

THRIVING TOGETHER:

Lessons from the most challenging year of Londoners' lives



Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is affecting our social, economic and family lives dramatically – both now and in the longer term. There is growing evidence that the pandemic has widened pre-existing inequalities. For many communities, the coronavirus pandemic is the latest crisis event in a crisis trend – a steadily worsening series of situations they face. Yet there remains a lack of representativeness and detail on the lived experiences and needs of disadvantaged communities in London.

To address this, Thrive LDN has undertaken a period of **community engagement** to capture the experiences of Londoners during the pandemic. Our work has particularly focused on those who have been disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus crisis.

This work is not meant to be definitive. We need to understand more about the intersectional nature of issues communities face, the impact of cumulative stressors over time and the systemic action needed to address them. Thrive LDN is committed to further diversifying and democratising our processes and activities by working with communities to iterate, listen and develop ways of supporting Londoners.

Here, we begin to share and explore the emerging themes from the responses, engagement and submissions to our community insights and other partner sources. For this, we focus on the pandemic in the context of racism, discrimination, the digital divide and the importance of community.

 www.thriveldn.co.uk/resources/thrive-together-londoners-experiences/

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The risk of COVID-19 infection for Londoners from ethnic minority communities is notably higher than for their white counterparts, with, according to the Office of National Statistics, an estimated 2.7 times higher risk of dying. Evidence is growing that economic hardship and mental health issues arising from the pandemic are also disproportionately affecting people from these communities.



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Many Londoners entered the pandemic already disadvantaged. The evidence is that some groups experience a heavier negative impact because of the structural and everyday racism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and discrimination that are a central component of their lives.



Digital exclusion

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Coronavirus has seen much of our life – work, shopping, socialising, education – move online. But for some Londoners access to the internet is not easy and this ‘digital divide’ risks leaving already marginalised people even further behind. This matters because services are often digital by default. Digital exclusion means that people are missing out on a wide range of advantages.



Community and social networks

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The London response during the first national lockdown was rooted in voluntary and community action. However this sense of togetherness may have frayed as the pandemic has continued. Dealing with uncertainty for the future was an extremely common theme in Thrive LDN’s community engagement. However, we know there is a clear relationship between resilience and coping with uncertainty, and the power of relationships, collectivising, and social networks.

Racism



Racism

Everyone should have an equal right to good mental health. But they don't. We believe this is fundamentally unfair. COVID-19 has shone a harsh light on inequalities in society, exposing long-standing structural injustices with people from marginalised and disadvantaged communities hit hardest by the pandemic.

www.thriveldn.co.uk/2021/01/29/thrive-together-racism/

Since the pandemic began, research has shown that people of some ethnic backgrounds are at greater risk from coronavirus than others. Londoners from ethnic minority and ethnic communities have had a **notably higher risk of infection** than white Londoners. Previous **data** from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggested Black people have a 2.7 times higher risk of dying from COVID-19 than white people. They also influence our exposure and vulnerability to coronavirus infection, our ability to manage the consequences of the disease, and how the control measures affect us.

There is no doubt that ethnic groups' exposure and vulnerability to coronavirus has been influenced by demographic, geographical and socioeconomic factors. In other words, the ONS has highlighted where you live or the job you have puts you at greater risk, rather than having a worse outcome when infected.

Evidence is growing that economic hardship and mental health issues arising from the pandemic are also disproportionately affecting people

from these communities. London's ethnic minority population varies across the capital, but the **boroughs worst affected** by COVID-19 – Brent, Newham and Haringey – are also some of London's most diverse. Communities are coping with unusually high levels of loss and grief alongside the added financial and household pressures of the crisis.

It is worth noting that people's identities, their experiences, are made up of different factors. People are not just their ethnicity, but are affected by other characteristics, such as their sexuality, gender, a disability, faith. Any of these can amplify discrimination and marginalisation.

COVID-19's unequal impact has not only been on health. **Low-paid workers** are more likely to have seen a fall in their income and to be worried about their finances – and they are also far more likely to be women, young people, migrants, and people from ethnic minority communities. Added to this Black and Asian Londoners are overrepresented in sectors that were shut down by the pandemic.

It is therefore not surprising to hear that people from ethnic minority communities have suffered a greater negative impact on their mental health during the pandemic. The latest **UCL Covid-19 Social Study** shows higher levels of anxiety and depression among people from racial and ethnic communities than white. Our **community insights** collected at the end of 2020 in particular highlighted the distress of Black Londoners in response to devastating numbers of people in their communities who have died as a result of COVID-19.

Uncertainty for the future emerged as a strong area of concern from our community engagement. However, there was also a definite theme of hope. People highlighted the importance of family and the support offered by the wider community. Our findings show a clear relationship between coping with uncertainty and the power of relationships, of social networks and communities coming together. These are real strengths that need to be reinforced to protect Londoners' mental health and build long-term resilience and wellbeing into the future.

Migrants Organise works with refugee families, asylum seekers, torture and human trafficking survivors, domestic migrant workers, and undocumented

young people. Even before the COVID-19 crisis many were struggling with isolation, depression, post-traumatic stress, panic and anxiety – but the need for support is now even greater.

Community programme director, Francesca Valerio, told Thrive LDN:

“We work with people who really struggle and feel under-represented and really feel they don’t have a voice in our communities. They’re mainly migrants and refugees who are destitute, who might speak very little English, who experience difficult mental health symptoms and therefore they always feel marginalised. So for us it’s very important to give them a platform and an opportunity to talk, to be with each other, to feel connected and to feel supported.”

The organisation is using a Thrive LDN **Right to Thrive grant** to provide intensive support to 50 vulnerable refugees and migrants to make a positive difference to their mental health and quality of life. The project provides a variety of support, including mentoring and buddying, group activities such as English lessons and sewing, and specialist peer support for survivors of gender-based violence or trafficking.



“Being able to see people join activities, to connect to their communities, to be able to receive support and see their children going to school and accessing education is really, really important,” said Francesca. “That’s about thriving and having a voice in the community and in society.”

Kanlungan – Filipino for haven or sanctuary – is a registered charity bringing together several community-based organisations in the UK. Formed 25 years ago, its aim is to empower Filipino and other migrant communities from South East Asia, and advocate for their rights and welfare. During the pandemic, the charity has been at the forefront of helping vulnerable migrants, including providing food vouchers and mental health support.

“Filipinos are known as resilient people,” says Kanlungan’s Andrea Martinez. “We can thrive anywhere, we can survive everywhere, but given the strength of the pandemic, it tested our strength, it tested our resolve and our resilience.”

Kanlungan is using a Right to Thrive grant from Thrive LDN to develop and improve

the positive coping skills, resilience and wellbeing of migrant women and LGBTQ+ people in precarious job conditions. The project grew out of work Kanlungan conducted in 2019 to improve people’s mental health. It aims to build the confidence and capacity of migrant communities to deal with stressors.

“Many of the migrant communities are actually the frontliners during the lockdown,” Andrea explains. “Many of them have suffered from anxiety, even trauma and isolation. Some have lost their loved ones, others have actually suffered through their mental health problems.”

“So we still need organisations and people to help us through these problems. Thriving does not mean merely coping with our everyday stressors, it means our ability to bounce back, our ability to survive and our ability to prosper from whatever adversities come our way.”

You vs You works with young people, from diverse backgrounds carrying out one-to-one mentoring, mental health workshops, personal and interpersonal development. A Thrive LDN Right to Thrive grant is enabling the organisation to teach mindfulness techniques to help them build their resilience and look after their wellbeing.

Founder and CEO Ahmed Mohammed said:

“COVID-19 actually impacted on the community that we work with because we work with young refugees and asylum seekers in Haringey. Understand that in the majority of these young people, English is not their first language. Sometimes they struggle with the government guidelines as well and also some of them are actually anxious around their refugee status or their leave to remain status. They are always anxious about it because they don’t know what’s in store in terms of their future.”



Participants take part in three mindfulness sessions and an inspirational workshop. As Ahmed explains, the idea is...

“to show them that there are things that they can do to help them to either be of a positive mindset or even be able to make that phone call to seek professional help.”

Ahmed was inspired to start You vs You by his own personal journey:

“I came to the country as an unaccompanied asylum seeker at the age of 14. I’ve been through the care system, the asylum process. I was very fortunate to have good people and good social workers around me that helped me to get to where I am today. Society would have projected someone like myself to either be in jail or doing drugs or not be on the positive side of life, but fortunately I’m here today, giving back to my community and supporting young people.”

Ahmed believes that helping young people will help the community to thrive, and create a better society:

“The majority of our young people, there are so many anxieties around them, but if they are to thrive, just like with the help that was given to me growing up for me to be able to be where I am today, it’s the reason I’m doing what I’m doing to help other young people which means they will be able to pursue their dreams, go through education and become a better citizen which will improve our society.”

Overall, the pandemic is having a devastating impact on ethnic minority communities. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities. Londoners with lived experiences of marginalisation and social disadvantage, who were already experiencing poorer social, economic and health outcomes, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

These powerful accounts are just a few which highlight the experiences and voices of communities who experience structural inequalities and historic racism. These issues are a root cause affecting health and the risk of both exposure to the virus and becoming seriously ill.

Yet, they also tell a positive story of community-led activities to improve understanding, build trust and develop solutions that are meaningful and impactful for ethnic minority communities.

We are currently expanding our **Right to Thrive programme** to offer additional support, training and development opportunities to grassroots groups and take further action to advance equality. This will allow us to work with grassroots groups, like Migrants Organise, Kanlungan and You vs You, ensuring that COVID-19 transition and recovery strategies actively look to tackle the inequalities which exist in our society.



Discrimination



Discrimination

Thrive LDN and partners view diversity as not just an added extra, but one of the most valuable assets of our city. However, evidence and insights gathered from Londoners have shown that huge variation exist in terms of both experiences and outcomes, depending on who you are.

www.thriveldn.co.uk/2021/01/29/thrive-together-discrimination/

Keeping Londoners Well highlighted the role that stigma and discrimination may have in contributing to negative life experiences. Social inequalities impact people's mental health and wellbeing, with significant implications for their life outcomes. It is also the case that disadvantage – material, social or political – can be cumulative across a lifetime, sometimes irreversibly skewing people's chances of happiness and success.

So with this in mind, we know that many Londoners entered the pandemic already disadvantaged. The **evidence** is that coronavirus has widened pre-existing inequalities, while at the same time creating new ones, both in terms of the illness, its complications and deaths, and in the impact of the restrictions.

Londoners with personal experience of marginalisation and social disadvantage, who were already experiencing poorer social, economic and health outcomes, have been most adversely affected.

For deaf and disabled people, for example, the pandemic has amplified

the long-standing structural inequalities and discrimination they experience. The increased risk deaf and disabled Londoners have experienced from Covid-19 results, in part, from poorer living circumstances and socioeconomic factors, alongside other health conditions or vulnerability to ill-health, and increased risks from living in residential facilities.

The pandemic has impacted people with long-term, disabling physical health conditions particularly hard. The Mental Health Foundation's **study** found that people with long-term disabling health conditions were almost twice as likely to report having difficulty coping, compared to the overall population (26% compared to 14%). They were also more likely to have been worried that the pandemic may make their existing mental health condition worse (46%). These findings are echoed by the Office for National Statistics, which found that three months into the first lockdown over a third of disabled people said that their mental health had become slightly (29%) or much worse (7%).

Disabled people have also reported feeling failed and ignored by the government as the Coronavirus Act infringed on hard-won rights, re-classifying disabled people as 'vulnerable' and thereby weakening the legal support to which they were entitled pre-Covid. As **Inclusion London's report** outlined:

"Despite the government's rhetoric about protecting disabled people, the reality is that during the pandemic we have been treated less fairly and discriminated against across all areas of our lives"

There is very little information available about the impact of the pandemic on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) Londoners. The prevalence of poor mental health is lower among the LGBTQ+ community living in London, compared to those living in the rest of the UK. However, the increasing levels of stress can be seen in the overwhelming rise in callers to Switchboard, a confidential listening service for the LGBT+ communities. In May 2020, 1,819 calls were logged, a 50% increase on the previous year. These included 44% more conversations around themes of 'struggling', 31% more conversations around being 'worried', and 57% more conversations about 'isolation'.

H&Q Productions theatre group was set up in 2018 to create inspiring work and improve society's understanding of people with marginalised identities. All their staff are LGBTQ+ or neurodivergent.

They have used their Right to Thrive grant to develop an online version of their workshop designed to tackle the growing incidence of hate crime against LGBTQ+ people. Freelance theatre producer Sophie Leydon, who works with H&Q, points out that LGBTQ+ people have been disproportionately affected by COVID, perhaps forced back to live with unsupportive families.

"I think also losing the spaces we have physically in London has had a big impact," says Sophie. "A lot of our culture and solidarity and community centres around nightlife and performance and being physically with other queer people in those spaces, so having to be remote and in lockdown does have a big effect, I think, on the wellbeing of individuals and the community as a whole."

Asked what thriving means for the community, Sophie is clear that it is about tolerance, but that it is also a question of equality, of rights.



“I think as a community our goal is to be accepted, but to go beyond that acceptance and tolerance to where being queer, being trans, being gender-non conforming or non-binary, those things can be celebrated, people can have the space bodily in our society, people can have equal access to medical resources, to mental healthcare, and to education as well.”

Early findings from the **Queerantime Study** reveal high levels of stress and depressive symptoms, particularly among younger transgender and gender diverse respondents. The results from the research showed more than 1 in 10 (12%) LGBTQ+ Londoners who responded to the survey highlighted that they had experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Importantly, reported stress has been higher for those who have experienced homophobic or transphobic harassment, compared to respondents who haven't.

Exposure is an award-winning charitable youth communications enterprise based in north London. Through a **Right to Thrive grant**, young journalists have **written about the experiences** of their peers in a range of articles throughout the pandemic from their education and job prospects to reduced contact with friends. In **an article** by Angela Mascolo, the issue of disruption to social and safe networks was articulated by fellow journalist Jamie Aldridge:

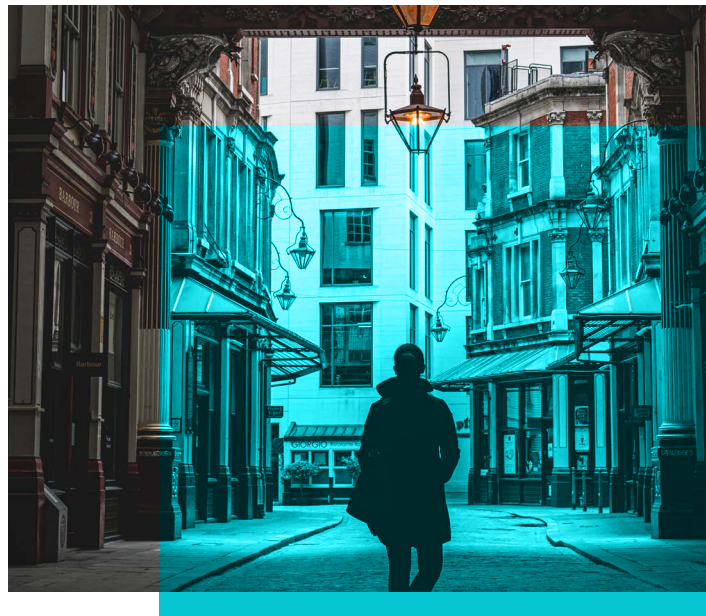
“It's been difficult spending so much time at home, when most of my sources of support are based outside the home. I haven't been able to see my friends, hear my preferred name, talk about my identity in a positive way. It's been a long time since I've been in a place I feel really accepted.”

London has the highest proportion of older workers, with most people aged 50–70 years old still working. The pandemic also poses a serious risk to

their economic security, with a looming long-term unemployment crisis for older people. Many older people still in employment and renting privately told of their concerns of redundancies, furloughs, and reduced working hours in community **research carried out by Toynbee Hall**.

According to **analysis** conducted by the Centre for Ageing Better, one in four older workers has been furloughed, and hundreds of thousands of these workers may be unable to return to their previous jobs as some sectors struggle to recover. The emotional and psychological effects of unemployment and redundancy have been well documented.

Ethnic minority communities, experienced the highest proportion of people in their communities **dying as a result of COVID-19**. These communities are also disproportionately represented in the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. Black men **report** the biggest knock to their wellbeing, of about 14% in their mental health from 2017–2019 to April 2020, twice that reported by white British males (6.5%).



Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC) works to make changes in society so that LGBTQ+ members of Southeast and East Asian communities in the UK can live without social exclusion and isolation, free from discrimination, exploitation and poverty, and able to make positive contributions to the wider British society. Rogelio Braga from SEEAC said:

“Established in January 2020, this is a very young organisation. We are catering to a very specific member of our community, the LGBTQ+ community.”

Its Right to Thrive project, **Pink Transcript** is designed to address the challenges of LGBTQ+ members of the South East and East Asian community living in London. The project is in two phases. Rogelio explains:

“The first phase is a workshop to document their experiences and their struggle as undocumented members of the transgender or the crossdresser community of South East Asians and East Asians in London.”

In the second part, a workshop called Drama Therapy, participants will perform

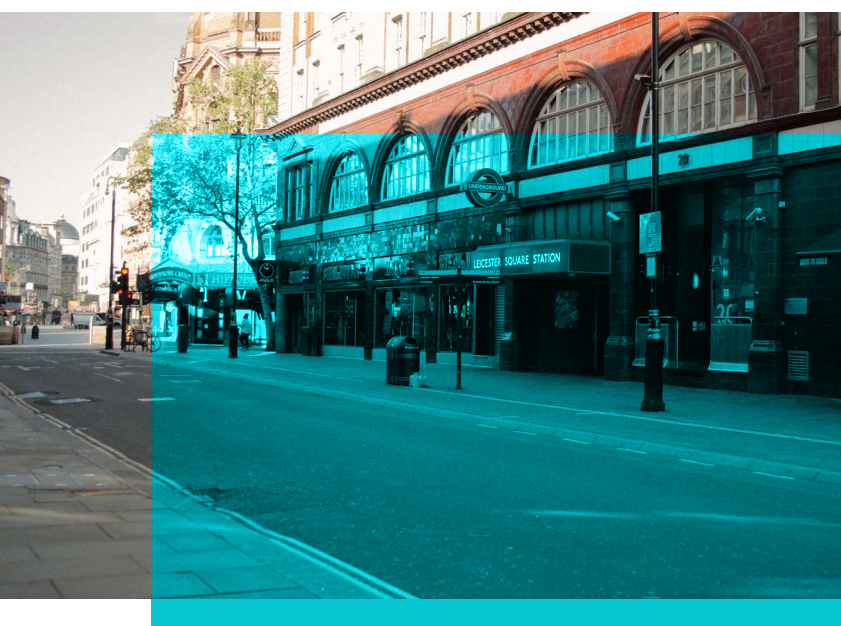
the stories they developed in the first phase. Rogelio says that COVID-19 has had a big impact on the mental health of the people they work with, largely related to their jobs, with people losing income, and others involved in the stress of frontline work. But Rogelio pinpoints a wider issue, that of invisibility of the South East and East Asian LGBTQ community.

“Our invisibility is coming from the lack of space where we can express ourselves and reach out to the larger British community,” Rogelio says. “Because at the end of the day, survival for us it means to thrive and to integrate to the British community, so The Pink Transcript is our way of documenting our experiences while addressing the mental health concerns of the members of our community. And to perform it to the public and just to tell everyone that ‘hey we are existing’ and all of our narratives and stories are always visible.”

It is worth noting that people don't fit neatly into one label – they are not just disabled, or just from a particular ethnic community, or just older, or just LGBTQ+. Any intersectionality, or combination of factors, will amplify the negative impact that individuals face.

Women, of course, are represented in all the above groups, but evidence is growing of the discriminatory impact of the pandemic based on gender. Women have been more likely than men to **report** feeling anxious, lonely, and hopeless due to the pandemic, as well as being more worried about finances.

Mothers are more likely to have quit or lost their job, or to have been furloughed since March 2020, and women are more likely to be in temporary, part-time and precarious employment than men. These jobs often come with lower pay, weaker legal protection and difficulties in accessing social protection. Levels of precarious work are particularly high among young women, women with low qualifications and migrant women.



There has also been a rise in domestic abuse and gender-based violence. As normal life shuts down, victims – who are usually women – can be exposed to abusers for long periods of time and cut off from social and institutional support. Calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline increased by 150% during the first lockdown and domestic abuse referrals to Victims Support were around a quarter higher than average between July and September when lockdown had eased.

We know every Londoner has had their own individual experiences in recent months. We recognise that many things have changed and life is different as a result of COVID-19 for everyone. However, these individual accounts and the ever-growing breadth of research both highlight that certain communities are suffering the impact of the crisis more than others.

In the context of the pandemic, where existing social, economic, and health inequalities are being exacerbated, there are many more examples and stories of difficulties or adversity that Londoners have faced, often linked to their specific experiences or identities.

Nobody's mental health and wellbeing should suffer because of who they are or where they live. Thrive LDN have **long emphasised** the need to broaden opportunities and promote acceptance and inclusion. We must collectively work together to overcome stigma and ensure that people from a wide range of backgrounds and communities have more support available for them.



Digital exclusion



Digital divide

The coronavirus pandemic has seen much of our life move online. We use the internet for work, shopping, socialising, and, with schools and universities closed, for education. But for some Londoners access to the internet is not easy and a digital divide risks leaving already marginalised people even further behind.

www.thriveInDn.co.uk/2021/01/29/thrive-together-the-digital-divide/

Digital exclusion is not a new phenomenon for many Londoners. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) **estimated** that in 2018, 7% of Londoners were internet non-users – they had either never used the internet, or not in the past three months. Some 6% lacked one or more of five basic digital skills, such as sending emails, finding information or shopping online. In a more recent ONS **study** (2020) of adults in Great Britain, 9% of respondents stated they had not accessed the internet in the past month and in a separate study, 16% of respondents said they were unable to use the internet without assistance.

There can be a number of reasons for this: not having the appropriate device, limits on connectivity, inability to afford data, a lack of digital skills and confidence, and lack of support. Those who do have access to the internet may have to rely on a mobile connection or have weak broadband that doesn't meet the needs of their household.

ONS analysis has shown that the people missing out on using the internet are some of the people who are already hardest

hit by the pandemic. Older people are more likely not to be internet users, with over 75s making up over half of all non-users in 2018. Regardless of age, disabled people make up a large proportion of non-users – 56% in 2018, much higher than the 22% estimated disabled people in the population as a whole. The ONS also found that over half – 58% – of non-users were women.

There is also a clear link between income and digital exclusion. People out of work are more likely to be non-users, and low-income households are much more likely to have no or limited internet access at home. Just half (51%) of households with an income between £6,000–£10,000 had internet access at home, compared to 99% with an income of more than £40,000.

This matters. As the ONS points out, digital exclusion means that people are missing out on a wide range of advantages. Services are often 'digital by default' and much interaction with public bodies and banks is now online – even more so with coronavirus related restrictions and safety measures.

Thrive LDN has been supporting Toynbee Hall since June 2020 to carry out **community peer research** into the impact of the pandemic. They found that for interviewees from low-income households who had good access to the internet combined with digital skills, the internet provided *“a sense of control”* during the pandemic:

“They could pay bills and keep track of their balance through online banking, order shopping online and cheaply contact family abroad, avoiding expensive phone bills. Access to the internet creates a sense of financial control for low-income families in a time where their income and expenditure is painfully uncertain.”

However, for some low-income families this creates an extra source of stress, with families feeling that the internet was too important to do without. This meant they struggled with the expense of, for example, paying for a better internet connection, at a time when their financial situation rested on a knife edge.

The Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) has been **researching digital exclusion** for the past four years. In their report **Pay the Wifi or feed the Children** they point out that from managing money, to applying for Universal Credit, from putting together a CV to applying for a job, there are many challenges facing adults on the wrong side of the digital divide:

“In the context of coronavirus, the tasks that were once difficult for the digitally excluded are now closer to impossible.”

The report also highlights that digital exclusion *“is not just a generational issue.”*

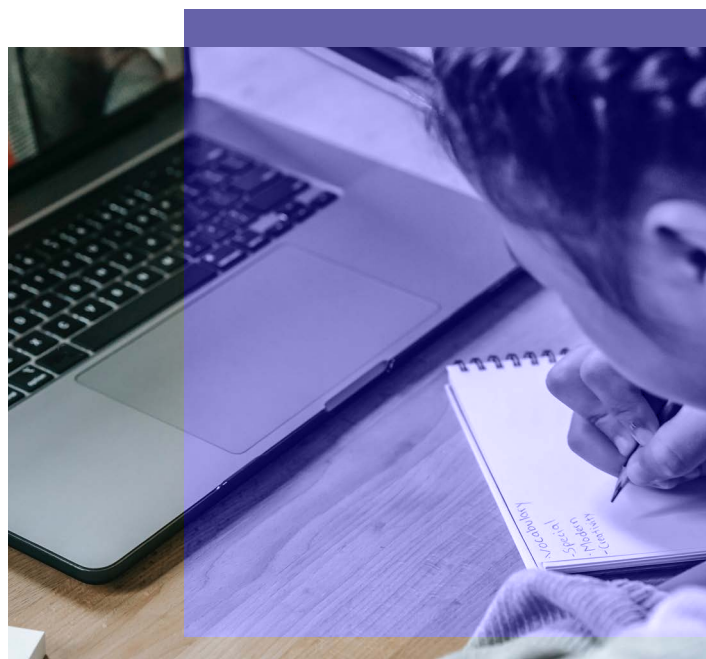
There are other problems particular to the pandemic which are exacerbated by digital exclusion. Concerns have been raised about the effects of isolation

on people’s mental health. **Research** by Lloyds Bank’s found that 40% of respondents said being online helped them feel less alone. This was even stronger among disabled respondents. But people living alone are less likely to have an internet connection at home – 9% of adults aged 16–64 living alone, compared to just 1% of households with two people.

With schools currently closed to most children, digital access is vital for children’s education. However, as the Children’s Commissioner **highlights**, almost one in 10 families (9%) in the UK do not have a laptop, desktop or tablet at home:

“Particularly during this pandemic, proper access to the internet is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is the same as not having a book or a pen and must be recognised as such.”

At the beginning of January, a group of MPs, former ministers, unions and charities **wrote** to the Prime Minister, urging the government to ensure that every child out of school has the data and device they need to learn from home:



“These pupils were likely to be behind their peers even before the pandemic. After five months of missed education, they returned to school further behind and now start the new year facing weeks of even more missed education.”

The Department of Education has announced a further 300,000 laptops and tablets to help children learn at home. But there have been **on-going issues** with supplying the promised number of laptops to those who most need it. As well as creating further digital exclusion, this is also creating a health inequality. As Kenan Malik **wrote** in The Observer on 10 January 2021:

“Pupils who cannot adequately access online learning can physically attend schools. This means that students and their families in poorer areas will be exposed to Covid in a way that those in more affluent parts will not”.

There are positive community-based projects emerging across London to support young people with the digital divide. For example, in April 2020 The

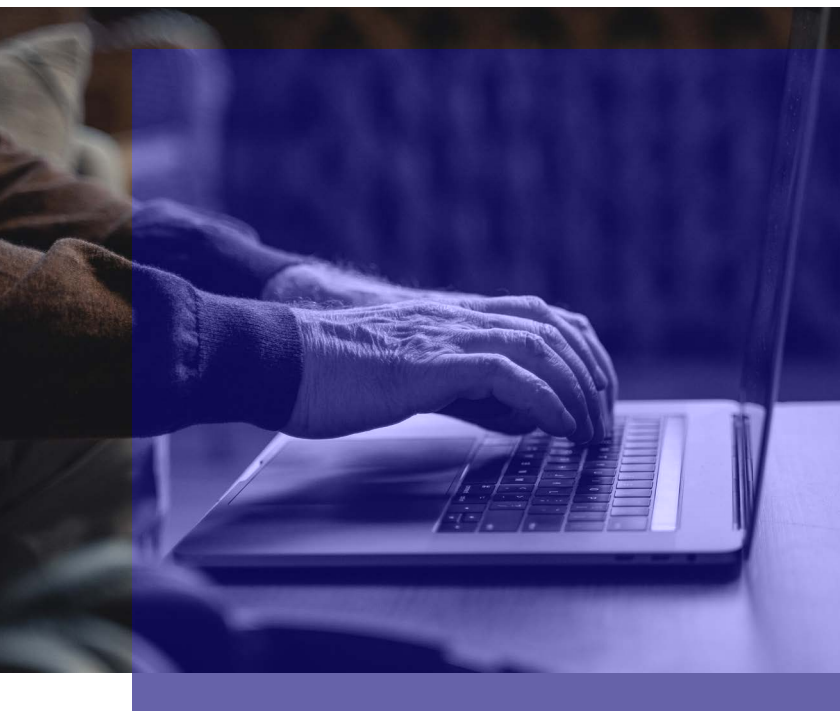
Traveller Movement and King’s College London launched **‘Tutors for GRT’**, a project to help Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students when schools closed during the first lockdown. Knowing the challenge that this would pose for GRT communities, due to low literacy levels and digital exclusion, the programme provided volunteer tutors to GRT families.

Importantly, the needs of each family are taken into consideration and different mediums are used from WhatsApp to Zoom, books or tablets, depending on the circumstances. The programme has been well received with parents seeing increased engagement and enthusiasm towards education from their children. Although challenges with connectivity and equipment still exist. **Writing** about the initiative, Chrissie Browne, Tutors for GRT project coordinator said:

“For a project where we weren’t sure if we would get even one sign up, we were quickly oversubscribed with both families and volunteer tutors.”

There has also been an increase in the number of ‘tech aid’ initiatives. In essence, this has seen a local collection of devices people no longer need, erasing and repairing the devices, before then delivering them to people in need, identified through local schools, women’s aid groups, disability, refugee and other community organisations. The BBC’s **Give A Laptop** and **Lambeth TechAid** are examples of this kind of initiative emerging in direct response to the pandemic.

Founder and CEO of YourStudio and **Thrive LDN Champion**, Tom Philipson, has very recently launched a tech aid initiative within the creative industry through **Vital Hardware**. Vital Hardware’s approach is both to support young people from diverse backgrounds in London without access to digital devices, but also create opportunities and increase the skills needed for a career within the creative industry. Tom hopes that the initiative *“helps build a more inclusion foundation to the creative industry.”*



There is no doubt that the implications of a widening digital divide have and will continue to affect those who need information, connectivity and support, which go beyond daily practicalities and are closely related to the social inequalities which exist across London.

In the words of the CCHPR:

“Digital exclusion is another facet of the deep inequalities which run through the social fabric of the UK, and is more widespread than many people are aware of. One thing is clear: the public health crisis currently gripping the UK stands to make the impacts of digital exclusion worse for the millions of people affected, and the poorest will be hit the hardest.”

There have been important initiatives to help ensure that people without digital access don't miss out on essential information and social contact during the pandemic.

For example, an initiative run by Thrive LDN, London Councils and the capital's boroughs **delivered 225,000 mental health 'card packs'** to support the wellbeing of vulnerable people. The cards were included in the emergency food and medical parcels from council shielding hubs. They included tips and advice for people on how to look after their

wellbeing, along with contact details for supporting organisations, and charities that could offer further help.

Debt Free London, a free debt advice service led by Toynbee Hall, is deploying video advice kiosks to community locations across London. These kiosks will enable people who are digitally excluded to access free debt advice, the demand for which is expected to increase as financial support schemes are closed down. Thrive LDN is partnering with Debt Free London to integrate mental health advice within the support offered to those accessing the kiosks.

The Campaign to End Loneliness and Be More Us launched the **Have a Chat campaign**. It suggested *“5 ways to check in on those around you”* and tips for looking out for signs of loneliness. The campaign acknowledged that it can feel awkward making contact with people you don't know, but urged us to *“grow and build new connections, starting with those on our doorstep”*.

However, we must not ignore the fact that Londoners with internet access are better equipped to find tools, resources and support for their mental health and wellbeing. Answering the digital divide questions remains as important as ever.



Community and social networks



Community and social networks

In it together has been a refrain of the pandemic, but coronavirus has had both positive and negative impacts on communities and our sense of connectedness and belonging. Looking at how communities have been affected, and how they have responded to mitigate the pandemic's social and economic effects can teach us important lessons for the future.

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The London response during the first national lockdown was largely rooted in voluntary and community action. Heroic efforts in March and April 2020 resulted in innovation and transformation at a scale and speed never seen before. At a national level, the government set a target of 250,000 NHS Volunteer Responders and **750,000 signed up** within two days. Every Thursday, people came out of their homes or stood on their balconies to clap for frontline workers.

An Office of National Statistics (ONS) **survey** in April 2020 highlighted this ground swell and noted a “steady increase in community spirit”: nearly two in three adults (62.6%) had checked in on neighbours who might need help at least once in the last seven days (up from 53.8% previous week) and over a third (37.5%) had gone shopping or done other tasks for neighbours (up from 27.7% the previous week). Almost two in three (64.1%) thought other community members would support them if they needed help and more than three quarters (77.9%) thought people were doing more to help others.

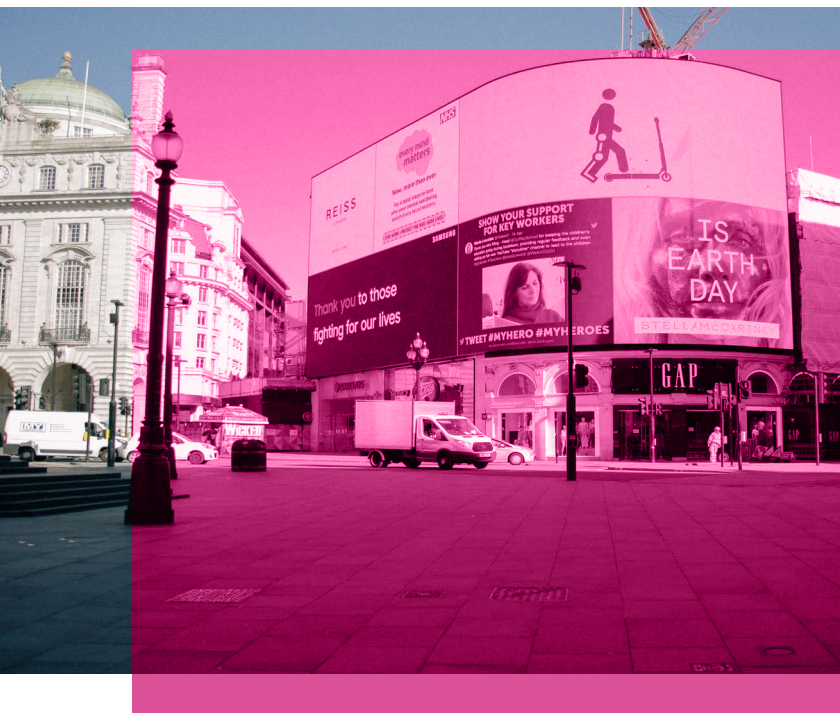
Much of this support has been focused on older people who throughout the various national lockdowns and changing safety measures have been more likely to be shielding. This is against a **growing consensus** that long periods of isolation, and in particular social isolation among older people, is a serious public health issue.

Our **Thrive Together** findings illustrated the importance of this further. Communities disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic, who already experienced poorer social, economic and health outcomes, identified the significance of family and support structures, and the support offered by wider community and faith groups.

One participant outlined this very clearly:

“We don’t always know how, but we know we’ll be OK together.”

There is a clear relationship between resilience and coping with uncertainty, and the power of relationships, collectivising, and social networks.



The pressures of work and home schooling have **re-emerged** too.

Added to this, the pandemic has placed greater importance on digital connections yet connecting online is **not an option for all** Londoners. In 2018, 7% of Londoners had never used the internet, or not in the past three months, and 6% of Londoners lacked basic digital skills, such as sending an email or shopping online.

Social networks – those informal connections that give people a sense of identity and belonging – have been disrupted by coronavirus restrictions. Throughout August and September 2020, **Brixton Reel** carried out **surveys and webinars** specifically aimed at LGBTQIA, Black, South Asian and Latin American communities in London. The insights and conversations held reflected how these communities had been affected by the pandemic.

A large majority of respondents highlighted how the importance of a strong, supportive community had never been more important or more appreciated than during the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent said:

“We as neighbours cooperated well during these times and helped each other with groceries and basic amenities to avoid either of them having to leave from the house.”

Almost everybody mentioned the necessity to maintain and strengthen community links to improve mental overall wellbeing and resilience in the face of social isolation. For many, this had involved online support groups and activities, such as workshops, faith meetings, arts festivals and exercise classes delivered via webinars or video calls.

Young people (18–24 years old) have been more likely **to report** stress arising from the pandemic than the population

However, as we enter 2021 this sense of togetherness may be fraying as the pandemic has continued. This is perhaps not surprising, when considering the general sense of loss across all aspects of many Londoners’ lives: loss of loved ones, employment, relationships, homes, education and wider opportunities.

The University of Essex and University of Manchester compared perceptions of social cohesion during the pandemic with earlier studies in 2012 and 2015. **The research team found** that the overall levels of social cohesion were lower in June 2020 compared to pre-pandemic periods. Importantly noting that...

“the decline of perceived cohesion is particularly high in the most deprived communities, among certain ethnic minority groups and among the lower-skilled.”

There are recent examples which demonstrate this. Calls to revive the Clap for Carers were met with a **great deal of cynicism**. Many people talk of **pandemic fatigue** and a ‘Groundhog Day’ feeling.

as a whole. They were also more likely to report hopelessness, loneliness, not coping well and suicidal thoughts and feelings. A recent **report** from the Prince's Trust suggested one in four young people felt unable to cope – the worst ever results in its annual survey of young people's happiness.

An **online listening project** run by **Partnership for Young London** and **Good Thinking**, with the support of TikTok, heard regularly from a group of a group of 14 to 24-year-olds during the height of the pandemic in 2020. When asked to sum up their lockdown experience in one or two words, 'lonely', 'cooped up' and 'bored' were common responses.

Organisations that support communities have themselves been affected by the pandemic. For example, the youth sector was experiencing increased demands and reduced funding prior to the crisis. Although youth organisations have continued to provide frontline services to young people and communities, at the outset of the pandemic 31% of youth organisations **surveyed** said staff redundancies were likely, with 17% stating that they are likely to close.

London Youth's summer survey on the impact of COVID-19 on the sector, named **Running On Reserves**, highlighted the

challenges faced. The report found nearly a third of London Youth's 650 member organisations could 'struggle to operate' and more than a quarter were in difficulty with running costs.

Solidarity within and across communities was a source of support and hope for Londoners during 2020. The vast number of Mutual Aid groups and other informal local support systems grew astronomically when initial restrictions were introduced and brought together people to take responsibility for caring for one another.

Queen's Crescent Community Association (QCCA) is a major provider of free and subsidised services for people in the Gospel Oak area. It provides youth services, older people services and support projects to improve family health. Many of its staff grew up in the neighbourhood, one of the most socially deprived in the UK. It acts as hub which regularly brings together residents, councillors, police, MPs and other local charities. But most of all, it is a place that believes in inclusion, co-operation, and tolerance.

As soon as the first lockdown began QCCA swung into action, setting up a food bank and a telephone befriending service. "We had over a hundred and twenty volunteers," says QCCA's Elaine Mulligan.



“They were coming in droves to support, to deliver food to elderly, vulnerable and isolated individuals and to me that is the sign of a community that’s thriving and wants to thrive and wants to continue with this, wants to develop further.”

“Looking at Gospel Oak, and how as a community we responded to COVID-19 and this awful pandemic, that can be seen quite plainly in the response from the local community. They just picked up and ran with it, they responded in a way that puts my faith back in humanity.”

QCCA is using a **Right to Thrive** grant to support a project as part of its healthy families work. Elaine explains: “We are empowering local community members, especially those of a minority ethnic background, those who are refugees, asylum seekers and females. We’re looking to support females, families, and those families with young children. The whole idea being that we improve their fitness, their mental health, their access to services. We’re supporting them in any way they need, whether it be peer support, health advice. Primarily, we are there to look after the whole family as a unit.

Forest Gate Community Garden in Newham is a green space at the heart of the community for wildlife, plants and people. It aims to support enjoyment and learning about nature, promote an inclusive community and nurture wellbeing.

From the charity, Myanah Saunders, told us:

“We’ve set up a community garden, a wildlife garden in the centre of a very impoverished area, for people to come and relax, meet friends and volunteer, learn about gardening. It’s a place for people to meet, make friends and to learn.”

Myanah says that the community has been hard hit by coronavirus.

“The rates were very high in Newham to begin with. A lot of people were affected. A lot of people are in jobs where they can’t work from home. Where they have to go into work. They haven’t been furloughed necessarily. A very well loved local GP died, very sadly, of the virus very early on. The community has been enormously affected by it.”

The Garden is using a **Right to Thrive** grant to open up the project. The aim is to produce video material about what the garden is, how it works and how people can get involved so that more people in the community can benefit from it. Myanah added:

“The [community’s] problems can’t all be solved by a community garden. But what we do is offer as many people as we can opportunities, to come together, to share positive experiences, learn, exchange ideas and skills, people learn from each other.”



There have since been **positive steps** to engage with and learn from how community support, which often took a different approach to more mainstream services, proactively responded to the coronavirus pandemic, such as the examples shared here. It is important to ensure innovative approaches can be shared, sustained and continued support is appropriate or sufficient for everyone.

However, when exploring the theme of social and community networks, the reality of structural and cultural barriers for many communities is clearly seen, both before and during the pandemic. We can't overlook how cultural and language barriers have been **identified** as the reason many communities felt ignored and abandoned by the health

and care system, particularly with changing public health messaging. This is not a new scenario for London's diverse communities. As an example, a member of the British-Somali community in Brent **said:**

"Information wasn't provided early enough in Somali. People were abandoned."

This has been the case in London and **elsewhere.**

There is a clear need to examine community assets further and consider how they can be reinforced as a means of protecting Londoners' mental health and building strength and resilience in the long term.

