

# Skyline Food Hub

Final Report

6th April 2020 –  
30th June 2021



# Summary

**Food is at the centre of community. It brings people together. It provides critical sustenance. It's a way to share and celebrate culture and heritage.**

And because of this food has always been at the centre of MHDT's activities. Lunch clubs, cookery classes, community feasts, community fridges and food hygiene training are all much loved and valued services that we offer.

But in March 2020 when the pandemic hit and the community centre had to close, we had to quickly rethink how we would serve the community of Woodberry Down at this unprecedented time. Due to the vast number of people needing to medically shield, had lost work, had children at home and no longer receiving school meals - it became apparent food access, already an issue within the community in pre-pandemic times, was a critical issue.

And so the Skyline Food Hub was born. A service that we initially imagined would run for a few months but in reality provided a crucial service for one and a half years. This report tells the story of the hub, the people and partners behind it, it's incredible impact, and what we've learnt as an organisation from this project.



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# Introduction

## MHDT has worked on the Woodberry Down estate running community engagement activities and managing the Redmond Community Centre in north Hackney, London since 2011.

We are a trusted and well embedded service provider to the local community. Much of our activities have centred around employability skills, reducing isolation, community cohesion and health and wellbeing.

Hackney has high levels of deprivation, with almost 20% of the population living in relative poverty. Within this Woodberry Down is one of the most socio-economically deprived wards in Hackney, it is within the top 2% of most deprived wards in London and in the top 5% in the country as a whole. It has approximately 11,800 residents, two thirds of whom are from white ethnic backgrounds, including a large Turkish and Kurdish community. Approximately one fifth of the population are from black ethnic backgrounds. Qualifications are lower in Woodberry Down than in Hackney overall, and there are fewer adults in full time work. There are more students, retired people and people not working because of long term sickness or disability, or looking after home and family, than the borough as a whole. Residents of Woodberry Down experience worse health than the rest of Hackney and more people provide unpaid care.

The community centre was always bustling with people and activities from gardening club, Friday prayers for Muslim community members, lunch clubs, knit and natter groups, cookery courses, fitness classes, community fridge collections, yoga and youth activities. We hosted regular parties and celebration events for black history month, Eid, Christmas and Hannukah to name just a few. Our activities were almost always about people coming together.

The pandemic and the announcement of a national lock down on 23rd March posed a unique challenge. With the community centres doors shut - how could we best serve the community at this time of crisis? And how could we do it in a way that was safe for our staff and volunteers?

Due to our 11 years of service we already had a detailed understanding of the needs and challenges faced by our community and the catastrophic impact the pandemic would have, especially on our 'just-managing' households. Food insecurity, precarious employment and child poverty were factors before Covid19 - so we knew these challenges would be exacerbated by the pandemic. And so, on April 6th 2020, just three weeks after the national lockdown was announced, we mobilised the MHDT team and volunteers to launch the Skyline Food Hub.

It was a collaborative effort that required bringing different partners and stakeholders together at speed. Funders, small businesses, housing associations, third sector partners, volunteers, community champions and eventually central government - all played a crucial role in the projects success. It wasn't always easy. And to pull it off the programme required a substantial amount of hard work with the team both managing the challenges of Covid19 - home schooling, remote working, illness - whilst delivering a new and vital service. We are extremely proud of what we achieved and look back on this project as a remarkable achievement that's testament to the power of community.



# Why did we need to respond?

Woodberry Down is in the top 5% indices of multiple deprivation across the country. Just before the outbreak of the pandemic in 2019 a shocking 48% of children living in Hackney were living in poverty. We knew the pandemic was going to hit children hard – their educations, home and social lives all impacted.

Despite some politicians siting Covid19 as ‘the great equaliser’ – this was not the experience on the ground, with low income, marginalised households impacted on a much greater scale than wealthier households. Many households circumstances changed rapidly – loss of income, the need to medically shield/isolate, care for other vulnerable friends or family members, and/or children being home full time and needing to be home schooled. The change was overnight. And in some cases absolutely brutal.

The diverse Woodberry Down community also stood a much greater chance of dying from Covid19. The ONS.gov website states that between December 2020 and June 2021 all members of every ethnic minority group had a higher chance of dying from Covid19 than white British people with Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African people suffering the highest death rates.

“One minute we were able to socialise, go out to the shops, see loved one’s and take the kids to school. The next we shut in terrified. Everyone’s world turned upside down. It was a scary time. A lot of people lost jobs, their routines and found it very difficult to cope. We also lost a lot of people. It’s been a very sad time. It was very moving to see people coming together to help each other more. That was something.”

Joan, Woodberry Down resident



# What was the Skyline Food Hub?

## Skyline Food Hub in Numbers

**13,995** packed lunches provided between April 2020-April 2021

**8,000** Volunteer hours donated

**7,035** hot meals provided between April 2020-May 2021

Ingredients for approximately **10,000** meals were delivered in grocery bags

**122** households supported

**94** Volunteers

The Skyline Food Hub was set up as a means of providing vital sustenance to households across Woodberry Down who we’re struggling to access enough food during the pandemic.

The hub provided a mixture of cold packed lunches (sandwiches, snacks, fruit and a drink), a hot meal paired with a dessert or snack and/or grocery bags. These items were then delivered by volunteers on a daily basis on foot and cargo bike, Monday to Friday direct to people’s doorsteps.

As the Redmond Community Centre and MHDT’s shop Woodberry Blooms were both shut, we were able to use these closed venues to receive food surplus donations from The Felix Project, Tesco and Waitrose. The community centre kitchen was domestic scale and not big enough for the cooking operation so we negotiated with Berkeley Homes, landlords of the nearby Sky Line Building, to move the service into an empty restaurant in the Skyline tower.

In this catering suitable kitchen between 40-70 hot meals and 20-30 cold packed lunches were made per shift by Woodberry Down resident and chef Lydia Batchelor, founder of local catering business Baraza.

Before the pandemic Lydia was a regular at the Redmond Community Centre hosting our lunch club and getting stuck in with many other food activations. Having been a resident of Woodberry Down for 27 years she was also a critical part of the outreach for this project ensuring households who most needed the service were informed about it as soon as possible.

As lead Chef of the Skyline Food Hub Lydia was integral to the operation and poured her culinary heart and soul into the meals and lunches. She catered to allergies, preferences, cultural requests and changed the dishes daily so that people had variety and could look forward to a different meal every day. All meals met NHS Eat-Well guidelines and were both delicious and nutritious. Lydia was a community champion during this period and showed unwavering commitment, skill and resourcefulness during her time at the kitchen helm.

“It was real dedication from the start, and I’m proud to have cooked over 7000 meals.”  
Lydia, Skyline Food Hub Chef

## Celebrity Visit

Eastenders actress **Tamzin Outhwaite** came to visit the food hub! Tamzin spent time in the kitchen with the delivery volunteers and went out delivering food to community members. A few people said, "Oh it's Mel (Tamzin's famous Eastenders role) at the door." Everyone enjoyed her visit and it really lifted people's spirits.

The meals and packed lunches were prepared each day using donated food surplus and purchased ingredients. The food surplus deliveries were delivered to Woodberry Blooms and the grocery bags were packed at the Redmond Community Centre by a team of volunteers.

To access the service residents could self-refer or be referred by a third party using a google form. We knew during a time of crisis and fear the service had to be accessible, with as few barriers, or perceived barriers, as possible. We didn't mean to test people but instead supported anyone who said they needed support. This was critical in our approach to providing support at this challenging time.

The execution of the project was a logistical feat that saw MHDT team member Fionnuala Keane-Conley, formerly a shop assistant at our florists shop Woodberry Blooms, be repurposed to managing the on-the-ground logistics of an emergency food service operation, something she'd never done before but delivered with exceptional skill and dedication. This role was as varied as it was challenging and included coordinating the food donations, deliveries, health and safety, referrals and aspects of the volunteers. Eventually we recruited and trained up a volunteer to manage the volunteers!

To fund the Skyline Food Hub and its continuation, Centre managers working remotely found themselves in a continuous cycle of applying for emergency funding applications. This back to back submitting of funding bids – all with differing reporting requirements – was an exercise in stamina in itself.

The safety of our volunteers and on-the-ground workers was of paramount concern. We rapidly developed a Health & Safety manual to cover all aspects of the operation – which we later shared with other smaller community operations offering food support. We took GDPR and safeguarding very seriously and DBS checked all our volunteers before working with them. We wanted to ensure our response was rapid yet safe for all concerned.

The volunteers who supported the programme all said what a rewarding and affirming experience it was. People cited how it was a great support to their mental health, sense of purpose and overall wellbeing knowing that they were contributing to something so vital. They also said that although each shift was hard work, it was also very enjoyable.

**"Being able to volunteer at the Skyline Food Hub meant the world to me during lockdown. I'd been furloughed and was struggling being at home doing nothing. It was such a satisfying and rewarding experience knowing you were making a real difference in people's lives."**

Ade, Packing Volunteer

Throughout the duration of the Skyline Food Hub the project made a real difference to the residents that received the food. They told us...

**"It makes a lot of difference for me and my family. It helps a lot. Without it I'd have to go to shops all the time. The kids need more food when they stay home. When Lydia phoned me – I was happy for me and my kids. It's one less thing to worry about. It helps me a lot."**

Clare, Mum and local resident

**"I'm a pensioner and have health complications so I can't be going to the shops. I'm one of those people that's supposed to stay in and shield. At first getting food was very difficult. Relying on neighbours and that. The food support has took a lot of stress off and I'm really enjoying the hot meals. Compliments to the chef."**

Patrick, Pensioner and local resident

**"The kids enjoy the meals. When they go to school, they get the same food every day, so this is different. We're so happy to receive it. It helps me feed my family. I don't have all the food in the house to give them to eat. It means I'm able to pay most of the bills as well. It's one less thing to worry about. The kids are home 24/7 whereas normally I'd just be feeding them breakfast and dinner. The deliveries of lunch and snacks fill that gap. It's really helping."**

Mandy, Mum and local resident and food recipient



## Case studies

**Fionnuala's Story,**  
Skyline Food Hub Coordinator  
"Switching from working at Woodberry Blooms to coordinating the Skyline Food Hub was a massive transition. I didn't have previous experience coordinating a project of this scale so every day was a learning curve and a challenge. It was hard but rewarding work. One of the biggest challenges was volunteer recruitment, in particular delivery volunteers. At times we had too many and others not enough. Finding that balance was tricky. A lot of the time me and my Dad delivered food that couldn't be delivered by volunteers. What kept me going was working with such lovely staff and volunteers. I got on with Lydia straight away. We worked well as a team and could rely on each other if we ever had a difficult day. If we ever needed to mount another emergency response we'd be well prepared as we have a lot of systems in place."

**Lydia's Story,**  
Skyline Food Hub Chef  
"When the lockdown was first announced I reached out to local residents letting them know that I was going to provide a service for the community. We then got together a team of volunteers and off we went! It was real dedication from the start, and I'm proud to have cooked over 7000 meals. It was a great feeling to be doing something at such a difficult time. I know the community I was cooking for so every dish was thought out to suit all ages and their tastes. The most popular dishes were Ital Lentils, Chickpea Curry and Pasta and Tuna Bake. Although it was a challenging time we also had a lot of fun. I'll never forget one breastfeeding mother telling me that without the regular meals she didn't know how she would have coped. That meant a lot to me."

## The DEFRA Grant

**In June 2020 we secured a DEFRA grant worth £80,000.**

We shared our experience in programme administrative and reporting to secure these vital funds which were split between a consortium of eight grassroots community groups (including MHDT) who were providing specialist community food support. These organisations were based across Hackney and included Made Up Kitchen, Coffee Afrique, African Community School, The Boiler House, The National Food Service, Woodberry Aid and the Community African Network. The funding could be spent on culturally appropriate grocery items and other ingredients. It also meant more well balanced grocery bags could be curated than if relying solely on food surplus donations.

Although brilliant this programme was not without its challenges. The grant required a huge amount of reporting and administration (with very precise and unrealistic data required with regards to weightage of food purchased) and the funding had very specific limitations on what it could be spent on. We worked closely with the London Borough of Hackney for this bid, and in particular Lisa-Raine Hunt, who was amazingly supportive and always at the end of a phone when we needed her for all the sticky points in delivering this project.

Via this programme MHDT supported the 8 partners to deliver: 76,571 meals, or 32,160kg food.



# Test & Trace Referral Scheme

In September 2020 the Central Government isolation framework, Hackney Council Public Health and City and Hackney CCG invited applications from groups interested in delivering food to residents who needed to isolate due to Covid19.

Six consortia represented different geographic areas of the borough - North West, North East, Central, Central West, South East and South West. We were the lead partner in the North West consortia of Hackney that included Brownswood, Woodberry Down and Stamford Hill West wards.

Referrals were made via a council help line or/and online form for people who needed to self-isolate and were struggling to feed themselves. Emergency food support was then provided within a maximum of thirty-six hours - but usually the consortia was able to respond quicker than this.

The consortium approach enabled organisations to share funding and meant larger organisations such as MHDT could manage and redistribute funding to smaller organisations who were providing a more bespoke service to specific community groups. Many of these smaller partners would not have been eligible for funding directly from government bodies.

Part of the learning from the earlier months of the Skyline Food Hub, was how much additional work community food providers put into providing wrap around care - be it signposting to other support services, help with accessing benefits, purchasing of refrigerators, collecting medicine and other essential tasks. From winter 2021, this additional work was remunerated with additional budget per referral - demonstrating how the food hub was critical in influencing local government policy.

We have continued to provide this service throughout the pandemic - and even beyond the life of The Skyline Food Hub. After the Skyline Food Hub closed so we could reopen the community centre, we continued to support people referred by this method with food. The test and trace food referral service ends 31st March 2022.

# The importance of culturally appropriate food

During the pandemic the importance of culturally appropriate food was highlighted again and again.

Available food surplus donations were often centred on Northern European dietary choices so failed to serve the needs of many of the diverse community members of Woodberry Down - and the communities supported by our DEFRA partner organisations. At a time of crisis and fear, food needs to be, more than ever, familiar, comforting and nourishing. Four of our

partners on the DEFRA programme specifically supported different African diaspora and Afro-Caribbean communities. The feedback we received was that the specialist cultural items they were able to purchase were greatly appreciated, were a great source of comfort and also meant less food was wasted as it was familiar and people knew how to cook it.



# Something for the kids

MHDT also distributed 100 art packs to children across Woodberry Down, Stoke Newington, and Stamford Hill.

This was in collaboration with Woodberry Down Primary school. These fun resources helped keep children entertained and motivated whilst they were not in school. This

initiative provided another pathway in which local parents and carers could find out about The Skyline Food Hub and refer themselves to it, thereby expanding our coverage.



# How did this project fit into London Development Trust's 5 keystones?

## 1. Connection

This project posed the unique challenge of connection between the MHDT team and volunteers being a mixture of remote/online and in-person. Desk based manager roles needed to focus on fundraising and reporting while the on-the-ground team focused on the project delivery. This separation of the team was a new experience for MHDT - and indeed it was for much of the nationwide workforce - as we needed to adjust to this new way of connecting and supporting one another in our respective roles.

At the time of launching MHDT was one of only two food hubs in Hackney that had launched a COVID19 response. The speed of our response meant we were able to secure donations and partners relatively smoothly and utilise pre-existing contacts to deliver a safe, high quality service.

Our existing supporter base meant in addition to grant funding we were able to raise £9351 from public-facing giving pages, no small feat given how many fundraisers were being launched at the time.

Our pre-existing experience of partnership working and collaboration were critical to the success of this project - in particular with regards to the delivery of the DEFRA grant which had 8 partners. We connected to these partners via the Hackney Council Food Network group - an online group that brought together the 80 plus organisations and businesses in the borough that went on to provide food support at varying scales throughout the pandemic.

Our proactive approach to partnership working and establishing connections between organisations and individuals means we are well placed to carry out future emergency response projects.

## 2. Empowerment

The creation of meaningful, empowering volunteer opportunities have always been an integral part of MHDT's work and this project was no exception.

Volunteering is empowering because:

- It enables people to give something back to their local community
- Builds connections between local people and organisations
- Tackles isolation, loneliness and other mental health challenges
- Is an effective way of learning new skills and enhancing employability prospects
- Increases the resilience and capacity of communities
- Supports overall wellbeing with physical and mental activity

And in the case of the Skyline Food Hub it provided all those aspects in addition to...

- Providing a unique opportunity to be part of a local support service at a time when thousands of people were either on furlough, had been made unemployed and were in lockdown



The Skyline Food Hub was a volunteer-run project with a phenomenal 8,000 volunteer hours donated from 95. The project was heavily reliant on their efforts to ensure all food was prepared, packed, and distributed. Volunteers played a key role in outreach and referral and their on-the-ground knowledge helped us to achieve a more equitable distribution of food to the community. This approach of community involvement is one that is embedded in the strategic objectives of LDT.

*Gulay's Story, Delivery and kitchen volunteer*  
**“The pandemic was difficult for everyone but particularly for disabled people and the elderly. I decided I wanted to be of service and lend a helping hand to vulnerable community members. I loved being part of the Skyline Food Hub. I got involved with cooking, packing, deliveries – whatever needed doing. It was very well organised and I felt safe working alongside 2-3 volunteers. I loved doing the deliveries door to door and having a chat with people. Knowing you were helping people to feel less lonely and isolated was very motivating.”**

*Bolanle's Story, Kitchen Volunteer*  
**“I've always enjoyed volunteering at The Redmond Centre so when lockdown happened and the opportunity to volunteer at The Skyline Food Hub arose, I knew I wanted to do it. Continuing to help out in the kitchen was a great use of my time and I learnt many new skills from our amazing chef Lydia. It was a very worthwhile and rewarding experience.”**

Quotes from volunteers

**“I want to do my bit to help vulnerable people during this crisis.”**  
 Muglav, volunteer

**“I chose to volunteer mainly because I have spare time and secondly because I like the idea of being able to help elderly and vulnerable people in these difficult times.”**  
 David, volunteer

**“I felt motivated to keep going as I was talking to people who felt lonely and isolated when we did the door-to-door deliveries. It was nice to get to know them and see them regularly.”**  
 Yi, Volunteer

### 3. Influence

Our work as the lead for the North West Hackney consortia for the test and trace referral scheme was the area where we able to exert influence over local government policy.

Our experience delivering the food hub from the start of the pandemic, then going on to lead the consortium meant we were perfectly placed to feedback on what was happening on the ground not just at our food hub, but across the seven projects we supported with the DEFRA grant and the organisations that we're part of the North West consortium.

Reporting back to local government about the extensive wrap-around care that was being provided by community food support services led to additional budget being put aside per referral to help cover the costs of this critical care. This was greatly appreciated by all the organisations involved – many whom hadn't imagined budget could be located to fund the essential extension service they were providing – and provided critical top up funds to keep their services running.

### 4. Space

As we've found with all our work to date, access to space was a critical part of being able to deliver the Skyline Food Hub project successfully.

Having to close a community centre at a time when the Woodberry Down community needed support more than ever, was a difficult thing to experience albeit essential to keeping people safe. However repurposing it into a food delivery and packing hub highlighted the essentialness of having community spaces that can be pivoted during times of crisis.

The benefit of 'meanwhile' or 'pop-up' spaces was also emphasised via this project as we negotiated use of a closed commercial kitchen in the Skyline Tower. Although we didn't pay rent we did cover all the costs of using the kitchen such as utilises, equipment and deep cleaning. Having a track record at managing spaces safely and professionally was vital to securing this empty commercial property.

### 5. A robust and sustainable organisation: key learnings

2020 was a momentous but undoubtedly challenging year for MHDT. Between April 2020 and March 2021 we simultaneously managed 15 different grants related to the Skyline Food hub project – each with their own often extraneous reporting criteria.

The team and community at large faced new challenges which we approached with innovation, hard work and unwavering dedication. These challenges have helped us to learn, make improvements to future projects and be ready to respond to future crisis that may impact our community.

### Emergency response – speed is critical

Responding to the crisis required making decisions, implementing systems, securing funding and recruiting a team at a much more rapid pace than usual. Our community was impacted immediately by the lock-down so we could not spend months designing a response. We needed to strike a careful balance between a fast and a safe response which we achieved. To work at speed in a crisis requires additional working hours from the team. For future responses we would have these conversations with the team prior to launch and put aside additional budget to compensate for these hours.

### Maintaining HR best-practices during times of crisis

Maintaining good HR practices and work/home life balance whilst mounting an emergency response was certainly a challenge and one we would be more mindful of in the future. The desire be of service at a time of great need is commendable and natural for people working in the community sector, but should be carefully monitored to ensure this desire is not to the detriment of employees mental and physical health and work load does not lead to burn out. This is a difficult balance to strike with one of the greatest challenges to shift from emergency all hands-on-deck mode into a routine that resembles a more usual working day/week.

### Outreach

Being able to quickly mobilise and reach out to existing networks is critical to achieving successful outreach in an emergency response. We were able to use our existing centre and programme beneficiaries and partners to get the word out about the Skyline Food Hub and ask them to spread the word – encouraging people to tell neighbours, friends and group members. This ensured we reached particularly vulnerable groups such as elders, young families and people with health conditions. In times of turmoil you may not be able to rely on people checking emails or office phone numbers – so contacting people with SMS texts, personal calls and via Whatsapp groups was affective.

## Partnership working

There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to go fast go alone, if you want to go far go together.” We found this to ring true for this response – the initial fast paced set up phase being achieved at speed by the MHDT team alone, and then as the service developed into a longer term offer partnerships became utterly crucial to it’s success. We were able to lend our expertise and administrative skills to small grassroots organisations as part of the DEFRA and consortium programme, and these organisations in turn taught us a lot about culturally appropriate food and specialist community offers. Partnership working can be cumbersome and time-heavy, but when navigated with good communication and clear objectives partnerships enhance each organisations respective offers.

## Culturally appropriate food

When it comes to community food programmes – this project emphasised how the one size fits all model is a major disservice to many community members. Working with other partners enabled us to be able to deliver not just generic food parcels, but culturally appropriate food which is familiar and importantly tastes good. Because people were given food which suits their preferences, this demonstrates respect and care that are not always seen in traditional ‘take what you’re given’ generic food distribution projects. This cultural sensitivity to the needs of a diverse neighbourhood is crucial to the project and our partner organisations really showed us how this was done to its highest standard.

## Safely recruiting and working with volunteers during a pandemic

A pandemic of this scale was an unprecedented experience. As we’re not an emergency responder organisation we did not have policies or practices in place that took into account working at such speed and through a time of great risk to personal health. Consistent advice and guidance from national and local government changed frequently (and often contradicted itself particularly with regards to mask wearing in kitchens) and at the start of the pandemic was hard to come by at all. We therefore had to make hard and fast decisions about what were safe working conditions for our volunteers, how they would work in the space, the cleaning protocols and necessary training procedures. It was crucial that we did not cut corners on safeguarding and health and safety despite the ‘emergency’ nature of the project. The protocols we created were cautionary and as there were so many unknowns we based things off ‘worse-case scenario planning’ to ensure our volunteers were kept as safe as possible.

## Impact & evaluation

Collecting data in a pandemic proved to be very challenging. We experimented with paper forms and text message surveys but very few people completed them. Some food recipients fed back that they were finding it hard to concentrate on tasks like that while coping with everything else going on. Having a chat on the telephone seemed to be the most successful method of data collection combined with door knocking, although this had to be done sensitively as some people, especially people who were medically shielding, didn’t want any face to face interactions. Moving forward, MHDT looks to strengthen our data collection and analysis, paying particular attention to finding new and innovative ways to capture data and providing our beneficiaries with the tools and skills to provide feedback remotely. More resource in terms of staff capacity and funding is needed to achieve good data collection during a pandemic.

# A big thank you to our funders and collaborators

None of this would have been possible without the support of our collaborators, delivery partners, strategic partners, organisations who gave us food, funders, and of course the local residents who gave their time, money and other donations to make this project really count.

## Funders

DEFRA, The National Lottery Community Fund, Mayor’s Fund for London (Kitchen Social), Berkeley Homes, Royal Society of the Arts, East End Community Foundation, JustGiving crowdfunding donations, Notting Hill Genesis housing association, London Community Foundation, Waitrose Community Matters Fund, London Borough Of Hackney Council, donors to Just Giving crowdfunding page.

## Strategic Partners

The Felix Project, Volunteer Centre Hackney, London Borough of Hackney Council, Woodberry Down Primary School, Berkeley Homes, Yeast Bakery, Rich Mix & Love Corn, Made In Hackney, Thomas Frank, Sainsbury’s, Waitrose, HCVS & Woodberry Wetlands Consortium, National Literacy Trust, Donovan Designs, GLA Hygiene Bank

## Delivery Partners

Woodberry Aid, Made In Hackney, North London Food Service & Castle Climbing Centre, African Community School, Coffee Afrique, Community African Network, Hackney Marsh Partnership: Made Up Kitchen, The Boiler House, St. John the Evangelist Church, Edible London.



# Conclusions

## At an organisational level

The Skyline Food Hub was a momentous achievement. It stands as proof of the vitalness of community building, spaces and activations in non-crisis times, so that when challenges come – communities are well connected and able to demonstrate resilience and responsiveness.

As the pandemic lasted for such a long period of time, moving from emergency response mode into making the project part of a more structured and consistent working pattern posed unique challenges. Staff and volunteers threw themselves into the response with everything they had – but as the pandemic continued MHDT had to ensure everyone was well looked after and didn't burn out. In some ways scaling down from emergency response into making it part of our everyday was more challenging than the initial activation. Re-merging the team from two strands of remote workers and on-the-ground workers was a new and unique challenge – and one that constant communication and dialogue is needed to maintain staff morale and motivation.

Our experience running the Skyline Food Hub leaves us well placed to respond to future crisis and to be more forthright when communicating with funders about realistic measurables and reporting criteria. More joined up thinking is required from all funders be they local and national government, philanthropists, businesses, trusts and foundations – to alleviate organisations from the burden of varying and excessive reporting criteria at a time when they need to concentrate on delivering crucial emergency services.

Knowing when was the right time to stop the service was a difficult decision. Food access in the area was an issue pre-pandemic times. With costs of living rising dramatically and the £20 pandemic Universal Credit payment having ended – people in the area need food support now more than ever. However the community centre needed to return to its usual – and also vital – services and the free lease on the restaurant housing the service had ended. This all pointed to it being a time to resume our pre-pandemic operations.

Looking to the future we will continue to centre food as part of our community centre activities be it through cookery classes, community fridges, food growing, community feasts and other ways of building grassroots level food resilience. In some ways we are still digesting the events of the last two years – the courageous actions of local people, the work undertaken and the impact it had. But for now we at MHDT, and everyone who was part of this phenomenal project, are very proud of what we achieved.

## Conclusions at a societal level

**By Simon Donovan,  
Director of Parent Company  
London Development Trust**

The outstanding effort put in by MHDT staff, volunteers and partners in Hackney and elsewhere documented in this report during the pandemic has been heroic! Our people have gone above and beyond providing practical support in the most difficult of circumstances while also dealing with their own personal challenges which demonstrates the depth of MHDT's commitment to community development.

The pandemic exacerbated many of the challenges that ordinary people and families faced before Covid19 hit and which continue to make everyday life a struggle. Challenges that with more commitment from the powerful to community development could be mitigated against more easily. A radical rethink on how we approach community development and social stewardship is urgently needed. The work highlighted in this report gives a very small indication of what we together could achieve.

## Key take aways

### The right to food

MHDT was dealing with food poverty for many years before the pandemic struck. Too many people go hungry. Our projects such as Kitchen Social or the Community Fridge only touched the tip of the iceberg. Many times I've witnessed community members receiving their only food for the day at one of our activities. Yet as a nation we throw away tonnes of perfectly good produce every single day. The carrot doesn't look right or its not fresh enough for sale – straight in the bin!! The knock on implications of this are astonishing with extra pressure on the poorest costing the tax payer £millions not to mention the wasted energy needed to produce food in the first place in a time of climate crisis. There is a clear need to change policy in the way we organise food production and distribution. MHDT calls on national and local government and those in power including the private sector to adopt the measures included in the UN Report on The Right to Adequate Food within the next 12 months. No one should be going hungry in the UK in the 21st Century – it's a disgrace.



## The digital divide & it's impact on the young & old

We need to value Children and Young People! Successive lockdowns hurt badly. While they were needed to control the spread of virus they had a negative impact on our communities in so many ways. However the impact of closing schools and loss of education for our young people will be a legacy challenging us for many years into the future. It will be very difficult for too many young people and children to catch up on what education was missed. While on-line classes and home learning mitigated part of this, for the poorest families without the internet or devices to access learning materials this issue is compounded a thousand times. The generosity of individuals donating devices was outstanding yet too many could not afford to get on line. MHDT has been providing free access to the internet along with training on how residents can access on-line services in its centres for years. But with forced closure of facilities residents in particular young people were not allowed in. We need to tackle the Digital Divide as a matter of urgency. Lack of access to the web has exasperated the divisions in our communities with the poorest children now at even more of a disadvantage unable to break from the cycle of poverty that far too many are condemned too. Yet with all the technological advances why was this the case? The elders in our community not yet online or without technical skills were hugely impacted by the lockdowns. Accessing support, benefits, social activities, paying bills – all needed to be done online and this was extremely challenging for many elders who's online skills had not kept pace with the digitisation of society. We need a radical change in national policy to guarantee access to the web and all the benefits it brings.

## Harnessing the energy of community & volunteers

One of the most heart-warming effects of the pandemic was the surge in community volunteering. Neighbours looking after neighbours. Yet this was hampered by a lack of resource and policy to harness this wave of community response. Despite the good intentions of the individuals involved organising volunteers on this scale is hard. Funding for this is extremely limited and as quick as the wave of volunteering arose so it has dissipated. Those individuals and organisations which have carried on with volunteering programmes do so in the most difficult of circumstances. The Covid-19 pandemic will not be the last time we will need a community response to national challenges. We need to look seriously on how we can harness this energy for the long term. MHDT believes that local community organisations can play a key role in recruiting, training and valuing volunteers. An emergency community volunteering service organised at a local level needs to be introduced and funded as a matter of urgency. And what will they do when there's not an emergency? Work with volunteers to mitigate against the everyday issues the UK faces - climate change, loneliness, mentoring young people - the good effects this positive energy could be put to are endless. We have the people, there are no end to the issues to tackle, we have the know how on how to organise. What we lack is the funding to do it. When I look at the urgent challenges we face this needs to change now!!

## Social prescribing & funding community work

The UK faces a number of ticking time bombs which in one way or another all of us are already paying for. Loneliness, poverty and all that goes hand in hand with it - poor diet, diabetes, obesity, mental health - an NHS and other public services stretched to the limit and cut to the bone, the issues go on and on. We are told that there is 'no magic money tree' so how on earth could it be possible to fund our suggestions which mitigate against the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic but already there long before Covid19? MHDT's community projects and the research that accompanies them shows that we can solve many of these challenges locally and at a fraction of the cost of what it costs the health and other services to do. We need to radically re-think how we tackle these challenges and fund a community approach. MHDT has experimented with low key high impact community projects in conjunction with local health providers under the 'Social Prescribing' banner. In essence rather than prescribing pills or other medicines Drs have asked patients to come to our Centres and participate in activities which improve mental health or general fitness looking for lifestyle and other behaviour changes which lead to better health and other outcomes. Our data shows that this approach works. The problem is that the money saved on not giving prescription drugs and medicines does not follow the patient to fund these activities. In some cases there is not even a mechanism by which health providers are able to transfer funds into community organisations. This needs to change. The NHS England drugs budget is somewhere in the region of £18Billions/annum – by diverting just a tiny fraction of this annual amount Youth and Community Work across the UK is paid for. Imagine the benefit for society of having well-funded youth and community organisations and facilities in every locality! It's not new money just diverted cash from the profits of the drugs companies, for me it's a no brainer!



# We are an award winning organisation with over 15 years experience of community development.

London Development Trust is a charity and social enterprise. We deliver community services that provide value for money and create lasting benefits.

We do this through our Five Key Principles, which we believe are fundamental to community development. These are: connecting; empowering; influencing the powerful; providing space; and running a robust and sustainable organisation.



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