

# Newham – Building a Social Welfare Alliance

## BACKGROUND

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Public Health team in the London Borough of Newham decided to prioritise work around the support of the voluntary and community sector. In the absence of a voluntary services umbrella organisation in the borough, but with a wealth of action taking place at a grassroots level, supporting connectivity between services, organisations and groups and building the capacity of the sector, had the potential for huge impact.

## THE APPROACH

The approach taken by the Newham Public Health team had a number of key elements:

### Building community intelligence

The initial focus was on understanding what was happening on the ground. A weekly survey for organisations and community groups was commissioned to get a snapshot picture of the kinds of support needs coming through and any gaps in services. Starting with a small number of groups and organisations, it now has 249 groups participating. The intelligence gathered from the survey has been used to inform priorities for small grant funding, enabling resources to flow quickly to where they were most needed, including to smaller and volunteer-led groups, with trust being a central principle.

“  
The biggest thing the pandemic has taught us is to pull the guardrails down on siloed working and focus on what everyone can bring to the table.  
”

- Phil Veasey, Public Health Consultant

## TOP TIPS

- **Value people's time.** It only takes one boring meeting or poor-quality training session to make people disengage from what you're trying to do, so work hard to make things as engaging and useful as possible.
- **Trust those working in the community** and use this as a starting point, letting go of power and influence where possible to enable new and innovative solutions to be put in place.
- **Test with the intention of genuinely learning.** Seek feedback and make sure it's listened to and acted upon, ideally quickly, to ensure activity is as effective as possible.

### Developing networks

The team has worked closely with the [One Newham](#) network of voluntary sector organisations to proactively reach out to those working in the borough. In the early stages of the pandemic, the [Newham Food Alliance](#) developed as a way of drawing together all of the emergency food support in the borough. The Public Health team decided to take a similar approach in bringing together a Social Welfare Alliance made up of partners across the borough, to start to take preventive action and address the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage.

A core cross-sector team was established, incorporating representation from Public Health, the voluntary sector including advice services, food banks and organisations working with specific communities, the social prescribing lead and other parts of the Council such as [Our Newham Work](#), [Our Newham Money](#) and the housing team. The group initially met on a weekly basis to identify priorities and opportunities for collaboration.

Two network events have been held to date with attendance of up to 80 across both events. Great care was taken to ensure that agendas for both the core group and wider network meetings were engaging and interactive, with opportunity for discussion and input from a wide range of voices.

## CASE STUDY CONTACT

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## ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This case study has been produced by the [Bromley by Bow Centre](#) and [Greater London Authority](#) who are working together to support the development of social prescribing in London.

### Building connectivity and capacity

The Social Welfare Alliance has run an extensive programme of social welfare training and professional development for frontline workers across Newham. The aim is for all workers to adopt a social prescribing approach, being able to answer questions across a range of topics, make effective referrals and deal with 15 – 20% of issues directly. Initially key social determinant themes around income maximisation, immigration support/advice, early years, and housing were identified alongside core conversation skills. This has since grown into a broad programme of bitesize training. Each session is short and interactive, with space for discussion to promote connection across staff and services.

### Learning and adapting

Throughout the work of the Alliance, there has been a culture of continuous improvement. Feedback is sought for all activities and acted on quickly to ensure the programme is as effective as possible. Support is provided for facilitators of training sessions to ensure quality and consistency is maintained.

### Sustainability

Now the training programme is fully operational, focus has turned to looking at referral pathways and service redesign, with the group taking deep dives into issues that can't be solved alone and where long-term impact can be achieved. Issues relating to migrant communities were highlighted, and key organisations in the sector were funded to come up with a workable, cross-sector Community Migrant Action Plan, which is now being operationalised. Work on prototyping digital hubs is being designed. If the approach is proven to be effective, it could be adopted by Libraries in the long term.

### THE BENEFITS

The benefits of the approach have been multi-faceted, including an increase in collaboration between statutory and voluntary services. with closer relationships and more effective joint working. Frontline staff have improved knowledge and skills, and support has flowed quickly and responsively to the frontline. This connectivity and upskilling has led in turn to improved outcomes and experiences for Newham residents.

### THE CHALLENGES

Key challenges have been around ensuring that programme activities remain of a consistent high standard to promote ongoing engagement, as well as being able to accept when the test and learn approach leads to getting it wrong. Advice was initially trialled in food banks for example but was found to be ineffective due to the levels of stress and difficulties involved in delivering an in-person service at a time of social distancing.

### THE OUTCOME

The Alliance has built a strong foundation for the future and it is hoped that this way of working will extend far beyond the duration of the pandemic.

### RESOURCES

#### Newham Social Welfare Alliance

For more information on the Newham Social Welfare Alliance including the training programme, migrant community action plan and a video introducing the work of the Alliance, click [here](#).

#### Newham SWA Network events

To read an agenda for a network event, click [here](#).



For information supporting the voluntary and community sector to deliver on social prescribing please click [here](#).



For information on support for social prescribing schemes offered by the Bromley by Bow Centre, please visit: <https://www.bbbc.org.uk/insights/>



For information on how to join the London Plus social prescribing VCSE network, [click here](#).

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