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Arup is the creative force at the heart of many of the world’s most prominent projects in the built environment and across industry. Working in more than 140 countries, the firm’s designers, engineers, architects, planners, consultants and technical specialists work with our clients on innovative projects of the highest quality and impact.

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Pollard Thomas Edwards is an architecture practice specialising in the design of homes, neighbourhoods, public and mixed-use buildings throughout the United Kingdom.

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACE &amp; COMMUNITY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT INSPIRES SOCIALITY</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROACHES TO BUILDING COMMUNITY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENDNOTES</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Humans are social creatures, and we thrive when we feel connected to those around us. But more than half of all Londoners find the capital a lonely place to live\(^1\). Given that our cities and neighbourhoods are where many of our social ties are developed and formed, what influence does the built environment have?

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a spotlight on this question. From early 2020, the way we live, work and connect with each other has dramatically changed; for some this has led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, but others have never felt more connected to their neighbours. How have the homes we live in, the streets we live on, and the infrastructure that surrounds us, affected community life under lockdown?

People, Place and Community aims to investigate the role that both people and place play in creating community, and what Covid-19 has taught us about belonging in both new developments and existing neighbourhoods.

**WHAT THIS REPORT EXPLORES**

- How London’s built environment sector can help forge and maintain a sense of belonging in both new developments and within existing neighbourhoods.
- Popular approaches to building community, the benefits that each approach delivers during typical times and how well each of these have fared under lockdown.
- The impact that the pandemic has had on how we think about and build communities.
- Learnings for built environment professionals to consider going forward.
WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

As social animals, we have a tendency towards living in groups or communities. Communities are social units which share something in common. This might be a shared sense of place (such as a city, a town or a neighbourhood) or it might be a shared sense of space (such as a virtual or digital space). Communities can also come together around shared interests, beliefs or ideas – but common to all communities is the desire for social connection.

DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

coo-design: creating with stakeholders (business or customers) specifically within the design development process to ensure the results meet their needs and are usable.
	sense of community: identifying with the neighbourhood, feeling connected and supporting one another.

social capital: the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

social cohesion: being willing and able to work together.

social relations(hips): the connections that exist between people who have recurring interactions, and these interactions are experienced as having personal meaning.

sociality: the tendency to associate in or form social groups.

WHAT’S INFORMED THIS REPORT

1 podcast

1 webinar

5 (socially distanced) field trips

10 resident viewpoints

16 expert interviews
“Community means being inclusive: everyone living and working on the estate, participating, meeting and socialising. It helps against isolation and depression. And it gives us an opportunity to give back to society.”

Mary Pearce, Chairperson
Grahame Park Independent Living

Image credit: Notting Hill Genesis ©
WHY DOES COMMUNITY MATTER?

Community connections increase life expectancy\(^{(2)}\)

Loneliness is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day\(^{(3)}\)

The built environment is proven to impact upon community participation\(^{(4)}\)

Two thirds of us have checked if our neighbours need help in lockdown\(^{(7)}\)

78% of UK adults are doing more to help others during lockdown\(^{(7)}\)

Young people are 3x more likely to feel loneliness in lockdown\(^{(8)}\)

Image credit: Flat Icon ©
The benefits of community are clear: social connection can help you live a longer, happier life and, by contrast, loneliness and isolation have a detrimental impact on health and wellbeing. The impact that loneliness has on life expectancy is comparable to that of obesity or cigarette smoking.

The built environment plays a critical role in supporting community life; studies show that the physical fabric of our cities and neighbourhoods encourages community participation and makes people happier. In particular, cities which strike the right balance of community facilities, housing and green spaces show greater life satisfaction scores for all residents. This suggests that more equal access to a range of community facilities can help reduce the gap in life satisfaction between the most economically deprived and most affluent residents of a city.

**THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC**

Clearly community is important in ‘typical times’, but it is vital when things get tough. And the pandemic has brought this into sharp focus. Where communities were already strong, social life has flourished: neighbours have been checking in on each other more and have helped each other with food shopping or other chores. But for others, the pandemic has been an isolating experience and certain groups, such as young adults and communities with large numbers of residents on low incomes, have been particularly affected by loneliness.

Given the current pressure to increase housing delivery, as well as the anticipated economic knock-on effects of the pandemic and the uncertainty of Brexit, there is a risk the built environment community starts to see investing in community as a ‘nice to have’. However, the inequalities highlighted by Covid-19 offer a vital reminder: community is critical.
CHAPTER 2

HOW THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT INSPIRES SOCIAL CONNECTION

Our built environment impacts on how easily we form social ties, and how well communities can connect. Our research has identified three elements which influence the quality of our place-based connections.

PHYSICAL DESIGN

We spend up to 90% of our lives inside buildings\textsuperscript{10}. The way our homes, offices, schools and community spaces are designed informs how we connect with people inside and outside these places. The public realm which stitches our neighbourhoods together also plays an important role in creating social ties and good design inspires participation by creating opportunities for relaxation, play, exercise – all of which help to increase social interaction and support a sense of community.\textsuperscript{11}

NEIGHBOURHOOD ECOSYSTEMS

The interconnected network of services, organisations, businesses and individuals who are active in the community, either formally or informally.

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

From food shopping to GP appointments to neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, our communities are increasingly digital. Whilst 99% of households earning more than £40,000 per year have internet access, only 51% of UK households earning less than £10,000 do.\textsuperscript{12} Online access influences the degree to which we’re able to connect with the people and the places around us.
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMMUNITY: A FRAMEWORK

There are three building blocks of social connection within the built environment: physical design, neighbourhood ecosystems, and digital connectivity.

The framework below outlines some of the practical ways that each building block can promote social connection.

PHYSICAL DESIGN

- Mixed tenure and tenure-blind dwellings bring together different social or generational groups.

- Design that connects homes to the neighbourhood maximises opportunities for regular contact with the same people, for example kitchen windows that overlook the street, front gardens and communal areas.

- Safe, visible and intuitive pedestrian routes, such as child-friendly streets encourage people out of cars, and foster doorstep play and community interaction.

- Formal social spaces, such as gardens and parks, as well as informal places to linger, such as benches, help form and sustain social relationships.

- Flexible and dynamic use of community buildings, for example schools which allow the community to use their playgrounds at the weekends, encourages a wider range of people to come together in ways that suit them.

- Well-designed, inspiring spaces give a sense of identity to a particular community and help residents feel ownership of a space.

- Co-designing with communities produces buildings and spaces that meet their needs.

- Quality, day-to-day upkeep and management increases civic pride.

Image credit: Metropolitan Workshop © Prototype for Campbell Park North, Milton Keynes, A New Kind of Suburbia
NEIGHBOURHOOD ECOSYSTEMS

- A network of shops and services allows people to serve their needs close to home (for example, the 15-minute city concept).\textsuperscript{13}

- Activities which reflect the needs of the community boost social capital and promote positive social interactions between community members.

- Programming, such as festivals and events, which is shaped by the community brings together people from different social backgrounds.

- Volunteer opportunities promote community spirit and enhance social capital.

- Well resourced, bottom-up initiatives empower communities to work together, and this promotes social cohesion.

- Training emboldens motivated individuals who may become the next generation of community leaders.

- A good neighbourhood ecosystem supports people who wish to stay within their community and connected to their network as they go through different stages of life.

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

- Localised, place-based online groups connect residents with services, encourage civic participation, and keep people connected to one another and the wider community.

- Hyper-local support networks, such as mutual-aid groups, reduce the pressure on statutory services and create trust within communities.

- Access to wifi, hardware and training ensures connection and access to services is possible for all.

- Physical alternatives to accessing online content promote civic participation from the whole community.
CHAPTER 3

FIVE APPROACHES TO BUILDING COMMUNITY

The building blocks of community framework (outlined on page 12) can be applied to the built environment in a number of ways. This is brought to life through five case studies.

Each case study demonstrates the benefits that this approach can bring in ‘typical’ (in other words, pre-Covid) times, as well as what we have learnt from resident and practitioner experiences during the pandemic.

Each case study exemplifies a different ‘building block’, or element of the framework. One case study illustrates an approach to digital connectivity, another shows an approach to community ecosystems, and (because of how broad this element can be) three have been used to outline approaches to physical design.

In reality, the case studies we have featured do not fit so neatly into just one category of physical design or community ecosystems or digital connectivity. And the most successful communities typically use all three elements to forge and maintain a sense of community. However, to fully understand what we can learn from each approach, we have decided to focus on just one element of the framework per case study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Block</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Design</td>
<td>1. City Park West, Chelmsford, Essex</td>
<td>New neighbourhood design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Thamesmead, LB Bexley / RB Greenwich</td>
<td>Landscape-led regeneration of an existing neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Fitzpark, LB Camden</td>
<td>Temporary installation to an existing street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood Ecosystems</td>
<td>4. Grahame Park, LB Barnet</td>
<td>Social and economic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Connectivity</td>
<td>5. Acton Gardens, LB Ealing</td>
<td>Digital community hub</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
People, Place and Community: belonging in unprecedented times

Neighbourhood Design

Image credit: Pollard Thomas Edwards ©
“The scheme is about connections... connecting residential neighbourhoods with transport links and social infrastructure; such as the high-street, library, civic buildings and arts district”

Justin Laskin, Associate Partner, Pollard Thomas Edwards

Pollard Thomas Edwards

CITY PARK WEST, CHELMSFORD

Completed in 2019, City Park West is the first high-density housing scheme in Essex. Of the 645 dwellings here, 60% are for market rent, 20% are shared ownership, 10% are social housing and 10% are affordable extra-care homes (a). These homes sit alongside cafés, restaurants, landscaped public realm, sculpture, workplaces and community facilities.

Located next to Chelmsford railway station, it takes less than 30 minutes to reach central London. And this makes City Park West a key site for Essex; anyone arriving or departing via train or bus will pass through the site.

HOW ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN SUPPORTS CONNECTION IN TYPICAL TIMES

How our built environment is designed can have a great impact on both the type of community we experience and how sustainable the community is in the longer term. City Park West uses several key principles to promote connection:

• Heritage which creates a sense of pride in the community
  A sense of pride in a community has been linked to positive social behaviour and City Park West uses heritage to root the new community in its history; a ‘river’ of words runs through the site and is used to tell the history of the neighbourhood’s historical water source.

• Multi-generational planning and tenure blind dwellings
  Design which brings together people from different ages and social backgrounds increases social cohesion and multi-generational communities also benefit community life. A range of home types and tenures has attracted families, first time buyers, renters and older citizens to City Park West.

• Individual control over how and when to socialise
  Communities thrive when design achieves a balance of opportunities for social interaction, whilst giving individuals control over who, when and where they meet. Communal gardens provide opportunities to meet, whereas gallery access apartments ensure only a limited number of immediate neighbours pass the front door.

(a) extra-care housing (assisted living) is a type of ‘housing with care’ where residents retain independence but have access to support for tasks such as washing, dressing, medication.
(b) gallery access is any covered passage that is open at one side.
WHAT COVID-19 HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT NEIGHBOURHOOD DESIGN & COMMUNITY

Designed back in 2008, there was no way of knowing what 2020 would bring for residents of City Park West.

Nevertheless, several of the scheme’s design, policy and management features have helped support community connections during the pandemic.

• **Visual connection is as important as physical connection**
  Based upon the recommendations of the HAPPI report\(^{(a)}\), Pollard Thomas Edwards advocated for an extra-care facility, including 65 affordable extra-care homes, to be designed into the centre of the scheme.\(^{19}\)

  This deliberate placement, coupled with a glass-fronted lobby, has allowed residents to look out onto the street’s activities and feel connected even when they were unable to venture outside at the height of the pandemic. In the future, we must be mindful of designing in connection for our more vulnerable residents.

• **Active ground-floor frontage keeps places vibrant**
  Many ground-floor units are residential; this was a deliberate design decision, and a move away from an approach where all ground-floor units are retail based.

  In light of the pandemic, this has proved to be a wise decision and one that we can perhaps learn from: having lots of ground-floor homes helped to provide a sense of safety and ‘eyes on the street’,\(^{20}\) even during the height of lockdown.

• **We need policies which protect public realm provision**
  In accordance with 2008 Essex design standards, and a desire to ensure resident quality of life in high-density development, City Park West has a generous allocation of public space.

  During the first lockdown these green spaces became covered in picnicking families and cyclists made the most of the car-free streets. The pandemic reminds us how critical outside space is - and supports the case for future schemes to deliver generous, good-quality public realm.

\(^{(a)}\) In 2009 PTE coordinated Housing our Aged Population: Panel for Innovation. The report contains case studies and shows how schemes can integrate with the community.
LANDSCAPE-LED REGENERATION
“Landscape prioritises and strengthens communities”

p5, Living in the Landscape

Peabody

THAMESMEAD, LB BEXLEY & RB GREENWICH

Thamesmead is a 1960s estate which is home to 40,000 residents. Around 40% of the 760-hectare site is made up of outside space; ranging from parks, grazing marshes and nature reserves, to a network of five lakes and seven kilometres of canals. Per head, this is around 50% more than the London average.

Despite this, only 20% of Thamesmead residents currently visit these spaces once a week or more. But this is set to change: in November 2020 estate owner Peabody published a bold landscape-led framework that puts outside space at the heart of Thamesmead’s future.21

HOW LANDSCAPE SUPPORTS CONNECTION IN TYPICAL TIMES

Peabody’s long-term vision aims to transform Thamesmead by 2050 through reinvigorating existing outside spaces and introducing a 10-km new canal walk, 700m of new canals, three new parks and one new beach.

However, pre-pandemic, initial landscape-led changes were already shaping community connections:

• Connecting locals with Thamesmead’s unique landscape
  Thamesmead was built on the site of the former Royal Arsenal and the landscape is punctuated by Victorian-era ammunition storage facilities called ‘tumps’, which are now a haven for wildlife. After being closed off to the community for years, Tump 53 is a formal nature reserve and regularly hosts local school visits designed to connect the next generation with Thamesmead’s unique landscape. The ambition is that “children will grow up...spending time outside, enjoying more active and sociable lives.”22

• A distinct sense of place
  Distinctive fences which back onto a community green space help to create a sense of place. Importantly, the fences were co-designed by the community and architect Jan Kattein: residents were involved in the design, the colour scheme, and helped develop the idea of integrated community planters. This approach gave residents a sense of ownership and encourages the community to spend time in their shared public realm.
WHAT COVID-19 HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT LANDSCAPE & COMMUNITY

In typical times, spending time outside promotes positive social behaviours, is associated with a reduction in stress, and is estimated to save the NHS £952 million per year. During the pandemic, Thamesmead’s landscape has helped to enhance community wellbeing by providing a safe place to socialise, through bringing interest groups together, and by providing a change of scene.

“Green space has been a godsend for us”
Lianne, Thamesmead resident
“Covid-19 has super-charged what we knew already about green space and wellbeing”

Dr Phil Askew, Director of Landscape and Placemaking, Peabody

- **Landscape provides a safe space to socialise**
  As shared indoor space has become more difficult to navigate, outdoor space has become an important element of social life. Dr Phil Askew (Director Landscape and Placemaking, Peabody) noticed more people using Thamesmead’s outside spaces throughout lockdown.

  Safety has been an important driver to increased use. As one resident said: “Green space has been a godsend for us, my son is vulnerable but [outside] you can keep your distance and still see the neighbours... friendships are built.” The pandemic has clearly highlighted the importance of green space – but disadvantaged communities are less likely to have access to gardens, balconies, or green space within 300 metres of their homes. It’s imperative that the built environment community now works together to ensure everyone has access to high-quality green space.

- **Green spaces inspire community groups to come together**
  Spending time in nature can boost social and civic behaviours, such as generosity, helpfulness and cooperation. Spending more time in local green spaces during the first lockdown activated local residents to create a new group called ‘Tidy South Thamesmead’ who now regularly meet for socially distanced litter picks.

  Community initiatives, such as litter picking, bring people together and help to improve the public realm. However, enthusiasm for local initiatives may fluctuate when life goes back to ‘normal’ post-pandemic. Investing in structures which support bottom-up community initiatives (such as training) can help guard against this.

- **Landscape changes over time – and adds variety when travel is not an option**
  Over the summer, Peabody’s landscape team transformed an area which is typically grassland into a sunflower field. This provided a community focal point and much-needed change of scene. And it has been popular with the local bees too!

  The sunflower field shows that low cost is not low impact. It reminds us that human communities are just one group who profit from landscape; net gains in biodiversity are mutually beneficial for all.
TEMPORARY INSTALLATION
“You need spaces to sit where you don’t have to pay for a beer or a sandwich, without these spaces you lose the opportunity to connect”

Local resident

41% increase in wellbeing after the installation had been put in place

Arup evaluation report

FITZPARK, LB CAMDEN

Constructed from planters and benches and arranged in a former loading bay, Fitzpark is a 35m² parklet located in Fitzrovia in central London.

Parklets (sometimes also called pocket parks) are small, temporary seating areas or green spaces which are typically found alongside a pavement, or in a former parking space. With no need to move or adjust infrastructure or utilities, they are designed for quick installation. This makes them a relatively low-cost intervention; the design and construction of the Fitzpark parklet was £40,000, and maintenance is £10,000 a year.

As a public amenity, everyone is welcome to use the space – to eat a packed lunch, to meet friends and colleagues, or to simply take a five-minute rest.

HOW TEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS SUPPORT CONNECTION IN TYPICAL TIMES

Fitzpark was originally installed on Windmill Street in July 2017 for a period of six months. Windmill Street is in a dense urban area, with a large population of commuters who typically pass along the street as quickly as possible. But the introduction of the parklet had several notable effects on the community:

- **Increased time spent in the area**
  The parklet increased the amount of time visitors spent on Windmill Street; pre-installation only 2% of visitors spent more than 15 minutes in the area, but post-installation 22% of visitors spent longer than 15 minutes here.\(^{28}\)

- **Improved wellbeing**
  Those who used the parklet noticed a 41% increase in self-reported wellbeing after the installation had been put in place.\(^{29}\)

- **Boost to the local business community**
  The local business community – which is predominantly made up of small independent retailers, cafés and restaurants – also benefited from the parklet: 70% claimed it had had a positive impact on their business.\(^{30}\)
WHAT COVID-19 HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT TEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS & COMMUNITY

Pre-Covid, Fitzpark successfully fostered a sense of community by increasing interactions amongst the typically transient commuter community and, in January 2020, the parklet was relocated from its original, temporary home on Windmill Street to a more permanent location on nearby Fitzroy Street. However, two months later the pandemic struck and central London was emptied of the commuters who typically swell Camden’s population by 200,000 people each day – the people who had been the main users of the space.31

This dramatic change could have rendered Fitzpark redundant. But the parklet has thrived and, in recognition of the value that it brings to their communities, local businesses have begun caring for and watering the plants.

Three key features of Fitzpark have made it a community asset during the pandemic:

- **Streets play an important role in our social lives**
  More than ever, streets are playing an important role in our social lives. Lockdown has shown the Fitzrovia Partnership (a Business Improvement District) that there’s an appetite for alfresco social spaces and they are currently exploring the possibility of expanding the parklet scheme across Fitzrovia.
“Why did it take Covid for London to wake up to the alfresco move-ment? You can easily spend nine months of the year outside - but up until now there hasn’t been any out-side seating!”

Local resident

The approach taken in Fitzrovia was designed for a central London context, but residential communities can also benefit from parklet installations. For example, LB Hackney is London’s leading borough in terms of parklets, which shows how parklets can be adapted to suit different contexts. And, as we emerge from the pandemic, we’re beginning to see low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) pop up across London. Whilst these remain controversial, they do demonstrate the power of more playful, sociable streets to enhance a sense of community.

- **Flexible design and streamlined planning enables responsive solutions**

  The small scale and temporary nature of parklets offers a way to retrofit amenity spaces quickly and cost-effectively into the streetscape. This proved useful for local cafés when social distancing guidelines limited indoor seating, and it has also given local residents access to greenery in the centre of London.

  The modular design suggests the potential to reconfigure the parklet if social distancing guidelines and/or social norms change.

  To make the installation of parklets easier, London can learn a lot from San Francisco, the birthplace of pocket parks. In particular, San Francisco has an expedited planning process which empowers communities to create, install and care for their own temporary interventions.

- **Public spaces which appeal to different user groups**

  Pre-covid, office workers were the main group who used the parklet. However, as London emerged from the first lockdown, locals said the parklet made a positive contribution to community life for them too.

  As one local resident said: “People’s priorities have shifted; isolation made us appreciate connection more and we’re no longer rushing from A to B. This kind of place gives you the option to take five minutes to take your blinkers off.” We need to ensure that a variety of user groups are accommodated for in the public spaces we design.
SOCIAL & ECONOMIC CHANGE

Image credit: Notting Hill Genesis ©
“To me, community is everything. If you live in the same area you should be part and parcel of each other's lives”

Carol Johnson, Grahame Park resident

Grahame Park, in LB Barnet, is a housing estate built in the 1970s on the Hendon aerodrome site. The original estate was typified by brick terraced houses and low-rise flats, but in the last 50 years Grahame Park has undergone two regeneration programmes. The first took place in the late 1980s, the second started in 2007 – and is still ongoing today.

The current regeneration of Grahame Park is not just about new homes: on the estate 40% of children live in poverty, 75% of residents live in socially rented accommodation and Grahame Park is within the top 10% of most deprived areas nationally. Therefore, social and economic change is at the heart of Grahame Park’s regeneration strategy.

HOW SOCIAL & ECONOMIC CHANGE SUPPORTS CONNECTION IN TYPICAL TIMES

The social and economic change programme in Grahame Park is called ‘Neighbourhood Change,’ this is a long-term process which aims to increase resident experiences of equality and inclusion.

Working with the existing community ecosystem is central to this approach: residents, local grassroots groups and larger strategic bodies are all engaged in developing and delivering a community agenda, which outlines shared priorities and outcomes for Grahame Park.

There is still a way to go before reaching the ultimate ambition of a more resilient, engaged and prosperous community. However, an independent impact evaluation (2017-2018) found the approach is helping to enhance the community’s economic and social wellbeing. So far it has improved partnership working between local organisations and stakeholders, increased the number of activities on offer for residents and boosted community engagement with these activities.
WHAT COVID-19 HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT SOCIAL & ECONOMIC CHANGE

Covid-19 has undoubtedly put a strain on Grahame Park’s community. Elderly and vulnerable residents have felt fed up and disconnected, with many excluded from services which moved online.

High levels of poverty and deprivation were also exacerbated by lockdown and, looking to the future, unemployment is a concern for many. Pre-lockdown, only 26% of Grahame Park residents aged 16 to 74 were in full-time employment (compared to a national average of 39%). Given that the Universal Credit claimant count has more than doubled nationwide since March,\textsuperscript{35} it’s likely that joblessness is now an even greater threat to the community.

Despite these challenges, the Neighbourhood Change approach has helped to make the community more resilient than it might have been otherwise. Aspects of the approach which have supported the Grahame Park community during the pandemic include the following:

- **Long-term engagement fosters committed service providers**
  Through long-term engagement, Grahame Park has developed a network of committed community service providers who continued to deliver care and support during Covid-19. The pandemic also encouraged local organisations, such as The Loop and the Colindale Food Bank, to work together for the first time. The success of these collaborations has highlighted the need for a collaborative crisis strategy, which will enable support services to have a positive impact even in challenging circumstances.

- **Residents who feel proud of their community want to give something back**
  Being seen as an equal stakeholder in the regeneration of Grahame Park has increased resident pride in the community and this has laid the foundations for increased civic participation.\textsuperscript{36} During the pandemic this took on a variety of different forms: some residents volunteered through formal channels; others got involved in informal, bottom-up networks; one resident sang to his neighbours from his balcony! This demonstrates that long-term investment in, and engagement with, existing community ecosystems is key: communities come together when they feel listened to, supported and empowered.

“Neighbourhood Change laid the foundations for community-led wellbeing initiatives during the pandemic”
Sherine McFarlane, Head of Social and Economic Regeneration, Notting Hill Genesis
DIGITAL COMMUNITY HUBS
“The main aim was to connect with existing local groups and make sure they felt welcome and at home in the new space”

Emmanuel Wachukwu, Manager of Acton Gardens Community Centre

Countryside Properties and L&Q

ACTON GARDENS, LB EALING

Once completed in around 2028, Acton Gardens redevelopment will deliver 3,463 high-quality, tenure-blind homes, alongside state-of-the-art community facilities, public spaces and commercial units. At the heart of this scheme is a new community centre. Covid-19 has demonstrated the importance of a physical community centre, which is linked to a community-based digital network.

HOW COMMUNITY HUBS SUPPORT CONNECTION IN TYPICAL TIMES

The community centre opened in 2019 with the ambition of offering residents all the services they needed on their doorstep. The design and location of the new centre is important: it’s in the middle of the estate so all residents can easily access it, and the space has been designed with flexibility in mind – allowing residents to use it in lots of different ways. It’s also surrounded by open space which can be used for outdoor events.

There is a busy activity programme, which includes meals for the over 60s, exercise classes, half-term activities for kids and a winter fiesta that appealed to many different communities living on the estate. This strengthened existing groups, such as the United Anglo Caribbean Society, who ran the over-60s meals and exercise classes, but also provided a space for new groups, including a Knit and Natter club.

WHAT COVID-19 HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY & COMMUNITY

Community centres are an important element of social infrastructure. They promote social cohesion by bringing together different social or generational groups, increase social capital and promote interaction between community members.

They also have the potential to increase people’s knowledge or skills and widen social networks. But as physical meeting spaces, community centres have experienced huge challenges during the pandemic when we have been encouraged to avoid social mixing and keep two metres apart.
By comparison, digital community hubs have been vital during the pandemic, and Covid-19 has shown us that we can no longer think about community infrastructure as simply physical; we have to include digital in our community strategies.

- **Digital infrastructure is key to creating an inclusive community**
  
  To overcome the challenges associated with groups of people meeting in a physical space, many of the hub’s activities, for example dance classes and mental health support, quickly moved online during the first lockdown. However, a lack of internet access meant many of the most vulnerable in Acton Gardens were not able to use these vital services.

  Acton Gardens was allocated funding from Countryside and L&Q, and the community decided that some of this would be best spent distributing 25 free tablets, ensuring a more digitally inclusive community. As well as providing access to the community hub’s activities and services, these tablets have helped children access educational resources and made it easier for isolated residents to stay in touch with loved ones. Tablets are for residents to keep and were distributed through partners such as Action Youth Association.

  Digital infrastructure has been key to keeping Acton Gardens’ residents connected during the pandemic. Post-pandemic, the community hub plans to run a mixed programme of physical and online events, something that would not have been considered before Covid-19. As we look to the future, it’s important to consider the role digital connections might play in keeping physical places networked into communities, and how the built environment community can support inclusive digital access for all.

- **Digital networks thrive when they are rooted in well-established physical communities**

  In the wake of the first national lockdown, the Acton Gardens community banded together to establish community-led groups through WhatsApp, social media, and leaflet dropping – initially these groups were local residents but volunteers from the wider communities in Ealing gradually got involved too.

  “The response in Acton to the pandemic has been extraordinary and is testament to the strong community spirit of the area”

  Mike Woolliscroft, Chief Executive, Partnerships South, Countryside Properties
Having created a physical ‘sense of place’ for the community pre-pandemic, the community centre became the home of this bottom-up volunteer network. At the height of the crisis, these physical and digital networks facilitated the delivery of hot, healthy meals to at least 120 people twice a week.

Despite all the benefits that digital connectivity brings, tangible connections are important. This huge community response in Acton Gardens highlights the value of rooting digital networks in physical places, and ensuring physical hubs and digital hubs work together to reach the whole community.
CHAPTER 4

LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN

We don’t yet know if, post-Covid, London will return to ‘normal’. And we don’t know if we will need to redesign our cities to accommodate a radically different urban experience, perhaps one where social distancing is the norm or where the built environment is prepared for future pandemics.

But we do know that 60% of London’s workforce worked from home during the pandemic.38 We also know that, compared to other regions in the UK, Londoners were the least likely to have access to private gardens but the most likely to visit a public park or green space.39 We also know that Covid-19 has highlighted the inadequate, and unequal, access to high quality green spaces – and that disadvantaged communities have significantly less access to green space within 300 metres of their home.40

Many of these inequalities pre-date the pandemic. But Covid-19 has triggered a renewed focus, and an opportunity, for London’s built environment practitioners to address the imbalances and inequities that we already knew existed.

What follows is a mixture of expert and resident perspectives outlining what the pandemic can teach us about building community, and what we should keep in mind as we navigate whatever the ‘new normal’ will be. Our recommendations then respond to these learnings, with practical recommendations which bring together findings from both project events and case studies. Recommendations are aimed at local authorities, the Greater London Authority, developers, urban designers, architects, and central government.

As a way of organising these learnings and recommendations, we’ve categorised them according to the ‘building blocks of community’ framework identified in Chapter two of this report.
EIGHT LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

1. Too many Londoners live in poor quality homes – we must advocate for better quality spaces and more generous provision of space.

"Lockdown has proven how important outside space really is, especially in higher-density developments. And, as more of us continue to work from home, we also need to advocate for flexibility and improved space-standards in developments."

Justin Laskin, Associate Partner, Pollard Thomas Edwards

2. To improve both individual and community wellbeing we should provide opportunities for people to spend more time outdoors.

"Covid-19 has super-charged what we knew before in relation to health, wellbeing and community. And we have seen a real appetite for green space, whereas perhaps that was not so obvious before."

Dr Phil Askew, Director Landscape & Placemaking, Peabody

3. Long-term thinking is key: stewardship should be central to development strategies

"We need to increase emphasis on stewardship of places and we must do this earlier on in the process so that it is coherently planned into design. This will ensure that great places continue to connect and support communities over the decades to come."

Mike Woolliscroft, Chief Executive of Partnerships - South, Countryside

4. Where community ecosystems already exist we should recognise and support them rather than trying to reinvent the wheel

"As a landlord it was essential that we were working with the existing ecosystem of communities - rather than (as is often the case with big landlords) trying to invent our own. This was an important lesson during the pandemic."

Fiona Fletcher-Smith, Chief Executive, L&Q
5. Cross-sector working practices need attention and investment ahead of the next crisis
"Going forwards, it will be essential that each organisation has some sort of crisis team which is able to meet together and quickly agree how they will act. There needs to be consistency and we need to ensure our services continue to run, no matter what happens."

Harriett Boamah, Director, F.U.S.E. Youth Project

6. To build longer-term resilience we must co-produce neighbourhood strategies and designs
"Policies which enable and empower communities to work together in an independent state, capable of creating mutual aid are critical. And an essential element of this is co-production; this ensures there is wider ownership and buy in from the community."

Mekor Newman, Director, NewmanFrancis

7. Community is about diversity and we should make sure no one is excluded from what their neighbourhood has to offer
"Make things outside but make them more accessible for disabled children. It’s little things like being able to actually get involved – and not watch from the sidelines - which make the biggest difference."

Lianne, Thamesmead resident

8. The digital divide excludes and we need to address this as an equalities issue
"Lockdown revealed a huge community energy, and showed how powerful neighbourhood connections can be...we should use new technologies to help establish place-based networks so that residents, retailers, local authorities and developers can connect."

Bethan Harris, Director, Collectively / Loneliness Lab
RECOMMENDATIONS: PHYSICAL DESIGN

Humans are social animals, and how our built environment is designed can have a huge impact on both the type of community we experience. Communities thrive when neighbourhood design achieves the right balance of easy opportunities for social interaction – whilst allowing individuals to keep control over who, when and where they meet.

The pandemic has emphasised the need to get the basics right, because it’s impossible for communities to flourish if individuals are preoccupied making incredibly difficult personal choices, such as whether or not to use the kitchen table to teach their child, or set it up as a work station to generate an income.

Lesson 1. Too many Londoners live in poor quality homes – we must advocate for better quality spaces and more generous provision of space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation: Protect and enhance public realm provision</th>
<th>Who this is aimed at: Greater London Authority, Local authorities, Housing associations, Developers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pandemic has been an important reminder that outside space is good for community health, promotes positive social behaviours, and when designed well, offers a safe space to socialise. However, disadvantaged communities are less likely to have access to gardens, balconies, or quality green space within 300 metres of their homes.</td>
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To ensure resident quality of life and community wellbeing, future schemes should deliver generous amounts of quality public realm. At a minimum, this should adhere to guidance from the national design guide (2019) and the planning white paper (October 2020) – but as an industry we should be advocating for the maximum possible outside space in new and existing schemes.
### Champion good design via a local design taskforce

Good design creates happier, more sociable communities and influences how sustainable the community is in the longer term. A local design taskforce, that defines clear aspirations for the community, will provide a benchmark for both existing and new neighbourhood strategies. This taskforce should include the local authority and local residents, but will also benefit from the input of local businesses, voluntary organisations, and the developer. It is important that this taskforce is place-based to ensure aspirations are appropriate for the local community.

| Local authorities |

### Re-evaluate space standards

As a result of the pandemic, Londoners have been more likely to work from home than workers in other areas of the UK, and it’s predicted that there will be a permanent shift to more remote working post-pandemic. For many households, this puts additional pressure on the home environment.

Space standards should be re-considered due to fundamental shifts in working patterns.

| Greater London Authority |

### Promote flexible spaces and shared assets

The pandemic has put additional pressure on the existing need for space for work and leisure in London. We must think creatively about how we use spaces, to ensure flexible use and 24-hour occupancy.

Incentivising and actively promoting pilot projects which include flexible units and shared assets will support community cohesion and civic behaviours. For example, Tidemill Academy is a school in Deptford which shares assets – including a rooftop sports pitch, a flexible suite of assembly spaces, and a dining hall and kitchen – with the community.

| Greater London Authority |

### Commit to robust monitoring and evaluation as an integral part of the commitment to making better communities

Community is critical, but in the wake of Covid-19 financial pressures on the built environment sector are predicted to increase. Nevertheless, it’s essential that we continue to design and build neighbourhoods which promote community.

Future of London’s 2017 report ‘Making the case for Place’ identifies five guiding principles for placemaking. In addition, robust post-occupancy evaluations (which consider a range of economic, social and wellbeing benefits) will make the case for community being a priority in new and existing development design.

| Local authorities |
| Housing associations |
| Developers |
| Designers |
Lesson 2. To improve both individual and community wellbeing we should provide opportunities for people to spend more time outdoors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Re-frame streets as community assets</th>
<th>Greater London Authority Local authorities</th>
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<tr>
<td>The pandemic has shown us that streets can play an important role in our social lives. Combined with concerns about air pollution from vehicles, they offer potential as community assets which could improve neighbourhood life. Build on the existing Greater London Authority active travel funding (£250m allocated in May 2020), the Streetspace for London guide, and the Making London Child Friendly initiative. It is important to actively promote and support innovative, creative and social uses of London’s streets, for example, parklets.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Streamline the planning process for temporary street interventions</th>
<th>Greater London Authority Local authorities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The small scale and temporary nature of parklets offer a way to retrofit infrastructure into the streetscape, without disrupting underground utilities. This is especially useful when indoor seating is limited due to social distancing guidelines. To make the installation of parklets (and other innovative, temporary interventions) easier an expedited planning process, which empowers communities to create and care for their own temporary interventions, will be beneficial. Lessons can be learnt from San Francisco’s approach to parklets and, closer to home, LB Hackney.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promote incremental delivery of interconnected, smaller scale, public realm works to make the most of limited funding</th>
<th>Local authorities Housing associations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As London recovers from Covid-19, funding will be a critical issue. However, many of the public realm works which have been successful during the pandemic (such as parklets and sunflower fields) have been relatively small-scale interventions. But small scale does not mean small impact. A smaller-scale approach, which creates a patchwork of spaces implemented over time, can reduce initial capital expenditure.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Expand the definition of ‘community’</th>
<th>Local authorities Housing associations Developers Designers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human communities are just one group who benefit from green and blue spaces – communities of plants, animals and insects also share these spaces. Actively promoting biodiversity will benefit the environment, and enhance social life for humans too: gardening clubs and litter-picking groups all become possible when the public realm supports a net gain in biodiversity.</td>
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</table>
## Lesson 3. Long-term thinking is key: stewardship should be central to development

| Consider stewardship earlier on in development strategies | Housing associations
| Developers |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| It’s not just the physical features of a place which promote community, but also how well managed these spaces are in the longer term. |
| Scrutinising stewardship strategies earlier in the development process will ensure management approaches are coherently planned into neighbourhood strategies. This will ensure the great places we create remain that way over the decades to come. |

| Invest in community training and capacity building to ensure legacy | Local authorities
| Housing associations |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| During the first lockdown, London’s communities benefited from a huge volunteer effort. However, enthusiasm for local initiatives can fluctuate when circumstances change and may wane as life goes back to ‘normal’ post-pandemic. |
| Investing in structures which support bottom-up community initiatives (such as training and capacity building) can help guard against this and will ensure community resilience in the longer term. |

| Provide opportunities for the next generation of community custodians to connect | Local authorities
| Housing associations
| Community organisations / volunteers |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| To ensure longer term stewardship, it is important to consider the next generation of community custodians. Quality community spaces which appeal to young people generate social capital and create opportunities for connection, engagement and leadership to develop. |
| It is important to invest in age-appropriate physical and digital spaces, as well as programming, to foster our next generation of community leaders. |
**RECOMMENDATIONS: NEIGHBOURHOOD ECOSYSTEMS**

Every social group will already have an inter-connected network of services, organisations, businesses and individuals who are active in the community, either formally or informally.

Some communities will have stronger, more robust ecosystems; others will have weaker, more fragile ecosystems. Rather than imposing new approaches and ideas, it is important to identify, foster and develop what exists and help these to thrive.

**Lesson 4. Where community ecosystems already exist we should recognise and support them rather than trying to reinvent the wheel.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation:</th>
<th>Who this is aimed at</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitate existing community initiatives and motivated individuals</strong></td>
<td>Local authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>The pandemic has shown us that most neighbourhoods are home to existing community ecosystems and motivated individuals that have been catalysts behind many of the mutual-aid groups we have seen grow across London. It is important to facilitate these existing groups and individuals (rather than impose new ways of working) through funding and resources.</td>
<td>Developers, Housing associations</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Allow communities to choose how funds are spent</strong></td>
<td>Local authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some communities benefited from additional funds during the pandemic, and where residents were able to choose how these donations were allocated (for example, in Acton Gardens) we’ve seen positive results.</td>
<td>Developers, Housing associations Community organisations / volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities should be empowered to allocate section 106, effective social value funds, and charitable donations as they see fit. This will ensure that money is spent in a way which reflects the needs of the community and will promote community pride and cohesion.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social landlords must help residents access training and jobs</strong></td>
<td>Local authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For communities to remain socially and economically resilient, employment opportunities are critical.</td>
<td>Housing associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlords should consider training and employment within their community strategies (for example, the Neighbourhood Change approach adopted in Grahame Park). Flexible opportunities which fit around caring commitments and health issues are especially important.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 5. Cross-sector working practices need attention and investment ahead of the next crisis

| Social landlords have a responsibility to link residents to local community services and voluntary activity | Local authorities  
Housing associations  
Private landlords  
Community organisations / volunteers |
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the first lockdown, many vulnerable residents were isolated and unable to access local community services and voluntary activities. Landlords have a social responsibility to understand the cross-sector network of services and community organisations in their neighbourhood and identify the most appropriate means of connecting residents to them. This connection can be made digitally (assuming access), or through other forms of communication (telephone calls, volunteer networks and noticeboards).</td>
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| Cross-sector crisis teams are critical | Local authorities  
Housing associations  
Developers  
Community organisations / volunteers |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The scale of the pandemic has encouraged many local charities, voluntary groups, local authorities, housing associations, local businesses and others to work together for the first time. To ensure support services can continue to run even in challenging circumstances, local authorities, housing associations and developers have a responsibility to work with and support local grassroots organisations and strategic bodies. Identifying cross-sector crisis teams ahead of time will help to develop and deliver appropriate response strategies.</td>
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</table>

| Share outcomes of cross-disciplinary working to demonstrate the benefits of working together with communities | Local authorities  
Housing associations  
Community organisations / volunteers |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-sector working is widely understood to be positive, however, tangible examples are lacking.(^{51}) Opportunities to share best-practice examples and outcomes (for example, through organisations like FoL) will make it more commonplace for sectors, organisations and communities to work together.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 6: To build longer-term resilience we must co-produce neighbourhood strategies and designs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invite communities to co-design their homes and neighbourhood strategies</th>
<th>Local authorities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-production is a process based upon an equal relationship between professionals and communities. The principles of co-production should be applied to new and existing developments, including the design of new homes, community buildings, outdoor spaces, local policies and neighbourhood plans. Future of London’s 2019 report ‘Foundations for Community-Led Housing’ offers additional insight into co-production approaches. Neighbourhood plans are one example of how communities are taking a lead in planning the future of their local area. As the ‘new normal’ evolves, it is important to not only involve current communities, but also develop innovative methods for engaging future residents and typically under represented groups, such as young people. Built environment professionals must work with community organisations directly to understand how to remove barriers to engagement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage internal stakeholders early</td>
<td>Developers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-production requires the collaboration of multiple teams within authorities, housing associations and commercial organisations. Creating buy-in across teams – including legal, asset management, resident engagement, housing and regeneration and elected members – will smooth the process.</td>
<td>Housing associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community organisations / volunteers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 7. Community is about diversity and we should make sure no one is excluded from what their neighbourhood has to offer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity of tenure</th>
<th>Local authorities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pandemic has highlighted the previously known benefits of mixed-tenure and multi-generational living, and there is some evidence to suggest that there is a fresh desire to live in these types of communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local plans must consider the balance of ownership, shared equity, social rent, affordable, sheltered and extra-care housing to ensure it reflects both best practice and local community preference.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity in the public realm</th>
<th>Greater London Authority Local authorities Designers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pandemic has placed a renewed focus on the importance of green space. In addition to the plentiful provision of high-quality public space (see recommendation 1), it’s important the whole community feels welcome in these spaces.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public realm should be designed and managed with diversity in mind: providing a range of different spaces will ensure there is something for everyone. Initiatives, such as the Greater London Authority’s Expanding London's Public Realm Design Guide are valuable.</td>
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</table>
People, Place and Community: belonging in unprecedented times

Digital communities are an important complement to communities that are geographically close, and during the pandemic platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have mobilised huge numbers of community volunteers across London. Digital connectivity has also provided access to vital services, such as GPs and mental health support groups, as well as community-based interest groups and exercise classes.

However, access to the online world is not equal and digital exclusion is a critical issue for many.\textsuperscript{56} The built environment sector has an important role to play in overcoming the digital divide.

**Lesson 8: The digital divide excludes and we need to address this as an equalities issue**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Who this is aimed at</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrate digital community strategies with physical design strategies</strong>&lt;br&gt;The pandemic has highlighted the importance of community centres as both a physical space where residents can meet, but also as a place-based anchor for a digital community.&lt;br&gt;Looking to the future, we must not only design physical connectivity to new and existing neighbourhoods, but also consider the role digital connections play in connecting communities. Digital community strategies must be integrated with physical design strategies.</td>
<td>Local authorities&lt;br&gt;Housing associations&lt;br&gt;Developers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve access by investing in both hardware and training</strong>&lt;br&gt;As community services and support transferred online during the pandemic, many communities became divided along the lines of those who had access to digital connectivity, and those who did not.&lt;br&gt;To create a digitally inclusive community it is important to invest in hardware, such as access to computers/tablets with free wifi connection. It is also critical to consider training, with a particular focus on specific groups. For example, people over the age of 55 make up 94% of those who have never been online within the UK and so may require specific training\textsuperscript{57}</td>
<td>Local authorities&lt;br&gt;Housing associations&lt;br&gt;Developers</td>
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</table>
Access and trust are crucial if big data is to provide meaningful feedback

A huge benefit of digital connectivity is the big data that it can provide. This data can enhance our understanding of community experience and need. However, to be truly representative, the whole community must have access to the data and be able to influence what information is collected and how.

Work must also be done to build relationships between local authorities, communities and technology platforms, like Facebook, that collect and use this data. Building trust is essential and can only be achieved through transparency and a clear demonstration of how the data will be used to benefit the community.

Consider market co-ordination to reduce costs

Digital infrastructure is a pan-London challenge, and as new smart technologies emerge it is important that all the capital’s communities benefit from smart connectivity.

In line with the Mayor of London’s digital masterplan and its ambition of city-wide collaboration, market co-ordination will help to overcome borough boundaries and drive down price due to increased demand. \(^58\) Local authorities should work together, potentially with developers and housing associations, to procure and deliver the necessary infrastructure to new and existing neighbourhoods.
CONCLUSIONS

People, Place and Community set out to understand how the built environment sector can support vital community networks.

At the time of publishing (February 2021) the charity Age UK estimates that there are approximately 1.4 million older people who are chronically lonely\(^{59}\), the Government has just announced a £7.5 million fund to tackle loneliness\(^{60}\), the housing sector is reflecting on the social housing white paper which aims to make a home "more than just four walls and a roof"\(^{61}\) - and the UK is in the midst of its third Covid-19 lockdown since March 2020.

Built environment practitioners play a key role in helping communities feel connected. The expert interviews, resident viewpoints, and case studies which inform this report illustrate three principal ways that the sector can boost neighbourliness:

1. **Good quality design**: We spend up to 90% of our lives in and around buildings and communities thrive when neighbourhood design inspires participation by creating opportunities for relaxation, play, and exercise. Quality design plays a critical role in our experience of connection, and the sector must strive to achieve this for all members of the community.

2. **Support for existing community ecosystems**: Every social group will already have an inter-connected network of services, organisations, businesses and individuals who are active in the community, either formally or informally. Rather than imposing new approaches and ideas, it is important to identify and foster what exists and help these to thrive.

3. **Inclusive digital connectivity**: From food shopping to GP appointments and neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, digital communities are an important complement to physical communities. However, access to the online world is not equal - and digital exclusion is a critical issue for many communities. The built environment sector has an important role to play in overcoming the digital divide.
In the context of Covid-19 we’ve been reminded just how important these three factors are: the pandemic has been (and will continue to be) devastating for many. But this research has shown that these features can help communities fare better than they might have otherwise.

Whilst there is a renewed urgency to build positive, equitable communities for all Londoners, built environment professionals will be faced with new barriers as we emerge from the pandemic. These include a likely economic downturn and the potential for further austerity measures. As an industry we must not let these challenges detract from building critical social infrastructure which enables people and places to thrive.
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuk/april2020
https://www.futureoflondon.org.uk/knowledge/placemaking/
https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/improvements-and-projects/streetspace-for-london
https://hackney.gov.uk/parklet-guidance
Mike Wooliscroft, in webinar 11 dec
https://www.economist.com/international/2020/12/05/the-pandemic-may-be-encouraging-people-to-live-in-larger-groups
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https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/
https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/07/03/covid-19-has-highlighted-the-inadequate-and-unequal-access-to-high-quality-green-spaces/
Future of London helps build better cities through knowledge, networks and leadership – across disciplines, organisations and sectors. We are the capital’s independent network for regeneration, housing, infrastructure and economic development practitioners, with 5,000+ professionals using FoL as a hub for sector intelligence, connection and professional development, and a mandate to prepare the next wave of cross-sector city leaders.