside Project's determination both to continue and expand its service to its community during the impositions of lockdown, and the support of both funding partners and a host of volunteers, made a big difference to LBBIQ+ Londoners during lockdown.



Little Village ([www.littlevillagehq.org](http://www.littlevillagehq.org)) is like a food bank, but for clothes, toys and equipment for babies and children up to the age of 5. The London charity has hubs in Brent, Southwark, Wandsworth and Camden and accepts donations of excellent-condition, pre-loved items, which are passed on to families who need support. They provide a warm, supportive community for families, building connections, local networks and facilitating support between parents. The six hundred Little Village volunteers made 7,000 phone calls to families during 2021, supporting 6,463 children, while many of the provisions of lockdown and social distancing remained in place in London.

The first two lockdowns of 2020 demonstrated just how vulnerable families with small children were. The charity carried out a survey of its staff and volunteers who had worked so hard through the year, finding that 70 per cent of those at the frontline found that parents were unable to afford basic essentials such as nappies. More than half of the parents surveyed reported that they had had to borrow to cover such basic costs, as incomes were hit by reduced hours, illness and job losses. Here's a typical case study from one Little Village client, the mother of a five-year-old:

“My husband had to stop working, he had an accident before the baby arrived, the landlord was pushing me to pay our rent, so I applied for Universal Credit, but they stopped my benefits in my last month of pregnancy for nearly four months, I was struggling a lot.

They told me I hadn't lived here for 5 years [so I couldn't claim UC], but I am more than six years here. Citizens Advice helped me a lot to find the solution, we had to borrow some money too."

Little Village works regularly with Citizens Advice to ensure that its volunteers are able to give up-to-date advice to families. Shelley works for Little Village as a volunteer in Wandsworth, and she describes what they face and the impact of social distancing during lockdown:

"Many of the people we talk to are dealing with a variety of challenges and sometimes don't know where else to turn for help. Sometimes the situations we deal with are extremely complicated, others just need a sympathetic ear and someone to talk or write to. Covid-19 has made circumstances more desperate for many families; they are confronting greater hardship, while access and resources are being curtailed. Foodbanks have had to shut down, charities have had to limit their services. For many families, everything is happening all at once and they are feeling very lost. Having to work remotely can also be frustrating – we've lost some of the personal connection we used to develop more frequently as part of our service. It's easier to give comfort and reassurance in person and I very much miss doing that. But there is comfort in knowing that Little Village keeps on. There are so many committed volunteers trying to help wherever possible and I truly believe we make a difference that is long-lasting in our community."

**The charity carried out a survey of its staff and volunteers who had worked so hard through the year, finding that 70 per cent of those at the frontline found that parents were unable to afford basic essentials such as nappies.**

The borough of **Newham** looks strikingly different today than ten years before, largely as a result of the building of the Olympic village to accommodate the London Games of 2012. In the decades leading up to that, Newham suffered from the loss of manufacturing alongside many other London boroughs, made more impactful here because of the slow and eventually total decline of the London Docks. That too resulted in a permanent change as the London Docks Development Corporation's work in Tower Hamlets began to spread east into Newham. Traditionally a Labour borough, Newham has become increasingly ethnically diverse in recent decades, with 72 per cent of residents now from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic groups. Only 57 per cent of the borough's residents have English as their main language and at the last count, there were over one hundred languages spoken in the borough.

One Newham ([www.onenewham.org.uk](http://www.onenewham.org.uk)) is a charitable network formed in 2019 and representing over sixty voluntary, community and faith groups representing the spread of beliefs in the borough: 40 per cent of residents identify as Christian, 32 per cent as Muslim, 9 per cent Hindu and 2 per cent Sikh. During the pandemic, the charity has been an absolutely vital resource to provide a link between isolated residents of different faiths and the services potentially available from national and local government.

One Newham became a key organisation to ensure that the local authority in particular was able to reach all residents from the early days, by offering its participating groups the opportunity to share information and to reach out to residents on specific issues.

The charity's members found themselves involved in a broad range of outreach activities, helping to explain and promote the often complex pandemic regulations and provisions to a broad church audience. From promoting vaccinations to helping residents to download and use the new NHS app, One Newham's members essentially provided a stepping stone for residents who would normally have little to do with the Council to understand issues which would fundamentally affect their lives.

One Newham Chair Susanne Rauprich OBE summed up the charity's experience of the pandemic: "Newham has a rich history of voluntary engagement; it is such an asset for the borough. One Newham's key role is to support those people who want to change the world. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to build on the good relationships that we've built with the local authority, we want to look back in a year's time and recognise how devastating Covid-19 was for Newham but that we've been able to build something out of it that will strengthen our communities for years to come."

One Newham only came into being the year before the pandemic hit, but its work over the last two years in the borough has demonstrated to the Council, to participating members and to residents that the process of collaboration is vital for voluntary groups to maximise their ability to reach their existing and potential clients.



First established in the 1920s, the Haredi community of Stamford Hill in Hackney has been growing rapidly since the 1930s, when many arrived fleeing the impending Holocaust. It is the largest strictly Orthodox Jewish community in Europe, and makes up 7% of the population of the borough of Hackney. While the sense of community here is strong, there were aspects which made the community potentially vulnerable at the same time: many families in the community who follow the strictly orthodox traditions avoid all use of social media and even mainstream news outlets, so there was swiftly a potential problem in disseminating the urgent new government guidelines and instructions in March 2020. At the same time, there is a very strong tradition within the community of praying together, which in turn created possible problems of Covid infection. When Chief Rabbi Mirvis ordered the closure of all United Synagogues, to comply with the new rules, there was bewilderment amongst some residents.

Moses Gluck has been an undertaker in Stamford Hill for 30 years. The impact of the pandemic meant that his service began to be overwhelmed within weeks. As most of his staff are older and at risk, he relied on younger volunteers to help out with ritual acts such as the tahara, washing the bodies. "Here in Stamford Hill we are a close-knit community. We say we're all family. So to come to a family where they have just lost somebody, you feel with them. It's our loss."

Stamford Hill also has its own branch of the global Jewish voluntary ambulance organisation, Hatzola, and has almost 50 volunteers; on a normal day, they might field 20 calls. At the peak of the crisis it was receiving 80 calls a day and had to rent extra ambulances to meet the demand. "Some members here took more calls during this period than others did in a year. It was just constant. Most calls were serious," said Benjamin Stern, a Hatzola volunteer of 20 years. A community-funded campaign raised more than £200,000 in a few weeks to buy a new ambulance and two response cars.





In September 2021, **Redbridge** charity The Shpresa Programme ([www.shpresaprogramme.org](http://www.shpresaprogramme.org)) was shortlisted for an Outstanding Contributions Award at the Anti Slavery Day Awards to honour their work with young Albanian unaccompanied asylum seekers.

Redbridge is normally known as one of several residential east London boroughs to which Londoners have moved over the years to settle in a quieter, greener environment than they might have experienced in the centre of the city. It is an ethnically diverse borough, with a long history of settled Jewish communities and in more recent decades a new influx from the Asian sub-continent. Thirty seven per cent of Redbridge residents register as having been born outside of the UK.

The Shpresa Programme was formed in the borough in 2002 and registered as a charity in 2005. Its purpose was specifically to promote the integration of the Albanian-speaking community into the UK. The fall of communism in Albania in 1991 and the political conflict in the Balkans led to huge violations of human rights across many communities in Albania, leading to migration to safe havens such as the UK. There was no notable Albanian presence in London at the time, which led the charity's founder, Luljeta Nuzi, to volunteer for the migration charity RAMP ([www.ramproject.org](http://www.ramproject.org)). Through her experience at RAMP, she was motivated to form The Shpresa Programme specifically for the Albanian community.

In response to the March 2020 lockdown, the charity launched a range of packages to support their client base during the pandemic: food delivery and financial support, clothing for women and babies, laptops for those facing digital exclusion, befriending and storytelling programmes, help in accessing small grants. In addition, the circumstances of lockdown made the situation of trafficked women even more precarious, and therefore Shpresa worked with the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit (MiCLU) to identify and support trafficked Albanian women and their children, who are particularly vulnerable and frequently fail to secure protection from the Home Office when they seek asylum in the UK.

Charity founder Luljeta Nuzi recalls: "The first few weeks were fast paced and we all felt bombarded with new, very often confusing, information. It was intense and stressful at times. We were struggling to stop thinking about work and worried that we had taken on too much. However, over time, as we started to understand the different elements of this period, we could see some of the opportunities. It was inspiring to see how strong our community was and how able we were to do things differently, moving all our services online: youth work, support groups, training, sport, heritage, events and award ceremonies. Shpresa's team was not set up to work from home. Many people didn't have a quiet space at home to work or lacked the devices, skills and digital connectivity to get online.

"Our initial priority was to get the means and be compliant with rules, safeguarding and consent mechanisms, so our staff can understand how to operate online, how to monitor and evaluate safely, at the same time as helping our users. The Shpresa Board saw an opportunity to build our professional community. We started to think about how we could work together more closely, learn from each other and build relationships outside of our community and make use of digital. We have now set up our first ever digital steering group and are reviewing our strategy, hoping to harness the power and importance of performance analytics in developing tools that really improve our ability to provide support to our users. We want to share and grow that passion as much as possible within Shpresa and beyond."



**“It was inspiring to see how strong our community was and how able we were to do things differently...”**

**Luljeta Nuzi, Founder,  
The Shpresa Programme**

Wandsworth Community Transport (WCT — [www.wctbus.co.uk](http://www.wctbus.co.uk)) is a charity in south west London made up of 25 minibuses available for non-profit making groups in the borough. Contracted to Wandsworth Borough Council, the charity is also funded by City Bridge Foundation and The Big Lottery. As well as training drivers and providing volunteers, the charity runs Wandsworth Shopmobility to help over 2,000 elderly and disabled people do their shopping in the borough.

**Wandsworth** as a borough is renowned for its low Council Tax under a cost-cutting and efficiency-motivated Conservative administration. It didn't go down the route of its eastern neighbour Lambeth in pursuing a left-wing agenda in the 1980s but today is collaborating with its neighbour on the high-rise development of the south bank. It is primarily a residential borough with less industrial infrastructure than many other London boroughs.

Once the Covid-19 vaccination roll-out began at the end of 2020, WCT was given additional responsibilities to assist in bringing elderly people to their vaccine appointments. Manuel Button, the charity's managing director, said:

“We started the service for people with vaccine appointments just before Christmas, and we soon realised it was very much needed. We were in touch with the NHS about liaising with them to provide more transport, but they were obviously so up to their necks in actually delivering the vaccines that they don't have much time to deal with this side of it.

“We were hoping for a proper system whereby they give us a list of maybe 30 names and addresses and we provide the service, but that never materialised.

“We are mainly working on an ad hoc basis where people who have a vaccine appointment ring us and we pick them up and provide any mobility aid they need, and then return them home. We have been in touch with other community transport services across London, and some of them are transporting over 30 people every day for vaccinations. There is definitely a need there for the service, it’s just a question of reaching the right people.”

Manuel explained that it is not just transport for vaccine appointments that is in demand, as the charity also provides home grocery deliveries for elderly residents in Wandsworth. “We were still taking people shopping up until the current lockdown, but we had to stop that service as all our passengers are considered vulnerable and this is too high-risk. Now, they phone us with their list, we pick up what they want and then we drop it off to them. Most of our users can’t do internet shopping, so this is definitely a lifeline for many people.”

Manuel also acknowledged the difficulties faced by volunteers across south London who now have no work due to the national lockdown. “When we get back to normal, that is when we’re going to have to go out and really rebuild our base of volunteers.

“I would ask people not to forget the good which they feel now, and to carry this with them as life starts to return back to normal.”

Manuel's team of volunteers effectively ensured that Britain's remarkable vaccine roll-out was able to succeed. Without his drivers and his vans, many old people would have struggled to meet their appointments.



**Tower Hamlets**, bearing out east from London Bridge on the north side of the Thames, has always been a home for migrants: first Huguenot and Jewish settlers, setting up homes and workshops for clothes and shoes amongst other trades; then from the 1970s on, a new Bangladeshi influx which settled around the Brick Lane area, with the Brick Lane Mosque sitting on the same site as a synagogue and, previous to that, a Huguenot meeting house. The London Docklands Development Corporation building of Canary Wharf and other huge structures along the river may have created enterprise activity there, but in the norther parts of the borough — in Bow and Poplar — standards of living have never been high.

Poplar HARCA is a housing, regeneration and community association in east London. Its residents voted HARCA into existence over 25 years ago and it’s led by the needs and aspirations of the local community.

Today, HARCA own and manage over 10,000 homes and invest around £4m each year in community regeneration. Since its formation HARCA has also moved into a wider area of social benefits, from helping people into work to providing creative spaces for young people to work in the creative sector. Much of HARCA's work on behalf of the community during the pandemic was self-generated, not relying on prompts or requests from the Council or other statutory authorities.

With that spirit and emphasis in mind, it's remarkable to see the impact of the charity's link-up with the Poplar Women's Inclusive Team (WIT — [www.wit.org.uk](http://www.wit.org.uk)), which carried out over 11,000 food deliveries and provisions to enable struggling families to get access to hot food. Their work was so impressive that they were awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2021. HARCA's Becs Marshall describes how they worked:

"I will never forget how WIT helped the Linc Community Centre and provided a community kitchen at our St Paul's Way Centre, at the height of the pandemic. Early on, the staff teams who run the centres were thinking 'What can we do to help our community with the resources and staff we have?'. Like so many people, some of our colleagues were furloughed, isolating or unwell. From ringing around local people, and talking to those who were coming in, it was immediately obvious that our community was in a really, really bad way.

We knew a food bank was desperately needed but we just didn't know where to begin. And then, suddenly, Poplar HARCA's partnership with WIT happened.

"They were looking for somewhere to establish a food provision. We had the space to provide one, and so we came together. None of us knew exactly what to do and every one of us was going through our own stuff at this point. Lots of our community had lost jobs and were scared about getting sick. There was so much uncertainty. But WIT rolled their sleeves up with such a strong sense of direction, they made us feel anything was possible. Without WIT, the food bank at the Linc Community Centre and the community kitchen at the St Paul's Way Centre just wouldn't have happened. They allowed us to do our my jobs and to support our communities, at a time and in a way in which it was needed the most."

In addition, HARCA set up a new Covid and Isolation Community Support Hub covering Bow and Poplar, which was made up of some core HARCA staff plus many volunteers. The Hub kept up phone links with vulnerable residents and organised shopping, collections of medications, welfare benefits advice, foodbank assistance and befriending.



Help On Your Doorstep ([www.helponyourdoorstep.com](http://www.helponyourdoorstep.com)) is an **Islington** charity which works to support Islington residents in a number of ways. Inevitably, like so many other London charities, it was obliged to shut down its face-to-face roles such as its Good Neighbours Scheme when lockdown commenced in March 2020, but instead of just relying on digital replacements, it immediately set up a new volunteer service to provide phone befriending to isolated and shielding residents.

Paul was a great example of a member of the public stepping up to respond to Help On Your Doorstep's request for volunteers. He shopped for people who couldn't leave their home and worked as a telephone befriender, speaking to people on a regular basis who were struggling at home and feeling isolated and alone. He says now that he enjoyed hearing people's stories and learning more about those in his local community. He says: "I often have the sense at the end of a call that the person perhaps feels a little happier than at the beginning of the call, perhaps simply as a result of speaking to someone else." Paul was inspired to volunteer as he had previously volunteered supporting people with learning difficulties and remembered how fulfilling and worthwhile he had found that work.

Simren is another person who elected to volunteer. She had only lived in Islington for two and a half years, but felt motivated to reach out via the charity.

She ended up supporting one elderly male resident in a number of ways: connecting him to the internet, collecting prescriptions for him from the hospital and speaking to him on the phone twice a week. As she says: "He is the most delightful individual and we became good friends." After lockdown ended, he made her a Greek meal and they stayed in light contact for some time.

One of the crucial things which Help On Your Doorstep discovered during its personal befriending lockdown scheme was that many residents didn't realise what support they were entitled to. By offering practical help — from replacing a broken cooker to getting support on employment opportunities — the charity's volunteers built trusting relationships by adapting their approach to each resident's individual situation. Volunteers reported back that often, residents would say that they found the normal way of accessing support services to be very formal and full of intimidating processes; by having a willing supporter on hand, they felt more confident to express what was lacking in their lives, and through that to find a support solution from one of the 150 partner organisations which worked with the charity in the borough.

Val was the Good Neighbours Co-ordinator for Help On Your Doorstep, and made a really innovative use of bingo.

She says: "Thinking outside of the box is something we are used to doing in the Good Neighbours Scheme, but never more so than during lockdown. We had to adapt our activities, carefully thinking about the people who attend. A lot of my 70-plus group users didn't have smartphones, tablets, laptops or computers so the other online Zoom activities that we were running were not something that they could join in. Having a chat line that multiple residents could use at one time has been a lifeline for a lot of my residents. Many of them live alone and really miss other group users' company and the Good Neighbours weekly bingo/coffee afternoon group they attended at the Hugh Cubitt Centre. We set up a weekly chat line bingo group to run every Wednesday. We had two games each week consisting of one line, two lines and a full house and the prizes were fruit, biscuits and a £5 Sainsbury's gift card. Each week I delivered the previous week's prizes and tickets for two weeks at a time. This gave me a chance to see people in person and have a 15-20 minute social distance chat with them to see how they were really doing which was nice for them and me."

One of the bingo players, Eva (name changed for privacy), summed it up: "It can be a bit noisy at the beginning of the bingo as everyone is saying hello and talking but then we start the bingo and it's so nice that we can feel part of a group and do this and we all really enjoy it."



It is easy to forget just how widespread the impact of Covid and lockdown was, and the capital's animals certainly became more vulnerable during the period. Brent-based animal charity Mayhew ([www.themayhew.org](http://www.themayhew.org)), which started out in 1886 as the The Home For Starving And Deserted Cats, found itself coming under real pressure very quickly but, working within the restrictions and lockdowns, it adapted its programmes and services so that it could continue to help the animals and pet owners in need. They delivered dog and cat care packages of vital supplies to vulnerable owners and their pets, and provided telephone support for members of the public looking to us for advice. The charity's TheraPaws programme went digital, with virtual calls replacing in-person visits so that volunteers could continue to provide the consolation of interacting with dogs to those who needed it most. The figures from 2020 were impressive: over a thousand animal welfare cases handled, 331 cats rehomed, 1,360 animals vaccinated.

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People were worried about getting vital supplies for their cat or dog while isolating and how their pet would receive treatment when local vet services were reduced. Older London residents were concerned about how they would look after their pets. Mayhew's clinic cut back outpatient slots and worked closely with volunteers and staff to identify the animals that needed most support. The charity also began delivering bespoke care packages including pet food, medical treatments and other supplies to people in at-risk groups who were shielding and to homeless shelters.

Angela is a good example of how important this service was. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at the start of 2020 at the same time that her beloved cat Kevin started to have problems with his eyes. Lockdown meant not only that Angela couldn't get the treatment she needed for herself, but her cat too couldn't be seen and initially, the only advice given to her was that he should be put down. But she contacted Mayhew and, collaborating with one of the charity's workers, AJ, established that Kevin could live on healthily by having just one eye removed.

"Although they tried their best, they couldn't save one of Kevin's eyes, but I have a happy, pain-free cat. I don't think I would have coped with my operation and treatment without Mayhew's help and support. They all cared so much.

"They kept in touch constantly and Kevin was so brave and took his treatment like the gentleman he is. I thank AJ and her team and the vets from the bottom of my heart. Both Kevin and I are now well and that is thanks to them."



Marta Rocco is the Volunteer Delivery and Development Manager for Volunteer Centre Sutton (VCS — [www.vcsutton.org.uk](http://www.vcsutton.org.uk)). **Sutton** neighbours Croydon in south west London and is a classic commuter region, forever known as the quiet suburban location for the 1970s sitcom *The Good Life*. It has always had a strong voluntary ethos and was chosen by David Cameron in 2010 as one of the four vanguard areas for his Big Society initiative, which was supposed to highlight the links between voluntary and state organisations.

Marta recalls that the relationship between VCS and Sutton Council was strong and mutually supportive throughout the pandemic. They began to recruit volunteers before the 23rd March lockdown and by May had recruited 2,000. With such a volume of volunteers, they had to set up what was effectively a brokerage system, fitting volunteers to different organisations.

While some of the organisation weren't always as flexible as they might have been in taking on volunteers, by the end of the year they had found roles for almost 3,000 volunteers within the borough.

Some of those volunteers were allocated to VCS's own projects: shopping, food deliveries, picking up medicines, befriending and so on. Others were allocated to specific tasks, and one such task arose early on at the very start of April. The local Clinical Commissioning Group of the NHS in Sutton contacted VCS to report that they had a warehouse of PPE equipment being delivered but they were without any means of getting them out to the 22 GP surgeries across the borough. While it may seem surprising in retrospect that such a situation would occur, Marta and her team took it in their stride. With just two days' notice, they allocated volunteers to visit the warehouse, divide the PPE equipment into piles, and then, using their own cars, the volunteers drove the kit around the borough to all 22 GP surgeries. The phone call came on a Wednesday, the equipment was with GP surgeries by the weekend.



GoodGym ([www.goodgym.org](http://www.goodgym.org)) is a not-for-profit organisation set up in 2009 to combine fitness with social and community support. People who might normally just go to the gym on their own to improve their fitness are able to join a local GoodGym group where they typically combine running to a project with supporting where necessary. During lockdown, GoodGym in London became involved in supporting the community in countless ways. Here are just a few examples.

Nurjehan joined GoodGym Haringey in 2018, to combine her wish to maintain fitness and her desire to connect more with her local community. During the pandemic she packed weekly breakfast bags for families and individuals without a permanent address across three boroughs; she got stuck into a deep-clean of isolation rooms in two homeless shelters; and she helped out with the reopening of a community café which had been badly hit by the lockdown closure. As she says: “An immediate response to feeding others in a time when resources are limited, movement is restricted and vulnerabilities are high makes for a impactful and rewarding task.”

In Camden, Voluntary Action Camden (VAC — [www.onecamden.com](http://www.onecamden.com)) contacted GoodGym in late March 2020 to ask members to collect and deliver prescriptions to vulnerable and isolated residents in the borough.

This both improved service delivery at a time when options were increasingly overloaded, and it also saved money



as pharmacies didn't have to co-ordinate and pay for transport to get medicines to clients. This partnership worked well, as VAC already had an existing relationship with GoodGym in Camden, and the same process worked with GoodGym in other boroughs such as Southwark.

In Ealing, the local GoodGym community supported Ealing food bank regularly with a number of tasks. They collaborated to coordinate large amounts of food donations and responded to urgent requests for items such as sanitary products. Sharon, from Ealing food bank commented: "We had regular GoodGym volunteers helping us at the food bank. Due to the unprecedented demand for food due to the pandemic the help has been invaluable." Meanwhile, in Newham, GoodGym runners worked to deliver food packages to kids from Manorfield Primary School to make sure children who were not able to go to school had what they needed in terms of nutrition.

The very distinctive GoodGym red T-shirts were seen all over the capital during the pandemic and their community support remains as strong as ever. Sometimes, a GoodGym-er would combine exercise with counselling by running to the house of an isolated person and spending some time chatting with them from the garden outside. Their involvement has proved a huge boon, not only to the recipients of their support, but also for each GoodGym member's fitness and positivity during this period.

**Lambeth** is an inner London borough which has, over the decades, seen perhaps more controversy than its residents might have wished. During the 1980s, leftist Councils challenged central government over primary issues such as the setting of local rates, and the borough became one of the country's flashpoints for disputes about the proposed Poll Tax. Ethnically diverse, with a mature Afro-Caribbean community dominating in the Brixton area, Lambeth has in recent years also seen a sudden surge towards modern residential tower blocks all along the south side of the Thames.

This combination of an older, deep-rooted community with an influx of younger professionals lies at the heart of the work of charity South London Cares ([www.southlondoncares.org.uk](http://www.southlondoncares.org.uk)), who specifically aim to bring together the young and the old to combat isolation where it occurs amongst both demographics. Clearly, the issue of isolation came to the fore as soon as the prospect of lockdown became real, and before the month of March 2020 was over, the charity had launched its #AloneTogether programme containing an entire month of daily activities for older and younger neighbours to meet each other safely outdoors. For every day of April, there was a different planned outdoor opportunity which residents were able to join, and whole range of different projects in which to participate: sharing jokes, writing poems, coming up with Desert Island Discs lists. The #AloneTogether was sent out to thousands of Lambeth residents.



One of the many volunteers who joined the South London Cares programme in April was Allie, who summed it up well: "I think this is a chance for things to be reversed and for people to think about others rather than themselves. There are good people in the world and hopefully this will make a few more! Changes do come in a way we don't expect; who could have thought that this would change everything? But we're in London and we've been here before, so to speak. London has survived a great many things and it will survive a great many more".

South London Cares launched a Phone A Friend project to compensate for the fact that its regular social club meets had to stop. What they discovered, unsurprisingly, was that this mechanism had considerable mental health advantages for both young and old — the unexpected impact of lockdown isolation didn't just sit on older people.

Volunteers also spent time to teach some residents how to embrace often baffling new technology like Zoom. Seventy-five-year-old Monique took to it immediately, although as she says: "I never thought I would like technology and have always avoided it. But I'm so happy I pushed through as I love it now and it lets me connect and have these fun experiences with you all." In April alone, 43 older neighbours in Lambeth learned the Zoom ropes in order to be able to participate in virtual social clubs.

It's difficult to overestimate quite how significant that process must have been, and it is a testament to the vision of the Cares Family that they could spark such a response. In those first two months, 270 new older neighbours were introduced to the charity, 389 older neighbours received support of connections they didn't know they could access, 955 conversations were shared with older neighbours, 178 older neighbours were referred to 80 partner organisations and over a thousand individual interventions were made on behalf of older neighbours who needed something specific.



The borough of **Richmond** in south west London takes in not just riverside Richmond but also Twickenham and Barnes and the huge green space, Richmond Park together with world-famous Kew Gardens. Managed historically by either Conservative or Liberal Councillors, the borough is prosperous, green and can often feel like a world away from the bustle of central London.

That doesn't mean, however, that its residents aren't aware of their good fortune.

Five years ago, a young nurse called Sian Thomas spotted a homeless young man sitting on the pavement outside Burger King on Christmas Eve. "I bought him a burger and he started telling me about his life," she says. "I could have written his story before he told me. His mum and dad were alcoholics. He went into care and his placements kept breaking down. He kept saying: 'I'm such a bad person.' He was sleeping on the street and that's where he was going to wake up on Christmas Day, alone. I walked away in tears. I went to do some last-minute food shopping in Waitrose and I just thought, how can it be like this?"

That experience motivated Sian to set up the Richmond Christmas Dinner ([www.christmasdaydinner.com](http://www.christmasdaydinner.com)) which every year since has given some fifty young adult care leavers not just a nice Christmas Day, but a fantastic and unforgettable day that celebrates their character and resilience. Sian was motivated by her own experience and also by the work of poet Lemn Sissay, a care leaver who founded the first Christmas Day Dinner initiative in 2013. Sian set up a working group of volunteers which included social workers, a high court judge, young care leavers and marketing professionals, all from the borough. A JustGiving appeal brought in donations but soon Richmond businesses like Bruce's Butchers, who supplied the turkeys for the meal, began to contribute.

The first Richmond Christmas Day Dinner was hosted in 2017 in Bushy Park Cricket Club.

Fifty young people came to a venue decorated for them with Christmas trees and enjoyed free hair treatments, a nail bar and even a silent disco. As Sian remembers: "There was one young man who had been saying all along he wasn't coming and he wasn't coming, because he was hoping to spend Christmas Day with his dad. Then at the last minute, on December 23rd, his dad cancelled on him and he came to us. Our guests were saying to us: 'You've given up your Christmas for us!' And we said we haven't given up anything: this is where we want to be." Sian says that while she started the project, its success is thanks to the goodwill and generosity of local people, warm support from local businesses and the help of large numbers of volunteers who peel mountains of veg, take part in a huge wrap-a-thon in Clarendon Hall, York House, decorate, communicate, cook the meal, host, clear up and more.

So the fear was that 2020's pandemic, and the strict tier system which was in place for Christmas that year, might impact on the group's ability to support care leavers once more. Far from it. Volunteers instead delivered a hot dinner, a hamper and a sack of presents to young care leavers wherever they were on Christmas Day, and stayed with the youngsters for a while to have a chat and share some Christmas wishes.

One of the volunteers was Whitney, who previously had been a recipient of the Dinner herself. "The interaction was different but to know that someone cares, that someone is knocking on my door...you still get the same vibes, the energy, the purposeful meaning. It gives me hope to know that people will take time out from their own families to create a day just for us. We know that we are not forgotten."



**Southwark** is one of London's most historic boroughs, with its roots going back to the very heart of the original city. Over the decades since 1965, it has suffered from under-development and large swathes of poverty in areas such as Peckham but more recently, building developments in places such as the rejuvenated Elephant & Castle are showing a new direction. The pockets of poverty remain, however, which is why one of London's oldest charities, Pembroke House, remains as busy as ever.

Pembroke House ([www.pembrokehouse.org.uk](http://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk)) has been based in Walworth since 1885, when students from Pembroke College, Cambridge took up residence in the neighbourhood to live and work alongside local people. Today, the charity is one of the only settlements in the country to retain its founding elements: residency, halls for community activities and a chapel.

It's general purpose is to work towards the binding together of individuals within the community; its specific purpose, as it demonstrated during lockdown, is to take action when individuals are suffering.

As with almost all other charities, it was immediately required to close down face-to-face activities in March 2020, and immediately created the Virtual Walworth Living Room to help people stay healthy and active through free virtual activities such as an online choir, a music group for babies and toddlers, drawing, dance and chess classes. However, rather than just staying online, Pembroke took the initiative within the borough to set up its own food hub within its building and within two months of 23rd March, one hundred volunteers had delivered over 20 tonnes of food to over 1,500 people in need.

As Mike Wilson, executive director, said: "Throughout our history, Pembroke House has stood ready to use one of our great assets — our building — to help the community in time of crisis. During the Second World War, we became an air-raid shelter, protecting 250 people from falling bombs. Walworth has always been a community that's pulled together in tough times and it's amazing to see the neighbourhood come together at this time of crisis as well."

The food hub which was set up had nearly 30 organisations, including the borough council, referring people to it.

## “Covid has revealed inequalities in Walworth — it didn’t cause them.”

Mike Wilson, Executive Director, Pembroke House

As Wilson commented: "There already was a food security crisis in Walworth, and in London and across much of the country. While transitioning into a food bank was the right response in an emergency, it's a scandal that our neighbours need to rely on food aid in ordinary times."

By August 2020, the hub had delivered a massive 90 tonnes of food to local residents — a remarkable effort resulting from the unceasing work of its dedicated volunteer network. But at the AGM of the charity, held virtually in November 2020, it was agreed that the experience of the hub's work during the pandemic had served to demonstrate the need for more fundamental longterm changes in a borough where, pre-Covid, 23 per cent of adults and 17 per cent of younger people lived in a constant state of food insecurity.

Cathy Deplessis, director at Southwark Pensioners' Centre, said: "We need to be empowering locals in a practical way, to not just be receivers, so that you're building and strengthening the local community. Covid brought people together quickly around a crisis, and that energy and desire to help is still there."

At Christmas 2020, when the Pembroke House food hub figures had reached 200 tonnes of food delivered to over 2,000 residents in over 20,000 individual journeys, director Wilson explained why the charity had brought together one hundred different people from the community to begin to plan a new future for the borough where food insecurity can be overcome: "Covid has revealed inequalities in Walworth — it didn't cause them. No single organisation, council or service can get us out of this mess. It will take the whole neighbourhood bringing its collective tools, know-how and spirit to the fight."



Marie Hobson runs a Girl Guide group in Lee, Lewisham. She looks back on the difficult times of 2020 with a thoughtful appreciation of both the impact on her and the girls in her group. To her, the pandemic was the equivalent of the impact of World War Two on London Guide leaders: it was a crisis that required them to demonstrate the value of their promise “to serve Queen and community”.

Marie has about twenty five girls in her group with ages from 10 to 18. She could see immediately the mental health impact on them of being told to stay at home, not go to school or visit friends. She soon set about moving the group onto a Zoom weekly meeting, but found that only a small proportion of the girls wanted to join. It soon became clear that many girls, spending their whole day in front of a computer screen for their home schooling, were quickly suffering from digital exhaustion. So, Marie drove around for hours dropping off activity packs she had prepared at the houses of all her girls, so they could still participate in Girlguiding but do it offline.

As soon as restrictions allowed, she set up socially distanced meetings for the girls in the car park of St Mildred's Church, giving them tasks and projects which made the most of the outdoor setting, such as constructing, decorating and planting flower boxes along the South Circular for local residents to enjoy.

As she tells it now, she hadn't realised until this point just how important Girlguiding was for her own mental health as well as that of the girls in her group — looking back, she can see that she put enormous pressure on herself in those early months to provide continued support for her girls. Marie wanted every girl in her group to have access to Girlguiding activities regardless of their circumstances. She doesn't regret it, however, and sees that the survival and continued health of her group — at a time when a number of London Girlguiding groups closed down — became a contributing factor to the sense of cohesion of their local community in Lewisham.



**Waltham Forest** at the north east edge of London is famous as the home of footballer David Beckham but is also another outer London residential borough that has seen population changes over the decades. Now, the borough's demographic profile is well over 50 per cent identifying as ethnic minority with a strong presence over the decades from the Indian sub-continent.

PL84U AL-SUFFA ([www.pl84ualsuffa.co.uk](http://www.pl84ualsuffa.co.uk)) is a faith-based charity in the borough which was originally set up by a Saira Begum Mir's family almost ten years ago.

The name came from the idea of offering a plate of food to guests in accord with one of the five pillars of Islam, that of offering charity. Saira noticed that, amongst their neighbours, too many seemed not to have a place to go and eat on the one day of the week — Sunday — when they might be able to rest from work. She and her husband Farooq determined to do something about it and soon, with support from Near Neighbours, the Church Urban Fund, and Muslim Aid together with their local mosque, Faizan-e-Islam, they involved their whole family together with a rapidly growing team of volunteers to provide meals for local residents every other Sunday.

Like other Muslim charities in London, PL84U AL-SUFFA offers food and support to everyone in need in Waltham Forest, regardless of race, religion, colour or gender. When the pandemic hit, the charity was obliged to put a temporary halt on the Sunday meals, Saira and her family partnered with 14th Walthamstow Scouts Group to create a food hub offering choices of fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and other essentials. While the Sunday meal service was every other week, the queues which developed at the impromptu food hub soon after the start of the first lockdown in 2020 meant that the family were opening up three times a week to offer essential food to residents.



As one resident put it: "I don't want to be here, but if I don't come, I won't survive." Others explained how, as self-employed tradespeople, they weren't eligible for the lockdown grants that the government was offering, and therefore within weeks were facing the stark reality of utter poverty.

By June 2020, Saira was commenting: "The numbers have really grown. We have different faces all the time and we've noticed that there are a lot of people from different social backgrounds. This Covid-19 has hit a lot of people because they're out of work." Saira has since been awarded with her name on the Queens New Years Honours List 2022, a British Empire Medal, and the British Citizen Award for her outstanding service to the community.



Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation in Southwark ([www.gsttfoundation.org.uk](http://www.gsttfoundation.org.uk)) has been, in one form or another, part of the landscape of London's health services for hundreds of years. Today, the foundation invests and partners in innovative projects, and during the pandemic it developed a fascinating partnership with the not-for-profit organisation Centre for Responsible Credit ([www.responsible-credit.org.uk](http://www.responsible-credit.org.uk)).

The foundation has a history of addressing longterm social and economic inequalities in London but in 2020 it was determined to focus on social factors that had been particularly accelerated by the pandemic and which put people more at risk of developing multiple longterm conditions. One of those was the enormous stress caused to individuals and families by debt and the threat of eviction. Although the government introduced Covid legislation barring evictions for a period, the debt issues continued to mount for many people with the threat of eviction waiting for the end of the moratorium.

The foundation provided a grant of £932,000 for a trial Covid Financial Shield in Southwark, aimed at 1,900 people with longterm health conditions in the borough, working with local landlords, creditors, GP surgeries and debt advisors to identify revenue-neutral ways to reduce debt and evictions. The grant was made to the Centre for Responsible Credit, who designed the Financial Shield specifically to support people with debt and eviction threats in order to improve their health, thereby not only supporting the people concerned but also reducing burdens on the NHS.





## Magpie Dance

([www.magpiedance.org.uk](http://www.magpiedance.org.uk)) is the UK's leading dance charity for people with learning disabilities, based in Bromley, south London. The charity was founded in 1985 by Avril Hitman, who for the first seven years worked with just two volunteers to provide dance training to adults with learning disabilities. Over thirty years later in 2017, shortly before her retirement, Avril was announced as the winner of the Lifetime Achievers award at the National Diversity Awards.

In March 2020, like so many other charities, Magpie Dance took the decision to temporarily close the company's face-to-face dance classes. Just over a month later, after a huge learning curve, they announced the launch of Virtually Magpie, a programme of online dance classes aimed at their client community. The classes remained free and were available to anyone who wanted to join. Crucially, this meant that their existing client base was able to continue their relationship and their practice.

In this short space of time, Magpie created 150 different videos of dance instruction for their 350 clients with learning disabilities: all ages from aged 3 up to adults. Artistic Director and project lead Alison Ferrao said: "This pandemic poses many issues but letting our participants down was simply not an option.

They rely on our weekly classes for physical activity and social interactions and though this programme can't replace the joy of dancing together, it will bring positive, exciting dance experiences in this new reality. We are delighted to share this beyond our own participants and hope many more people with and without learning disabilities will take part and celebrate dance with us around the world."

As well as supporting their client base in South East London, Magpie Dance were also able to make the videos available throughout the country to people with learning disabilities.



**Hillingdon** sits at the far west of London, the westernmost borough in the city, and for many years the Council was openly critical of bodies such as the GLC, attempting to insist that the area had little to do with other parts of London. However, with varying Labour and Conservative administrations in the borough over the decades, it has become absorbed successfully while at the same time maintaining its own identity, much of which derives from the impact of Heathrow, which provides employment for so many of its residents. It is not a borough of high rise tower block accommodation but it is, like all boroughs, made up of a wide variety of economic inequalities and ethnic diversity.

The lockdown of 2020 saw one particular success for the borough: in October of that year, the charity H4All ([www.h4all.org.uk](http://www.h4all.org.uk)), which is made up of five prominent charities — Age UK Hillingdon, DASH, Carers Trust Hillingdon, Harlington Hospice and Hillingdon MIND — was awarded the Social Prescribing Programme of the Year for its High Intensity User (HIU) Service.

Lockdown and the pandemic proved a complex issue for the whole area of social prescribing. Social prescribing is not such a new issue for the voluntary sector, but it is new as a core NHS service, which now considers it to be a key component of the NHS's Universal Personalised Care approach. Essentially, the social prescribing function is a way for local agencies to refer people to a support worker who will spend time with them to work out what the issues really are which have led each person to seek help from, for example, their GP. So, for example, an individual might present at their GP with a problem like insomnia and, by being referred to a social prescriber, they may be able to work on the issues which have caused that insomnia, such as debt concerns or mental health issues. It's a highly effective and sophisticated way of spreading the care for individuals amongst the service providers who can best help them.

Normally, about 60 per cent of social prescribers are volunteers, while 40 per cent of them are based in NHS Primary Care networks.

As Stephanie McKinley, the Social Prescribing Network Manager for London Plus, points out, social prescribing suffered during lockdown because many of the workers who would normally be providing this service were moved onto tasks which were considered more urgent: providing shopping for isolated people or supporting vaccination programmes. There would appear to be a good case for arguing that the funding of all social prescribers should be overhauled so that, in future, a crisis in one area doesn't mean that their operations are brought to a halt.

Hillingdon's performance, therefore, and specifically that of HIU, was all the more impressive. Hillingdon's NHS Care Commissioning Group reported that, in the ten months leading up to the award, HIU generated a total saving of £253,395 to the health economy of the borough through their intensive social prescribing support of residents. There was a reduction in A&E activity from 947 to 408 visits, with the reduction of 539 attendances representing a £46,348 saving; and a reduction in non-elective admissions from 216 to 79, with the reduction of 137 admissions representing a £207,047 saving.

The key link workers here were Phil Puttock, Kat Hunt and Debbie Dollery working closely with Hillingdon Hospital A&E Sister Sarah Harris and the London Ambulance Service, Hillingdon GP practices and Council Drug, Alcohol and Mental Health services.

For all the residents they counselled, they were able to find solutions that were individual and appropriate to each person. While the much-deserved award for H4All in Hillingdon demonstrates how powerful social prescribing can be and is a testament to the team's resilience during the conditions of lockdown, the future of social prescribing across the capital will depend on future funding and infrastructure decisions.



The borough of **Merton** was formed in 1965 by the merger of two former municipal boroughs, Mitcham and Wimbledon. The borough has since combined a residential character with a higher proportion than most boroughs of retail warehousing. It has never had a particularly radical character and has oscillated between Conservative and Labour leaderships. Rising property prices in the centre of the city have seen more and more younger residents moving into the area.

Similar to what happened in Bexley with the creation of Isolation Help Bexley, the events of March 2020 stimulated the formation of a new network of volunteers in Merton under the name of the Dons Local Action Group (DLAG — [www.donslocalaction.org](http://www.donslocalaction.org)).

**The initial response from residents was so overwhelming that within weeks they had attracted 450 volunteers.**

The Dons, of course, is the name given to the football club AFC Wimbledon, which was founded in 2002 by former supporters of Wimbledon FC after the Football Association allowed that club to relocate to Milton Keynes. AFC Wimbledon, therefore, is in itself an expression of local pride and community, so it's not surprising to see that it became the focus of volunteer activity in March.

Initially, three Dons fans established DLAG to collect and deliver food to vulnerable and self-isolating residents. Xavier Wiggins, Craig Wellstead and Cormac van der Hoeven — all three fans who had been closely connected with the formation of AFC Wimbledon — set up food collection points at Morrisons supermarket in the centre of Wimbledon, the Alexandra pub and the Old Ruts sports club in Merton Park.

The initial response from residents was so overwhelming that within weeks they had attracted 450 volunteers, most of them fans of the club. By May, they were delivering 1,500 food packs every week, supplying food to chefs to cook 2,000 meals a week for NHS staff.

The group soon extended its reach across Kingston, Merton and Wandsworth. Soon Merton Mutual Aid contacted them looking for help in supplying essential furniture to families in need and this and other early lockdown experiences made the group realise that the issue of poverty was a longer term problem than the pandemic.

Now, DLAG is a permanent part of the infrastructure of Merton's voluntary and community sector, running as well as other schemes a Keep Kids Connected programme which refurbishes donated laptops to give out to kids in need.

The inspirational team behind DLAG didn't come from a background in the voluntary and community sector, but the experience of saving football for the area back in 2002 demonstrated just how important a sense of community is deep down with most people.



IRIE Mind ([www.iriemind.org](http://www.iriemind.org)) is a relatively new mental health initiative, run by and for the African-Caribbean community in Hackney. Part of the Hackney and Waltham Forest Mind In the City grouping, IRIE Mind launched in October 2019 and obviously was impacted almost immediately by the lockdown of March 2020. The group was obliged to go online but immediately took steps to reach out to their constituency.

Firstly, they provided a wellbeing kit to give people things to read and do, such as stress balls, puzzles, tips on cost-effective health eating and self-care. An online counselling service was set up straight away, quicker than any other mental health group in the borough.

A cooking group was created, and people joined in from their homes. A "This Girl Can" group for young women aged 16-25 was created to support positive thoughts about body image, and the brands Dove and Lush agreed to sponsor the work the group was doing to encourage young women to feel positivity about their body images.

As lockdown set in, more and more older black men over the age of fifty were being admitted to psychiatric wards in Hackney because their council community support teams weren't able to come out to them. IRIE Mind made a point of targeting that demographic, encouraging older men to contact their counsellors using Zoom and telephone.

## Haringey Welcome

([www.haringeywelcome.org](http://www.haringeywelcome.org)) is a campaign group of local volunteers who work for fairness, dignity and respect for migrants and refugees in the borough. The organisation was formed in 2015 in support of Syrian refugees needing resettlement options, and its first success came when Haringey Council agreed to resettle 10 Syrian refugee families. Working to persuade and encourage the Council by attracting support from local residents, Haringey Welcome's mission is to gather the advocacy of residents to transform the borough into becoming a Welcome Borough where refugees are encouraged to put down roots.

One of the organisation's co-ordinators, Lucy Nabijou, had written a poem about one Syrian woman's escape from war and her journey towards Europe with her young child. In 2019, she set the words to music, planning to use it as part of Haringey Welcome's publicity to encourage the Council to accept refugees. However, lockdown dramatically put an end to such collaborative artistic ideas. She turned to her nephew, freelance musician Kayvon Nabijou, whose own work had suddenly dried up as a result of lockdown.

Working together online, and collaborating also online with other volunteers based in the borough who supported the aims of the group, Lucy and Kayvon not only created a finished song but also turned it into a fundraising video.

You can view the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuGnqBMNGhQ>.

It is featuring musical support from five other volunteer players in the borough on vocals, piano, qanun, clarinet and oud. The entire project was carried out remotely, with each participant recording their input in their own homes following musical direction from Kayvon. The end result was an ensemble performance of Lucy's poem which was used to attract donations to support Haringey migrant domestic workers' Covid hardship fund.



The pandemic affected the entire capital in so many ways that we are still counting. One of the cruellest outcomes perhaps was the rise in young people being forced to live on the streets: between July and September 2020, 11 per cent of all people sleeping rough in London were under-25, a staggering 48 per cent increase on the same period in 2019 and an all-time high. New Horizon Youth Centre ([www.nhyouthcentre.org.uk](http://www.nhyouthcentre.org.uk)) has been working on behalf of homeless, addicted and vulnerable young people since 1967. During lockdown, they found that in the rise in youth homeless in the capital, 66 per cent were under 21 years' old; there was also a 140 per cent increase in the number of young women resorting to sleeping rough.

New Horizon helped to build a coalition of partners to tackle this issue with the Mayor and Greater London Authority together with youth homelessness charity Depaul ([www.depaul.org.uk](http://www.depaul.org.uk)), youth charity London Youth Gateway ([www.londonyouthgateway.org.uk](http://www.londonyouthgateway.org.uk)) and London Councils. Between them, they identified and fitted out London's first pan-London accommodation hub specifically for the use of young people. Called Hotel 1824, it is a refurbished hotel in West London which will be capable of accommodating up to 350 young people a year. The hotel operates 24 hours a day, has on-site support from dedicated youth workers and is able to provide immigration advice where needed. The aim is to support the young people as soon as they arrive to help them move into longer-term accommodation.

Funding was provided by the Greater London Authority and London Councils Grants Programme, supported by funds from the Mayor's Winter Rough Sleeping Fundraising Campaign which brought in over £70,000 in donations from the public in three months. New Horizon CEO Phil Kerry pointed to a typical example of how the hotel has responded to the increased needs created by the pandemic: "Demola (23) approached us in January. He was rough sleeping after his mother and stepdad forced him to leave his family home – their already poor relationship had worsened during the pandemic.

He was met by our outreach team and put into a hotel we paid for. He will be staying at Hotel 1824 for just a couple of weeks as he is in the process of getting private rented accommodation. Demola is keen to start working so we're also supporting him to achieve this aim."



The borough of **Harrow** is part of what is often known as Metroland: that area of north west London which is serviced by TFL's Metropolitan line which stretches all the way out to Amersham in Buckinghamshire. It is an area which has changed much less than many other London boroughs, having avoided much of the tower block residential building of the 1960s and 1970s. But in terms of its residents, it has seen rapid change: it now has a 70 per cent ethnic minority population, one of the most diverse in the entire country.

As a largely residential borough, Harrow would inevitably need a strong mental health support system: so much mental health concerns take place behind the front door. Mind In Harrow ([www.mindinharrow.org.uk](http://www.mindinharrow.org.uk)) has served the community in this respect for over 50 years, and during the pandemic and lockdown found that its services were more in need than ever. As an independent charity and part of the National Association for Mental Health, Mind In Harrow delivers all its services in the borough and raises all of its own funds.

After lockdown in March 2020 forced the charity to close down its face-to-face services in the borough, as a short term measure they moved to services via telephone or Zoom. Bringing in new volunteers to cope with the rapidly increasing demand, they created a new campaign, Harrow Side By Side, to reassure residents suffering from the mental health outcomes of lockdown that they were not alone. As the needs of individuals began to flood in, both to Mind In Harrow's helplines and those of the NHS Harrow Talking Therapies service (which collaborated with the charity), there was a need to recruit more and more volunteers with specific characteristics. For example, an older Gujarati-speaking man lost his wife early on to Covid, and needed bereavement support from someone who could speak his language, as he was isolating at home; a young Romanian-speaking woman was found to be homeless and, once housed, needed befriending counselling from someone who could speak her language.

Mind In Harrow joined forces in lockdown with four other voluntary organisations — Mosaic LGBT Youth Centre ([www.mosaictrust.org.uk](http://www.mosaictrust.org.uk)), Paiwand Solidarity and Support for Refugees ([www.paiwand.enthuse.com](http://www.paiwand.enthuse.com)), Centre for ADHD and Autism Support ([www.adhdandautism.org](http://www.adhdandautism.org)) and The Wish Centre ([www.thewishcentre.org.uk](http://www.thewishcentre.org.uk))

— to form Heads Up, a service providing wellbeing workshops provided by Mind In Harrow to young people in the borough from the ages of 11 to 25. City Bridge Foundation provided matched funding to that offered by Comic Relief. While the service was unable to offer face-to-face support during lockdown, it reached young people via video, digital lessons beamed into school assemblies, activity packs and other means of support. Over 30 schools participated in the service over lockdown and reported back that their young people had benefited by learning resilience skills during such difficult times.

Mind In Harrow CEO Mark Gillham attended weekly meetings with both Harrow Council and the NHS to ensure that the charity was able to maintain its crucial strategic role in supporting mental health in the borough during the pandemic. And throughout the period, the charity retained the support of over 100 volunteers who enabled the range of services to continue.





With London councils focussing their attention about matters of life and death from March 2020 on, it is perhaps not surprising that here and there the environment was allowed to suffer. Abundance London ([www.abundancelondon.com](http://www.abundancelondon.com)) is a voluntary organisation, founded in Chiswick in 2010, that harvests surplus fruit, plants orchards, hedgerows and trees, tries to reconnect people with nature and protect it in an urban setting, creates beautiful spaces, mainly through planting but also through art. Early on in the first lockdown, founder Karen Liebreich realised that an avoidable environmental failure was looming in this normally leafy part of west London. Hounslow Borough Council had planted 125 new trees along streets throughout Chiswick in May, bang in the middle of the heatwave which hit London during those strange early days of lockdown.

Normally, trees should be planted in February to give the roots time to establish themselves, and it was obvious to Karen and her volunteers that, without help, all 125 trees would wither and die in the heat, as there was no sign of any council workers being sent to water them regularly.

Karen comments: "We should all be aware of the importance of trees in fighting the effects of climate change and as pollution mitigators. In 2019, Hounslow, along with many other London Boroughs, declared a climate emergency and tree planting was declared an important plank of this strategy. In addition to their contractual obligations to replace dead or removed trees, Hounslow Highways stepped up and offered to plant an extra tree around the borough for each of their 140 members of staff.



That's the good news. A lovely selection of new trees, including hornbeams, liquidambar, tulip trees, sweetgum, field maples and whitebeam, were planted. The bad news was that the planting took too many months and was only completed in mid-May, during a long spring drought that had so far lasted three months. This was the driest May since 1896, with only 10mm of rain, following on the sunniest April ever.

"In theory Hounslow Highways would have watered each tree. In practice, they did not get round the trees in time as there were simply too many planted out of season, it was too dry and of course there was a pandemic on so they had other stuff to do too.

We could either wring our hands, blame 'the council' and watch the young trees die, or we could step up, roll up our sleeves and fill our watering cans."

And that is what she and 85 other volunteers did over the summer months: every couple of days, a volunteer would fill two buckets of water, take them to the tree from Karen's list which they had agreed to 'adopt' and give it the water it needed to survive. A perfect example of London's residents joining forces to volunteer during lockdown, with the end result being that the trees all survived and many Chiswick residents met other residents for the first time in a spirit of friendly community.



Finally, it is important to recognise the role of the **City of London** during the capital's exposure to the pandemic. When the 32 London boroughs were created in 1965, the City of London retained its independence as a separate ceremonial county, but also effectively formed the 33rd local authority district. The original site of the first settlement by the Romans in the first century AD, the City is one of the most traditional geographical areas of the country.

In one sense, the City of London Corporation made a significant contribution to the community and voluntary sector's response to Covid by immediately making significant financial donations via its charitable arm, the City Bridge Foundation, to the centralised London Community Response. Many of the tales which are referenced in this report derived much of their strength from donations which originated with the Corporation via this route.

In addition, it is worth reflecting on the contribution made by the City's ancient Livery Companies, which go back in some instances as far as the 12th century. They are identified by the trade or trades historically represented and today there are more than one hundred Livery Companies in the City, varying in size and structure, which support apprenticeships and work placements within their sector and also work actively in supporting charitable endeavours.

The Mayor of the City of London, Alderman William Russell, made a point from March 2020 onwards of recognising the role of Livery Companies in supporting the general population during the pandemic. For example, the Engineers Company ([www.engineerscompany.org.uk](http://www.engineerscompany.org.uk)) fulfilled an order for 10,000 ventilators for the NHS, while members of the Broderers Company ([www.broderers.co.uk](http://www.broderers.co.uk)) made up medical scrubs for hospital staff. The Bakers Company ([www.bakers.co.uk](http://www.bakers.co.uk)) worked with the Shoreditch Trust to provide over 150 loaves of bread a week to be used in emergency food parcels.

The Drapers ([www.drapers.co.uk](http://www.drapers.co.uk)), the Grocers ([www.grocershall.co.uk](http://www.grocershall.co.uk)) and the Merchant Taylors ([www.merchant-taylors.co.uk](http://www.merchant-taylors.co.uk)) collaborated with volunteers from the City caterers Party Ingredients ([www.partyingredients.co.uk](http://www.partyingredients.co.uk)) to provide nutritious, individually-packed meals, prepared in livery hall kitchens, for NHS staff at the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel. Members of the Worshipful Company of Hackney Carriage Drivers ([www.thewchcd.co.uk](http://www.thewchcd.co.uk)) drove chefs to the kitchens so they could avoid public transport and sixteen other Livery Companies contributed funds to make this project the success it became. The initiative went live on 20th April 2020 and delivered 300 meals a day to staff in the ITU/Anaesthetics and A&E departments, the surgical hub, the Wellness Centre and other parts of the Royal London Hospital.

# Conclusion

**We began this report by pointing out that we are still experiencing the immediate effects of Covid-19 in the capital. Cases of infection continue to be recorded, deaths continue to occur, albeit at a significantly reduced level than at any time over the last two years.**

**While most government restrictions were lifted at the end of February 2022, mask-wearing remains fairly prevalent in the city and the return to work is still a subject for discussion. We still have no idea whether a further mutation of the virus could bring renewed restrictions or whether those days are finally behind us.**

The purpose of the report has been both to highlight the paramount importance of charity and community groups in helping Londoners to cope with the pandemic and its impact; and to indicate ways in which statutory authorities might support the sector more proactively going forward. Time and again, we have been struck by the breadth and variety of the sector's involvement over the last two years, and by the lack of consistency across all 32 London boroughs.

This feels like an opportune moment to examine in more detail the ways in which the voluntary and community sector is or is not incorporated into the future planning of the three layers of government in the city: Central Government, the Mayor's Greater London Authority, and the 32 London Borough Councils. Our report has demonstrated just how crucial the role of the sector has been over the last two years. It is unlikely that any future disaster will call on their support any less, so perhaps now is the time for all parties more formally to recognise their role in future planning discussions.





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