

Virtual Community Centre

Project Report

11th January -
30th June 2021



Summary

London Development Trust runs community centres. It is what we do. We believe in bringing people together for fun activities, fitness, celebrations, and simply day to day socialising.

We know how important it is to feel connected to other people; to be with other people. To share joy, sadness and simply to see the same faces week after week through the activities that add to our lives. Our community centres have been a bustling, central focus of the Woodberry Down estate for the last 11 years, and more recently on the Acton Gardens estate for just one year.

And then the pandemic hit. The community centres closed their doors. Initially, we focussed on essential support in the form of the emergency food provision which provided a crucial service for vulnerable households. But we knew that wellbeing relies on many more factors than simply having enough food to survive.

And so we developed the idea of a 'virtual community centre', one that would stand in for our actual community centres while restrictions were in place that prevented face to face socialising. We know how important social connections are, and how important different activities are to our communities: we knew that this was something that people really needed during those tough months of remaining indoors.

We had one aim for this project, that was to improve the mental and social wellbeing of residents of Woodberry Down (WD) and Acton Garden (AG) estates. This report discusses the achievements of the project and establishes the impact it had on the communities we serve.

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Introduction

London Development Trust has worked on the Woodberry Down estate running community engagement activities and managing the Redmond Community Centre in north Hackney, London since 2011; and the Acton Gardens Community Centre on the Acton Gardens estate, South Acton since 2019.

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.

Both Hackney and Ealing have 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. Inequality is a particular issue in South Acton where some areas are also in the top 5% most deprived in the country, and others in the top 50%.

Woodberry Down 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. Ealing is also an increasingly diverse borough, with a steady rise projected for BAME groups at 52%. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected black and minority ethnic communities and those living in deprived areas.

Qualifications are lower in Woodberry Down than in Hackney overall, and there are fewer adults in full time work. There is a higher percentage of people in South Acton claiming benefits than the national average. There are more students, retired people and people not working because of long term sickness or disability, or looking after home and family, in both areas than the boroughs of Hackney and Ealing overall. Residents of both Woodberry Down and South Acton experience worse health than the rest of London and more people provide unpaid care.

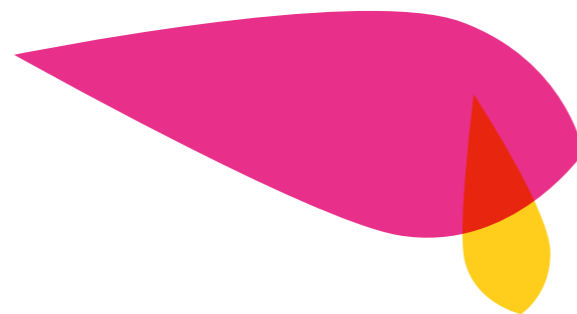
The community centres was always bustling with people and activities from gardening club, Friday prayers for Muslim community members, lunch clubs, knit and natter groups, cookery courses, fitness classes, community fridge collections, yoga and youth activities. We hosted regular parties and celebration 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 on Woodberry Down, and the research we had been doing with the communities in South Acton, 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. We set up the Virtual Community Centre (VCC) to mimic, the in-person community centre experience and provide virtual spaces to residents to support their interests in things like crafts, gardening and cooking; as well as crucially trying to support those personal relationships and human contact that are so important to people’s everyday lives.

With nearly all services seeming to transfer online overnight, we were keen to use this channel to keep connected with our communities. But we were also critically aware that many of the most vulnerable people struggled to keep up with the rapidly changing technology landscape. This is known as ‘the digital divide’; one more thing that was exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic made it clear that digital exclusion is not a generational issue that affects only the elderly, it affects people differently across the board. It has to do with access to the equipment, decent laptops, tablets or phones that work well and can handle new updates; reliable and affordable connection to the internet; and of course the skills to navigate ever evolving online platforms.

For this reason, the Virtual Community Centre (VCC) was set up in parallel with a programme to address the digital divide and support people to get online through the provision of equipment, internet access and training.



Why did we need to respond?

Both Acton Gardens and Woodberry Down are 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, and 30% in Ealing. We knew the pandemic was going to hit families hard.

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 and Acton Gardens communities 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. These statistics had a huge effect not just on people's physical health, but their mental wellbeing too, as Joan describes:

“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 Virtual Community Centre?

These were the 'virtual' programmes we ran:

Mondays:

Stretch, tone and grow “Reggaetivity”: dance fitness sessions to reggae music themed around mindfulness and body conditioning; ran by Sekhem Arts.

Wednesdays:

Social Dance: dance sessions exclusively for children under 13 and their carers. The sessions were ran by Elevate Arts UK and aimed to build confidence, improve fitness, develop creativity and encourage fitness.

Embroidery Classes: hosted by Cordwainers Grow which taught people skills and were themed around nature, plants and biodiversity.

Thursdays:

Nature Craft Sessions: making crafts with easily accessible items such as twig weaving and making inks and drawing implements from plants that grow locally. The sessions by Cordwainers Grow aimed to connect people creatively with the natural world.

Children's Storytelling: sessions ran by London Dreamtime exclusively for under 8s and their carers where the facilitator developed interactive stories and sang with the children.

Fridays:

Holistic Support for Self-Development: sessions ran by N'dey Holistic Support, which were about building self-esteem and inclusive coaching. The sessions involved a guided meditation to help reduce and manage stress. The activities were open to everyone, but they were especially aimed at mothers and parents to inspire them to achieve their professional goals.

Zumba for Families: fun, energetic and easily accessible Zumba sessions to increase physical activity and promote positive interactions, these were ran by Elevate Arts.



The Virtual Community Centre in numbers

9 local facilitators delivered over 100 sessions between January and June 2021

80% of sessions were live-streamed via Facebook

Over **8000** people saw our recorded posts and live streams through social media

We received **930** likes, comments, and shares on the Virtual Community Centre social media handles

There were **439** session registrations for the different sessions, from **103** different people

100% of participants said they enjoyed the sessions

80% of attendees reported that they felt happier after participating in the sessions

75% of people reported that they felt more confident since being involved in the VCC sessions



The Virtual Community Centre aimed to improve local resident's health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Yet, the project also managed to engage people from outside of the specific estates we were working with.

We had three target outputs for the project, these were:

Firstly, to ensure that our activities were accessible and available online for the local community; secondly to create awareness of the VCC through various online platform engagement; and thirdly to demonstrate a documented improvement in the health and wellbeing of local residents.

Our activities are accessible and available online for the local community

For this, we took the assumption was that residents would have access to digital devices and connectivity which enables them to get online to access the VCC (although we recognise that often this is not the case and offered digital training separately). Our sessions were streamed via zoom and Facebook Livestream or posted as recorded sessions at least 5 times per week. Because we provided a variety of options to access the VCC we could engage a wider and more diverse audience.

The project delivered 100 sessions between January and June 2021. Out of the 100 sessions delivered, 80% (N= 80) were live-streamed to Facebook to reach a wider audience. 20% (N= 20) of sessions were not live-streamed upon the facilitator's request due to the nature of the session contents.

People are aware of what the VCC offered

To ensure that people were aware of the VCC, the project team engaged in a social media campaign to promote the sessions. Posts were made every week to raise awareness of the centre through our own website, Facebook and Instagram.

Over 80 posts were made to Facebook and Instagram, which together received 930 likes, comments, and shares across the Woodberry Down and Acton Garden social media pages. The posts which were marketed on Facebook also reached over 7,387 people (The number of people who saw your post at least once). This resulted in approximately 439 session registrations being made via Zoom.

People registered to attend the VCC for different reasons, with the most common reasons being to learn a new skill, to engage and spend time with others, and to make friends.

100% of those who were surveyed at the end of the project reported that their motives for joining the sessions were fulfilled.

Although 439 session registrations were made, the total number of individuals who actually attended sessions between January and June 2021 was 103: 14 men or boys, and 89 women and girls. We found that some of those who registered did not attend the session, and also there were instances of double registrations. It is worth noting, that many people came back week after week, so the number of individuals attending is different to the number of registrations. The highest attended sessions were embroidery, social dance, and reggaetivity with February being the most highly attended month for all activities.

People said that their health and wellbeing improved as a result of attending the VCC sessions

Sessions were specifically designed to contribute towards the improvement in the mental and social wellbeing of residents in Woodberry Down and Acton Gardens. The activities enabled participants to develop their skills in activities such as embroidery, dance, arts, and crafts whilst encouraging social interactions which also improve mental wellbeing.

The timing of this project was seen as being critical to its impact by participants. It was a time that many people's mental, social and physical wellbeing had been negatively impacted by the pandemic and the lockdowns, which was particularly pertinent over the winter months when it was especially hard to socialise outdoors.

“Thank you so much for putting on this incredible learning opportunity during lockdown that was so accessible. It was the highlight of my week and being able to watch the videos when I missed weeks was brilliant. Thank you.”

Gulay, Nature Craft

“Even though I didn't attend all the sessions, I really learned a lot. I gained new information and skills, and I have implemented this in my current embroidery work.”

Charlotte, Embroidery

From those who participated in the VCC, 75% reported that the sessions contributed towards improved physical health as a result of the sessions such as Reggaetivity, Zumba, and social dance.

One of the key project aims also focussed on improving the mental wellbeing of residents. 80% reported that they felt happier after participating in the sessions. This indicates that the project contributed towards residents' improvement in mental wellbeing.

75% of participants also reported that they felt more confident since being involved in the VCC sessions. In addition to this, participants reported during focus group discussions that they felt the VCC allowed them to engage in social activities in the comfort of their own home which also contributed to increasing their confidence in general.

“I will come to these activities because I know it helps me and then ‘now I feel better.’”

Michael, Reggaetivity

“Because sometimes I used to go to the gym. But here in these classes, I don't. And it gives me this kind of relax that I'm not judged. You know, it's very important especially when you are not so super confident.”

Sharon



Case studies

Joanne's story

Joanne is originally from Poland. She participated in the VCC Reggaetivity class and regularly attended sessions for four months. She heard about the VCC through the facilitator and immediately booked multiple sessions via Zoom. Since she joined the sessions, Joanne has noted an improvement in her daily routine and helped her in looking forward to doing something amid a national lockdown.

Before the lockdown and joining the VCC, Joanne was socially active and ran classes of her own in the community however many of these activities could not continue.

She was motivated to join the VCC and more specifically the Reggaetivity session so that she can stay active and make new friends.

Regularly attending the session was helpful to Joanne even on her bad days during the lockdown. It lifted her spirit as she was able to meet with like-minded people and she could keep herself active through dance whilst being at home. She valued the social interactions so much that she did not want to miss one session.

She describes how she benefitted from attending the VCC sessions:

“It’s [been a] big help to me and honestly speaking, sometimes you know we don’t realise how much it helps. I am becoming aware of it more and more. In the beginning, it was just like you know, okay we would do the session – you don’t know how it’s going to be and sometimes you are busy, and you think oh maybe... But you push yourself and then you do it and then it becomes your routine which is really, really important.

I try never to skip the class... I just can’t imagine not having it. You know, I would be probably sitting in the corner, and I don’t know, maybe I’m in a bad mood... But I never postpone the physical sessions with Sharon. Even if I am down, I will always pop along.

So, seeing people is important and it doesn’t have to be in person. Sometimes it’s even easier to get to know somebody from their bedroom because we are more relaxed”

Ola's story

Ola lives alone on Woodberry Down and regularly attended the VCC to participate in the Embroidery class. Before participating in the VCC she had little experience of using online tools such as Zoom. Her family who is also local to Woodberry Down encouraged her to join in the VCC as they thought it would be good for her.

After regularly attending sessions which were facilitated by Debbie from Cordwainers Grow, Ola saw a benefit from regular interactions with other people in the class. The sessions had a positive impact on her general outlook on life during the lockdown and helped her to feel less isolated.

As well as having a positive impact on Ola’s mental wellbeing, the VCC has also enabled Ola to learn a new skill to which she is now passionately dedicating her time to. With the help of her daughter, she has invested in some embroidery equipment to help her progress in her new hobby.

Ola was so overwhelmed with joy at how much the VCC benefitted her life during lockdown that she stressed the importance of it for those who are more vulnerable than her. Here is how the VCC positively impacted Ola:

“But I really find that it is so nice to be able to see other people and to talk to them and just communicate. Because I haven’t been able to do anything like that here. I did have a social meeting group and it’s had to disband of course because of the lockdown.

It helped me during this time in particular and made me feel much brighter in myself... You don’t realise it but your whole energy going down, your whole attitude because it goes on and on the same thing housework, cooking a meal you know. So, yeah that’s how I found the experience is very good for me.

Of course, it is giving me new experience because I have never done

any embroidery before. This is a whole new thing opening up to me you know which is absolutely marvellous. I got myself some books... My daughter sent me thread and equipment because I cannot go outside.” I think it’s been absolutely marvellous [emphasis]. It has really amused my life.

But there must be quite a few people who aren’t able to leave their homes; people who have disabilities, haven’t got transport, things like that. So maybe if your funding would permit, you know just a session once a week for those or once a fortnight for those sorts of people would be very efficient, I would have thought.”

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

1. Connection

This project took place at a time of great uncertainty and anxiety. People were socially isolated due to the restrictions, and by the time our project started in January 2021 a full nine months after the first lockdown, the longer-term effects of the ongoing restrictions were becoming obvious. People were less resilient, and felt more isolated and vulnerable the longer the pandemic dragged on.

The VCC project was particularly pertinent and timely because it aimed to connect people, support old social connections and build new ones. The VCC became a safe space and encouraged participation by people with reduced mobility including physically disabled individuals, parents with very young children and older people. These are people who may not have used the community centres before, and so LDT began building new connections – and new ways of connecting – with a wider group of people than before the pandemic

2. Empowerment

The creation of meaningful, empowering work opportunities has always been an integral part of LDT's work and this project was no exception. We paid local facilitators to run the sessions, used our funding to buy equipment and used the halls of the community centres for facilitators to run their session in a covid safe way. By doing this, this project supported local residents, many of whom are self-employed. For some of our facilitators, the VCC was the only paid work they received during this time. This is because so many other spaces simply 'shut up shop' and so their work dried up. Therefore, we were able to support people financially. This had the additional benefit that many of our facilitators are well known within our communities, so they had their own social networks. It also ensured that our long term working relationships with our facilitators were supported and even developed over the course of the pandemic.

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.

3. Influence

The delivery of the VCC itself has yielded many benefits for those who have participated, but it has also provided useful learning for LDT's programming. The project has enabled us to invest into our own organisation's learning and capacity to set up and stream sessions online. We believe this will be important in the coming years now that so many people are used to interacting with one another in a 'hybrid' form.

In this new, online method of delivery, we also needed to amend our approach of measuring the impact of this projects. We used Zoom registration forms to register and document the contact details of participants. All participants were informed that their identity will be protected, and the data will be used for evaluation purposes. Many people did not want to share their age with us.

A Zoom survey tool was used to explore the expectations from VCC sessions and to investigate the attendees' mental, physical and confidence status at the beginning of the project. We asked people to complete a survey either before the livestream began or immediately after it ended. To prevent repetitive data collection from the same person, data was collected if there was a new participant after the second week.

We used Upshot surveys at the end of the project to ask people about how they had experienced the sessions over the months the VCC ran. The LDT impact team also conducted 2 online focus group interviews with session participants and one-to-one interviews for case studies. We looked at our project progress as we went on and used this information to alter the programme to work better as the project went on. For example, our data suggested that very few men were accessing the programme, so we altered our marketing for the social dance and children's storytelling to attract more male participants.

4. Space

As one of our five keystones, we know that access to space is a critical part of being able to deliver projects – 'virtual' or otherwise. We were able to open our community centres to our facilitators to make sure they had a suitable and safe space to film their sessions, as well as being able to use the centres for their administration tasks.

Our 'virtual spaces' which were created over the course of the project enabled residents to take part in activities that would otherwise have been conducted in-person at the community centres. This had the added benefit of meaning that people who were usually unable to attend our sessions (even in pre-pandemic times) were able to access our programme.

The spaces that were created were designed to be social spaces, where people were able to build connections with other participants – not simply watching a video about 'how to embroider', for example. The interpersonal connections were entirely dependent on the skills of the facilitators and project team to make these virtual spaces welcoming and friendly.

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.

Different sides of diversity, equality and inclusion

Implementing the VCC opened our eyes to a different side of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ensuring that everyone was able to access and make use of online activities was key to the project's success as well as ensuring diversity of participants and inclusion regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc. The project engaged a diverse group of people from various backgrounds although some participants were not happy to share their personal details, even though this was done anonymously.

In the design of the activities for the virtual community centre, there were considerations made for different groups of people and this resulted in a mix of different activities appealing to different groups of people. In spite of this (See Gender imbalance), there was an oversight on ensuring that all of our activities were also targeted to men who were left out in this project. The use of gender-inclusive language in advertising the VCC to the community may have been useful in ensuring this issue was addressed.

Social sustainability: longer term prospects

Following the easing of lockdown restrictions, there has been an urge to engage in 'real life' interactions and activities. This was evident nearing the end of the VCC project in June where the project team noted a significant drop in the number of participants attending classes (See figures 1 and 2). In some instances, this was because schools had opened and children who had been participating in one of the highest attended activities were now occupied with other things. The value of a virtual community can only be achieved when there are a significant number of members who are willing to stay online.

Whilst this model can be sustainable, the project team reflected on how this can be integrated with 'in-person' activities to make it hybrid. This will enable those who prefer to attend online to do so and those who prefer in-person activities to participate.

New opportunities to reach people online

One of the key learnings of this project has been the beneficial impacts online communities can have on people who do not take part in everyday activities in a 'physical' community centre. The VCC was eye-opening in understanding that a virtual community can provide a way for people to meet other people and form personal relationships. Aside from those who are physically restricted there are also 'invisible' hindrances that restrict people from participating in community activities including mental health issues such as anxiety and stress. One of the benefits of having the VCC was that it was to an extent anonymous for participants, and some reported that this made them feel more confident.

Figure 1: Participants who took part in February 2021

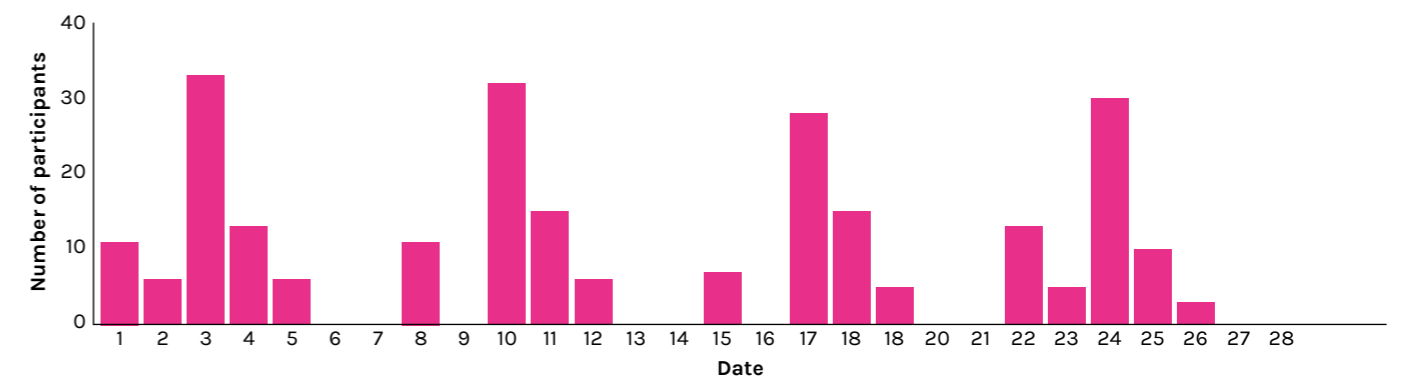
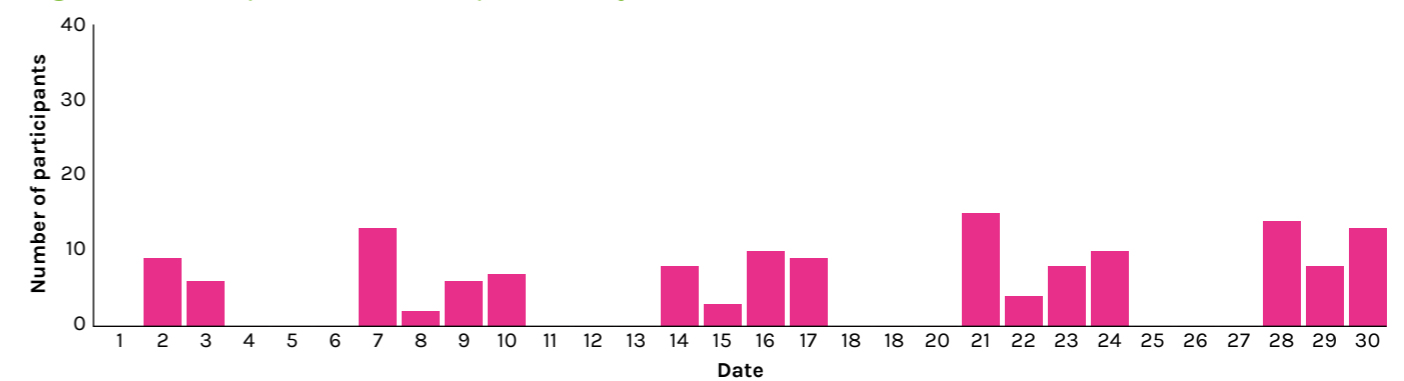


Figure 2: Participants who took part in July 2021



The digital divide

The very nature of the virtual community centre presented a barrier to those who do not have access to a computer, the internet, or had limited digital skills. Within Woodberry Down, we found in a sample baseline survey for the 'Woodberry Connect' Project which supports people to develop their digital skills that (N=10) 70% of residents indicated that they had little to no confidence in using digital devices and the internet. This was one of the key barriers to them using the computer or the internet. Whilst this was a small sample size, it is in line with wider research in this area.

Gender imbalance

The Virtual Community Centre highlighted a gender imbalance between male and female participants. As highlighted in the demographics of those who registered to attend the VCC, it can be seen that a higher percentage of female participants registered than male participants.

This was an issue that came the initial progress report for the VCC. Following this, the project team interviewed some members of the local football team. The purpose of this was to understand how best male residents can be engaged in the Virtual Community Centre. It was highlighted that they were aware of the VCC however none of the activities appealed to them. This provided a learning point if this project is to be implemented again, there would be a need of ensuring that mainstreaming is prioritised by putting in place gender-specific activities which target men and ensuring that any publicity of activities is gender-targeted.

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

London Community Fund and East End Community Fund.

Delivery Partners

N'dey Holistic Support, Cordwainers Grow, Elevate Arts, London Dreamtime and Sekhem Arts.



Conclusions

The Virtual community centre had a positive impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of residents who attended activities across Woodberry Down and Acton Gardens.

Our audience was wider than we initially assumed, and this was an unexpected positive of the programme. The people who visited the VCC reported that they learnt new skills, improved their physical health and it supported their mental wellbeing at a time of stress and anxiety.

We also found that the project cultivated a safe space where vulnerable residents who would not be able to attend in-person activities in our buildings were able to attend; this project was therefore reaching wider audiences

than our community centres had done previously. The virtual spaces were seen as safe spaces in a different way to physical spaces. These were new spaces where people felt less anxious, and more able to join in and socialise because of the different format.

This was not the same for all participants, but a key learning LDT will take from this project is that doing projects in a hybrid form will enable us to expand our reach to participants who may not be able to attend the physical community centres.

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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