

RESILIENCE

CONNECTION

VOLUNTEERING

HOME

PRIDE

INSPIRATION

COMMUNITY

IDENTITY

TRUST

# NO GOING BACK

GORTON AND LEVENSHULME

KINDNESS



INEQUALITY

DISCRIMINATION

ART

STRENGTH

Voices from Manchester's voluntary, community and social enterprise sector on the response to Covid-19 and their thoughts for the future



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# Contributors



## Claire Evans, 4CT

4CT Ltd supports people, neighbourhoods and communities through the development of services, partnerships and community facilities to improve opportunities and quality of life for residents.



## Ian McKay, Gorton Visual Arts

Gorton Visual Arts has been creating artwork and actively promoting social cohesion and inclusion in and around Gorton and Manchester since 2006.



## Adeyinka Adewumi, Beautiful Mind

Beautiful Mind charity is dedicated to the development of the human body, mind, soul, and spirit. We say no to stigmatisation, discrimination, and judgemental attitudes.



## Rich Browning, Healthy Me Healthy Communities

Healthy Me Healthy Communities is a not-for-profit social enterprise, founded in 2012, making a positive difference to people's health, lives and local communities.



## Shamime Jan, Bollyfit Active CIC

Bollyfit Active CIC aims to empower women of all cultures, religions and races, creating a community of independent women united by fitness, health and wellbeing.



## Adam Farricker, HideOut Youth Zone

HideOut Youth Zone is a new youth work charity based in Central East Manchester, providing children and young people aged 8-19 (up to 25 for those with additional needs) with somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to.



## Olwyn Taylor, Debdale Bowling Club

Debdale Bowling and Social Club offers bowling for all during the summer as well as social activities all year round. We take great pride in providing and supporting a community facility for the benefit of local people.



## Roxanna Locke, Levenshulme Inspire

Levenshulme Inspire is a community centre which puts on events, classes and activities which benefit the local community with the Inspire Café at its heart.



## Joe Meredith and Gosha Adamowska, Europaia

Founded in 2008, Europaia provides support to EU nationals living and working in Greater Manchester including benefits advice, legal surgery, EU Settlement Scheme support and an Emergency Fund.



## Raymond Ola, Levenshulme Good Neighbours

Levenshulme Good Neighbours CIO is a befriending charity supporting isolated older people with low mood and limited mobility in our community since 2012.



## Adeel Mahmood, Myriad Foundation

Myriad Foundation is an Islamic, charitable organisation. Together, we work for the greater good of humanity by sharing the message of Islam and through sincere and dedicated efforts to make a valuable contribution to society.



## Marion Quinn, Peter Quinn Friendship Group

The Peter Quinn Friendship Group supports anyone affected by dementia or cognitive changes. We always have a fun day and have lots of support waiting to help you and your family.



## Kate Percival, Rainbow Haven

Based in East Manchester, Rainbow Haven offers a place of welcome, support, and opportunity to refugees and displaced people.



## Sian Berry, The Circus House

Everyone is welcome at The Circus House. The Circus House is a community interest company set up to provide affordable and accessible circus based arts to everyone in Manchester.



## Gemma Bowden, The Owl and The Coconut

At The Owl and The Coconut, we share classes and courses to help people to reduce symptoms of stress and take time for self-care.



## Pipeeh Miyalu, Warm Hut UK

Warm Hut works with French-speaking asylum seekers and refugees living in Greater Manchester aiming to alleviate depression including emotional wellbeing and supporting people with concerns around unemployment, homelessness, housing, discrimination and social and economic deprivation.

# Introduction

**Our first No Going Back<sup>1</sup> report contained 22 articles from leaders of charities, community groups, voluntary organisations and social enterprises from across Manchester who reflected on their experiences during the Covid-19 crisis. They shared their learning, their insights and their hopes for the post-Covid future. Thank you to everyone who read, shared, commented and reflected on it.**

The trouble with a sequel, as Hollywood shows repeatedly, is there is a temptation to do the same again but bigger. We decided to go smaller and, in particular, to find ways to capture some of the local voices which we had not managed to reflect in the first report.

This next collection of stories focuses on a particular part of the city: Gorton and Levenshulme. The reason for choosing this is that it is one of the 'neighbourhood' areas defined for the purposes of integrating statutory health and care services. Public services are increasingly organised on this kind of footprint so we wanted to explore the experience and views of voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) organisations working at a neighbourhood level during the crisis. VCSE organisations have made a vital contribution all over Manchester in supporting people during the Covid-19 crisis, sometimes working in close collaboration with public agencies, though not always.

We chose the Gorton and Levenshulme neighbourhood, though it could have been any one of the other 11 (soon to be 12) neighbourhoods. In every one of them, there is an ecosystem of VCSE organisations working collectively to support people in their communities. We wanted to share their insight into the richness and diversity of VCSE sector organisations at a local, community level.

Gorton and Levenshulme wards are close to and south east of the city centre. Compared to other areas of Manchester it has a thriving and growing VCSE sector, however, still by no means enough. The population, in 2019, was 59,247 (likely to have grown since then); of whom 51% are White/White British, 29.2% Asian/Asian British and 15.2% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. In common with many other areas of Manchester, the population has much worse health outcomes than the average in England.<sup>2</sup>

16 organisations contributed to the report including two community associations, a bowling club, an organisation that teaches circus skills (yes...and you may be surprised why that matters), a youth service, and an organisation that runs classes to reduce stress. In these stories, you can read about work with young people, South Asian women, refugees, migrants, people with dementia and older neighbours. The insight they share covers topics from how to make a new home to how to address health inequalities, how to set up a rapid volunteering scheme, how to organise food banks and why we shouldn't need them. Some organisations chose to be interviewed rather than write an article so we asked them four questions about their experience during the pandemic:

- **What is the thing you are most proud of?**
- **What did you find most difficult?**
- **What surprised you most?**
- **What is your hope for the future?**

A selection of their answers are included in this report alongside the artwork created by local residents from Gorton Visual Arts during lockdown.

Each of our contributors has made the time to share their experience and the hopes, dreams and passions that drive their organisation. We are grateful to them for their contributions and in awe of their work.

## **Editorial Team**

**Danielle Conway, Nigel Rose, Anna Tate, Helen Walker, Stuart Vaughan and Victoria Jones**

**Macc**

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<sup>1</sup><https://manchestercommunitycentral.org/no-going-back-report>

<sup>2</sup>[https://secure.manchester.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/27321/health\\_and\\_care\\_profile.pdf](https://secure.manchester.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/27321/health_and_care_profile.pdf)



# Foreword

## The Creators of resilient communities

Nigel Rose, Strategic Lead (Commissioning) and Mike Wild, Chief Executive, Macc

**Macc works to increase and develop the support available to the city's 3300+ voluntary organisations, community groups, charities and social enterprises, through capacity building for local groups, support for volunteering and policy support, insight and influence.**

This report focuses on the 'neighbourhood' of Gorton and Levenshulme, one of 12 neighbourhoods (soon to be 13) in Manchester, as defined by statutory health and social care services.

The word 'neighbourhood' suggests a sense of community, some level of shared identity through being close together but these 'neighbourhoods' are planning terms based on a population of 30,000-50,000. No-one who lives in the area would recognise or define their neighbourhood in this way. That probably says something about the strange relationship between statutory services and the communities that they serve. This article is about a different vision of that relationship, one illustrated by all the stories in this report and which is key to long-term change in the health and wellbeing of people living in Manchester.

There is a health and social care crisis in Manchester, one that has been building over the last 20 years and worsened by many years of austerity. Compared to the rest of England, people in Manchester get ill earlier and for longer and have greater levels of a wide range of social ills. Everyone knows this and, obviously, it cannot be solved solely by more and more statutory services, as by the time they intervene it can be too late. They are putting out the fire rather than trying to prevent it. Nor can it be solved by focussing on the most vulnerable or the most ill top 2% or 5% and trying to 'fix' them.



**It is time to take a truly radical approach, one based in a practical and realistic idea of community, the kind of approach illustrated in every article in this publication**

This has been tried again and again by statutory services, always with the promise that it will reduce demand and save money, neither of which materialises.

Many in the statutory health and social care sector recognise the problem and almost every strategy now talks about the need for radical change, the vital contribution that the VCSE sector makes and the need for 'resilient communities'. However, when it comes to practice and money there is little change, the policy remains the same as it always was. Where there is more money, it is spent on meeting urgent demand, spent on more statutory health and social care services, and on trying to 'fix' even more people. Where there is work on prevention, it is often driven by nationally defined approaches which are individualised and negative: we are too fat, too lazy, don't eat the right food, don't look after our children properly, or don't follow the coronavirus rules.

It is time to take a truly radical approach, one based in a practical and realistic idea of community, the kind of approach illustrated in every article in this publication. Below are some key elements of this radical approach.



**Local VCSE organisations are part of their local community – they are the community organising itself to take action**

## **We're not here to help statutory services**

Statutory services are interlopers. Generally, the people who provide services in communities don't live locally, don't share the life experiences of their patients or clients and don't have an understanding of the community beyond their professional lens. The statistics that statutory services use can distort the image of communities by being focused on what is wrong with people, failing to record or recognise the positives. Even when staff do live locally, their local knowledge is not seen as an essential asset: they are not recruited on the basis of their local understanding, they are not valued for their knowledge and insight.

Local VCSE organisations are part of their local community – they are the community organising itself to take action - and are not there to help deliver statutory services' programmes and outcomes. They are the organisations that help people to help each other, who encourage people to voice their opinions, who create new organisations when they are needed, who create and maintain communities. To view the VCSE sector as just another service provider (a bit like statutory organisations only cheaper and less professional, a bit like businesses only not driven by profit) is to miss the point. Local VCSE organisations are the community and therefore are the path to resilient communities.



**Communities are full of passion and disagreement. Communities are complicated and diverse. Well-working communities embrace the complexity**

## **Conflict is not always a bad thing**

Working in the VCSE sector, the constant expectation from statutory services is that we will all get along and agree: we are always challenged to speak with one voice. This belies the huge levels of conflict within statutory services

over who and where the money goes and what the right services are, even within individual statutory institutions. This is seen repeatedly when the VCSE sector is expected to have a single person to represent all organisations who can be sent to a meeting with 10 statutory sector representatives. But it is the VCSE sector which is, it is said, just too complicated to work with.

Misunderstandings of asset-based or strength-based community approaches have exacerbated the problem. 'Shouldn't we all just get along, share our assets and be nice to one another?' When we don't get along, when we don't agree, we are being 'difficult'. Communities are full of passion and disagreement. Communities are complicated and diverse. Well-working communities embrace the complexity and have a wide range of mechanisms for debate, compromise and agreement, and for diverse voices and insights to be heard. This is where the good stuff happens, where people come together to understand what is happening, and think creatively about how to address the underlying issues that create loneliness, poverty, and ill health. This is where long-lasting change may come from. Statutory services, driven by programme management methodologies and risk aversion, too often try and avoid the mess. There needs to be increased bravery here: they need to participate, to get stuck in, to add what they can, to use their capacity to lift up community-led approaches and be part of long-term solutions.



**Imagine for a moment, if you started with £10 million per neighbourhood**

## **£120 million per annum**

There are 12 neighbourhoods. Imagine for a moment, if you started with £10 million per neighbourhood. Perhaps more for some neighbourhoods and less for others depending on factors such as population size – but overall, imagine you set aside £120 million. It is a lot of money, but still a small percentage of the total amount spent on health and statutory sector services in Manchester, much of which is spent on nationally driven targets rather than locally decided. Now imagine what a difference £10 million would make in a neighbourhood, the level of transformation possible, the long-term impact.

Every neighbourhood could have as many community centres as it needs. These community centres would be a focus for local community action, for local democracy, for bringing diverse communities together, for gathering knowledge about local needs and desires, for working alongside local businesses, for local events, as well as



**Youth crime would fall; older people would be healthier leading to fewer A&E admissions; fewer admissions to care as parents feel more supported; less vandalism; more physical activity; less loneliness**

offering rooms and support to new groups springing up to meet new needs or for local campaigns about things that matter in the area. Every neighbourhood could have the level of community and voluntary action it needs to ensure that: every older person who needs it can meet others and has an opportunity to contribute; that there are sufficient youth services; that people who are caring for others aren't left to cope on their own; that every care home and nursing home is connected to its local community; that there are local sport, art, and leisure opportunities; and that there are parent and toddlers groups for every parent that wants one.

And now imagine the level of impact this approach could make over time, if the energy and will was put in to make it work.

To consider just some of the issues that statutory services are particularly concerned about: youth crime would fall; older people would be healthier leading to fewer A&E admissions; fewer admissions to care as parents feel more supported; less vandalism; more physical activity; less loneliness.

Stronger organisations and networks, sophisticated understanding of their communities and stronger local confidence means that communities are better at identifying priorities for change and finding ways to address the local factors that lead to poor health and increased social problems: poor housing, loneliness, lack of access to welfare benefits, lack of access to good food and integration of new communities. A large and vibrant VCSE sector leads to more local business and more local jobs and all the positive impacts of being in work. It also means that statutory health and social care services have networks that they can tap into to help them to become part of those communities.

## Conclusion

What we are suggesting in this article is not some tidy, idealistic, utopian vision; it is a realistic view of what resilient communities could look like and the impact that they could have. Getting to where we need to be from where we are will not be easy or quick or without failure. Spending more money on statutory health and social care services will, of course, improve the lives of people receiving services, as will the integration of health and social care services but it will not change the long-term pattern of increasing poor health, unhappiness and loneliness. It is time to stop rehashing the same old solutions in the hope that perhaps they will work this time and be more radical. We need to transform the way that statutory services operate in neighbourhoods so they are able to work alongside local VCSE organisations, faith organisations and businesses and make the best use of the talents, skills and assets of all.

# I knew that this place could make me something



The impact of universal, open access youth services

Adam Farricker, CEO, HideOut Youth Zone



HideOut Youth Zone is a new youth work charity based in Central East Manchester, providing children and young people aged 8-19 (up to 25 for those with additional needs) with somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to.



23 March 2020, the day I had been waiting nearly four years for! Little did I know when I woke up that morning what was on the cards for us all.

It was the official practical completion date for HideOut's new £6.6m Youth Zone, on Hyde Road in the heart of Gorton, for young people aged 8-19 (up to 25 for those with additional needs). I skipped out of the house that morning, beaming from ear to ear as I knew, by lunch time, I would receive the keys to this amazing new youth centre, that will have a hugely positive impact on the lives of local young people and the wider community, in the place, almost 20 years ago, where I grew up and started my youth work career.



**What we don't celebrate enough are young people's strengths; they are intelligent, passionate, articulate, resilient and have huge potential**

By 2pm I had received the keys from the contractors. There were still a few defects and snags to rectify but nothing you wouldn't expect with any new build. I spent the next few hours checking out every room, imagining what it would be like in just a few weeks - full of young people, staff and volunteers enjoying themselves and developing personal and social skills. Fast forward to 8pm that night, I arrived home and turned on the evening news to hear the Prime Minister's national lockdown announcement and so began a difficult few months.

2020 was a challenging year for everyone, but let's be honest, it comes as no surprise to any of us that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Young people who would have not been identified previously as vulnerable or in need of additional support, are now reaching the threshold for support. Issues relating to employment, childcare, education and mental health have created additional pressures on families and local children are crying out for social interaction. Being able to meet and interact with your peers socially through places such as schools, youth projects and sports clubs, is critical to young people's personal and social development. That is why HideOut Youth Zone, and our youth and community work friends and colleagues across the City exist.

“

**History has shown us time after time, that if there was ever a city made to come through this pandemic stronger, it's Manchester and that's exactly what I expect of our young people**

Gorton and surrounding wards such as Ardwick, Longsight and Levenshulme have some of the highest rates of child poverty in the UK, which leads to other social inequalities that impact on physical and emotional health and wellbeing, education, employment, crime and life chances more generally. Too often young people are labelled and stigmatised because of these inequalities and despite good intentions, increased funding for short-term targeted initiatives, such as work on knife crime, can add to this stigmatisation.

What we don't celebrate enough are young people's strengths; they are intelligent, passionate, articulate, resilient and have huge potential. I want to see an increased understanding and acknowledgement of the longer-term impact of universal, open access youth services, that take a strength-based approach to supporting young people. Open access youth work starts where young people start. It is based on voluntary engagement and aims to build trusted relationships with young people over time, helping them to make informed decisions. For me, this is where we need to see more investment. Reactive or targeted funding is needed and valued and a great example of this recently is GM Fareshare's food poverty campaign which is important and relevant, but for me the last year has strengthened my belief that the impact of this type of funding is short-lived without a long term universal offer at its core.



HideOut Youth Zone officially opened on 26 September 2020. Due to Government restrictions, we couldn't have anywhere near the numbers of young people we had hoped to bring through the doors. However, we still created an amazing atmosphere for those that could. Natalia, one of our junior members, summed things up perfectly and reminded us why our services are so needed when she first heard about the youth zone and the activities that would be available:

**“It was in that moment; I knew that this place could make me something.”**

In the weeks following our official opening, it was amazing to see the number of young people from diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities coming through our doors, engaging in positive activities and receiving the much-needed support we have on offer. We have established a core universal youth work offer that has already allowed us to build emerging relationships with young people and their families. Building on the core offer, we have been able to adapt as Covid-19 guidance has evolved to provide support services for some of our more vulnerable local members and we will continue to do so in the months to come.

I am proud to say I grew up in Gorton and Longsight and even more proud that my career has now brought me back to the place that shaped me as a youth. I know first-hand some of the challenges local young people and their families face, and I know first-hand the power of youth work to bring about positive change in a young person's life. I am determined that HideOut Youth Zone will provide a platform from which the local community can celebrate the positive contribution young people make to our city. I know 2021 is going to be a challenging but exciting year for us as we implement a new approach to supporting young people in a post Covid-19 world. For as long as Government guidance allows, we will be here for young people seven days per week, 52 weeks of the year, not just because young people need our services but because they deserve them. History has shown us time after time, that if there was ever a city made to come through this pandemic stronger, it's Manchester and that's exactly what I expect of our young people.

# What is the thing you are most proud of?

“

Several of our members can't read so we arranged times to read the newsletters to them over the phone to ensure they were updated with our group news.”

**Gorton Visual Arts**

“

Opening the group. I didn't know what I was doing at the beginning. I am so proud of our volunteers who have been with me from the start and I am thankful to them for sticking with me. We are all on Messenger and we say “good morning” to all of our members. It just keeps people connected.”

**Peter Quinn  
Friendship Group**

“

4CT worked with others to support Gorton Community Centre through a very challenging time financially (it was very near to risk of closure) – but everyone rallied round and between us we have sorted out the short term problem and have a longer term plan.”

**4CT**

“

To begin with, there was a kerfuffle with Zoom and technology. We worked with partners like Manchester City Council and Buzz to help people feel more included digitally.”

**The Owl and the Coconut**

“

The way we adapted to the changing situation by amending how we operate to meet new rules – being able to carry on but in groups of six, then groups of two by using our own equipment rather than borrowing or sharing equipment. For example, we used two jacks instead of one if pairs were not from the same household.”

**Debdale Bowling Club**

“

The ability for The Circus House to go digital quite quickly. We secured funding to make juggling YouTube videos and paid freelancers to do teaching via Zoom. We also provided free workshops for Barnardo's and Manchester Young Carers.”

**The Circus House**

“

Being able to distribute 100 African food parcels to BAME families. Nothing compares to being able to relieve people of some of their suffering and I thank God for that. I thank God for Forever Manchester too for giving us some funding to enable us to do this work. I am proud that we were able to support people that were in real need and to get food to them that they would recognise and be able to cook with and families told us that they lasted for weeks.”

**Beautiful Mind**

# Hunger in the UK



**Food banks - not a long-term solution!**

**Adeel Mahmood, Trustee and Food Bank Project Lead, Myriad Foundation**



**Myriad Foundation is an Islamic charitable organisation. They work for the greater good of humanity by sharing the message of Islam and through sincere and dedicated efforts to make a valuable contribution to society.**

Picture the scene: it is 8:30pm and you have just arrived home after finishing your day job and completing your food bank duties for the voluntary sector organisation that you work with, when you get a call to say, "I got your number off a friend and we have no food, and I have two children to look after...can you help?" What do you do?

“

**One of the main issues I have found over the past few years is that a food bank service, for some, is not just a temporary fix and this is even more apparent since we entered our first lockdown**

Unfortunately, this scenario is not fictional, it is not an isolated incident or request. It is just one example of many that I have come across whilst working in the food bank in Levenshulme.

One of the main issues I have found over the past few years is that a food bank service, for some, is not just a temporary fix and this is even more apparent since we entered our first lockdown. It feels like it is much harder for individuals and families who need support to access our benefits system, the very system that has been set up to help those who are struggling financially.

We know that most people need to access a food bank or the welfare system through no fault of their own. We might have a small number of people who abuse food bank services, just like the small number of people who are abusing the benefits system. This does not mean that we should make the eligibility criteria to obtain a food parcel higher and create unnecessary restrictions and barriers because of the small minority.

The Myriad Foundation is a faith-based organisation, a charity run on an Islamic ethos, but open to everyone regardless of race, religion, sex or any other factor used to divide people nowadays. We run various social outreach projects, but as you can imagine, the food bank service has been the busiest of these projects since March 2020. The food bank service is called 'Feed a Friend' and it is run entirely by volunteers.

Our main food bank service in Gorton and Levenshulme is delivered in the South Manchester Muslim Community Association premises, who kindly provided us with a rent-free space to operate. Before the Covid-19 crisis, we were distributing up to 20 food parcels a week with service users coming directly to the food bank to pick up a parcel. Since March 2020, this has increased to delivering over 350 food parcels a week. We have also been delivering daily emergency food parcels on behalf of Manchester City Council, who have amazing people working for them. At times, their approach did feel very disjointed and understandably so due to the Covid-19 food response team being put together so quickly. The Hub's food support had its teething problems but then it started to work fairly well. Earlier on in the year, a number of local councillors became involved and it felt like the councillors got to see the extent of the issues we face as food providers and they also witnessed first-hand volunteering in action.



**Earlier on in the year councillors got to see the extent of the issues we face as food providers and they also witnessed first-hand volunteering in action**

Like many food banks, we are powered by our volunteers and their response throughout this crisis has been unbelievably invaluable. We had no shortage of people willing to support us, roll up their sleeves and help those who are shielding, isolating and going hungry. However, we had more issues concerning the funds that we needed to run the project. Luckily, we managed to get a couple of large international charities to fund most of the work, but now the funds are running out and this is going to be a huge issue for us and for other food banks across the city of Manchester.

We need to think about a more coordinated approach to food provision across the city. We have made such great steps towards this in the development of the Manchester City Council Community Response Hub offer. It would be my wish that this phone line never closes and here are the reasons why:

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**– It has effectively become a centralised list of information for residents to access which holds the details of all registered food banks;**

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**– It has opened up a space where the Council work with us by answering the Freephone number and taking down the information needed and passing the details onto groups like ours;**

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**– This has allowed individuals and families in need of food provision to tell their story just once, giving all the information needed to one worker so they are not tasked with having what can feel like a demoralising conversation multiple times over. Some people are hesitant to ask for help because of this reason alone;**

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**– It has also meant that VCSE sector organisations that provide food have had more time to focus on delivery, rather than administration tasks that take up valuable time and mean that fewer people access the support they need;**

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**– It also gives those who are digitally excluded the power to call from any phone and learn about where their nearest food parcel comes from.**

It used to be the norm to see adverts on the telly asking for food package donations for those living in poverty in so called 'Third World countries.' At times, it feels that we are now that 'Third World country.' People may not be dying of starvation, but there are certainly people who do not have food on the table every day, people that go without a meal to ensure that they can feed their children, people who have to make the decision between putting money on their meter and eating that day.

There are many pieces of research and sets of statistics out there that show that a food bank cannot any longer be considered as a short-term fix for a few people. I will not bombard you with too many figures but I will highlight the State of Hunger report written in 2019 by The Trussell Trust. They found that within their food bank network, there were 61,000 food parcels distributed in 2010/11, rising to 1,583,000 in 2018/19. If we delve a little deeper into this report, we can see how there is a positive correlation between the number of food parcels distributed and the numbers of failed Personal Independence Payment assessments, and households impacted by the 'bedroom tax' and the rollout of Universal Credit. I would urge you to look into the policies, specifically the policies around welfare benefits that have been put in place since 2010.



**People may not be dying of starvation but there are certainly people who have to make the decision between putting money on their meter and eating that day**



**We need to think about a more coordinated approach to food provision across the city**

These policies have had a direct impact on what appears to be an eruption of food bank usage in the last decade.

This picture is a national one. However, we know that some places are harder hit than others when it comes to food poverty. The cost of living in areas like Levenshulme and Gorton, where I have lived since 2003, has increased astronomically. A good few years back, you could rent a three-bedroom house for around £400-500 a month. Now you are looking at least almost double this amount. Average wages have not doubled, the price of food and other commodities have only increased. Honest, working families are struggling to survive financially.

When you read this article, if you are anything like me, you might start to feel a real sense of anger and frustration begin to build up. You might begin to question how we can be living in a civilised society in the 21st century in the United Kingdom and be on the receiving end of telephone calls from families desperate for food. You might question if this vital work, to put food on the tables of those who cannot manage, is the job of a 'normal' person like you or me, or is it actually the job of the government to help those struggling financially?

# A community on the edge



Rethinking support to EU Roma communities

Joe Meredith, Research and Information Officer, Europaia

Gosha Adamowska, Communities Engagement Consultant, Europaia



**Founded in 2008, Europaia provides support to EU nationals living and working in Greater Manchester including benefits advice, a legal surgery, EU Settlement Scheme support and an Emergency Fund.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the overwhelming scale of complex challenges faced by the EU Roma communities living in Gorton, Levenshulme and Longsight. Frontline staff are struggling to meet the needs of their Roma clients and it has become much more difficult to support this already extremely disadvantaged group. The Covid-19 restrictions have revealed the scale of systemic issues faced by the Roma communities, and has put in place barriers to accessing our support. The situation has also forced the start of a more in-depth conversation about the EU Roma communities in Britain, and how to provide them with an equal place in our society and a more secure future in our country.

The generational, systemic discrimination experienced by Central and Eastern European Roma communities in their countries of origin mean they live on the fringes of the societies they come from, and consequently the ones they join. The EU Roma community has been, and still is, the most persecuted community in Europe and, as a result, these groups are some of the most vulnerable in Britain, and often become victims of exploitation.



**The Covid-19 restrictions have revealed the scale of systemic issues faced by the Roma communities**

The EU Roma community can be reluctant to trust outsiders as a result of the relentless discrimination they face. They especially do not trust official authorities such as the police. Neither do they trust charities. Many are not comfortable sharing personal stories, and those that are more receptive are suspicious of non-profit services. Building trust over time is key to supporting EU Roma clients and social distancing has made this far more difficult.

Roma community members often deny their community membership, claiming publicly that they are nationals of their country of origin but not Roma. Having staff who are themselves community members, living in and amongst the community, removes any fear of being stereotyped and treated differently. They are able to provide all manner of support.

The move away from face-to-face services to Zoom or telephone-based support has not been a success in engaging with these groups. Lack of digital access has proved a significant barrier to service provision. Many of our Roma clients cannot read or write, let alone log in to Zoom, use WhatsApp or sign digital forms. Many clients could not afford to top up their phone or pay for an internet connection. Additionally, some clients did not fully understand why they could not meet their caseworkers face-to-face, taking it personally and feeling offended and confused when contact was denied.

However, some positive changes have come out of this tragic situation. Our staff are starting to teach clients how to use technology. Europaia has started to rethink how it delivers support, producing lasting and shareable materials like a translated Universal Credit application guide which can be sent to clients as a PDF. Nevertheless, our staff are still convinced remote digital support is not suitable in many cases, and that the only way forward is to return to face-to-face appointments. As such, Europaia is currently looking to rent suitable space in Levenshulme.

The pandemic has exposed the sheer scale of black market employment of EU Roma community members, many of whom lost their jobs when lockdown began. In addition to working low-status, insecure jobs like selling The Big Issue, working in factories or as Uber drivers, our staff estimated that approximately half of their Roma clients work cash-in-hand. Overnight, lots of these jobs ceased to exist.

When those who had lost their job started to seek support, many discovered that they were at risk of having 'no recourse to public funds'. Clients who were employed cash-in-hand struggled to provide proof of previous employment, and were reluctant to involve their former employers for fear of causing them trouble and jeopardising future employment opportunities. Some employers do not pay National Insurance contributions, depriving clients of another way of proving their employment and residency status. Community members are also routinely exploited by landlords who let properties without contracts, on an 'all-bills-inclusive' basis or with top-up meters so that tenants receive no correspondence or utility bills, leaving them unable to prove their place and period of residence.

To help provide support during the pandemic, Europaia crowdfunded an emergency fund and began distributing grants to people who became destitute. This difficult situation enabled our frontline workers to more effectively educate clients about their rights, the tax system, and the difference between black market employment and legitimate work using actual situations as examples. One of our staff commented: "I don't know how much change it will make but as long as they know

their rights - this is what makes a difference between an enslaved person and a free person."

Throughout the pandemic, the impending deadline of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) draws nearer. The EU Roma community face significant barriers to applying to the EUSS: the application process and status are mainly digital, and require rigorous provision of proof of employment and residency. There is very little official communication tailored towards those most in need, of the urgency, importance or specific details of applying. For a community who struggle to prove their status in the UK, who lack IT skills, who live on the fringes of society and only turn to authorities out of absolute necessity, applying for the EUSS during Covid-19 is the perfect storm.



**At worst we're facing another Windrush scenario where a marginalised community becomes 'illegally' resident in the UK**

Europaia staff check with each client whether they have applied, but find many are unaware of the importance and urgency of securing their immigration status. At worst, we're facing another Windrush scenario where a marginalised community becomes 'illegally' resident in the UK. This could result in deportations of people who were given no allowance for the systemic challenges their community faces. It cannot be left to specialist organisations. Every council, company, charity and individual must act to make sure that their friends and families, clients and co-workers are aware of the urgency and importance of applying to the EUSS before 30 June 2021 deadline.

The pandemic has radically altered Europaia's approach to working with extremely vulnerable groups like the EU Roma communities in Levenshulme, Gorton and Longsight. Europaia cannot go back to simply supporting EU Roma community members in their daily lives. We must take a more strategic approach highlighting inequalities to funders and stakeholders, and campaigning for change. The scale of the black market economy must be addressed in a systematic way through better regulation of the labour and housing market to prevent mass exploitation and through championing those who transfer to legal employment. As a first step towards fully incorporating the EU Roma community into the wider Gorton and Levenshulme community, everyone must take action to make sure their friends, family, neighbours and colleagues are aware of the importance and urgency of applying to the EUSS.

# What did you find most difficult?

“

I couldn't leave the house as I needed to shield. This meant just getting the Gorton Visual Arts parcels (materials, activities, guidance notes and a newsletter) to members was a challenge.”

**Gorton Visual Arts**

“

I think not seeing anyone and people ringing and asking “when are you going to open?” Calls asking “can we come back next week?” have been very hard. We have lost two of our members to Covid-19 and one of our ladies has gone into a home. She used to be the life and soul of the party but she really has deteriorated. It is an epidemic of loneliness, that's what it is. Everyone is just so lonely.”

**Peter Quinn  
Friendship Group**

“

Throughout Covid-19, we've struggled to keep up to date with all the changing guidance so it's really challenging for smaller groups.”

**4CT**

“

Closing the doors. Knowing that we wouldn't be able to run our scheduled in-person wellbeing course. However, we took this online and the participants created a WhatsApp group themselves so they were still able to provide that support to each other.”

**The Circus House**

“

A young woman came all the way from Wythenshawe to speak to us. She had managed to get hold of one of our flyers and with her last money, she had got on a bus to Levenshulme.

She came to us for a food parcel and as they are quite heavy, we asked how she would be getting home. She began to cry and told us that she had lost her job and had no family or friends nearby for support. Not being able to hug people and reassure them that ‘this too shall pass’ has been so difficult for us.”

**Beautiful Mind**

“

Walking in pairs was very restrictive and people were tempted all the time to form larger groupings – I had to keep reminding them to socially distance!”

**Debdale Bowling Club**

“

We did a survey across our social media and learnt our regulars didn't feel comfortable with being out meeting people face to face, even getting the bus etc. had become a new challenge. So we had to go online and scale back to match new funding requirements and to be able to still offer people creative, mindfulness stress reduction tools in our classes and courses.”

**The Owl and the Coconut**

# Polka dots and flowers



Helping refugees to make a new home

Kate Percival, Manager,  
Rainbow Haven



Based in East Manchester, Rainbow Haven offers a place of welcome, support, and opportunity to refugees and displaced people.



The physical space of Rainbow Haven is a typical community building. A slightly draughty sports hall, a church room and a tiny kitchen surrounded by grounds that our gardening group have been valiantly reclaiming from the weeds. Every week there are three large drop-in support sessions for hundreds of refugees and displaced people. We've done our best to make it 'homely'. The school canteen-style tables are covered in bright polka dot tablecloths, with a flower in a vase popped in the middle of each. To distract from the sports hall aesthetic, rows of bunting criss-cross the ceiling and – just like in every good home – there's food at its heart. Lemlem, our chef and her volunteer team cook hearty hot meals and everyone eats together on drop-in days. We are lucky enough to have a staff and volunteer team who genuinely enjoy being and working together, and for almost all of the time there is an atmosphere of warmth and mutual support.

At the end of March 2020, as the pandemic took hold, we closed the doors of Rainbow Haven for the first time since we opened in 2003. It was shocking to see the centre deserted. We scrambled to set up a remote service, offering telephone advice, welfare calls, and food parcel distribution. Then we tried to settle into our new reality – lockdown.

Over the following weeks, many of us found being confined to our homes wasn't so bad. The wonders of modern technology meant we could still work. In Zoom chats with friends and family, we compared notes on gardening, DIY, baking and embraced our home lives. Conversations with our service users and migrant volunteers couldn't have contrasted more. They were dealing with the sudden fear of the unknown and the crippling effects of losing insecure employment. We heard reports of anxiety, depression, mental health breakdowns and domestic violence. Even for those who were safe and well, the isolation and monotony of lockdown life was agonising.

Basir, one of our volunteers, was granted refugee status in spring 2020. By nature a busy and sociable person, he'd been coming to Rainbow Haven three days a week. Being

cooped up in the temporary home that he shared with near strangers was unbearable, he spent his days staring hopelessly at the walls. With a dry sense of humour, he asked if he could move into Rainbow Haven and live in a tent by the flower beds. He was only half joking. He said he would come “to wash up and make coffee” and that he just desperately needed “somewhere to be and something to do”.



**East Manchester and Gorton has a significant population of people who are seeking asylum and who will most likely settle here.... We want them to finally find their place in our city, to thrive here and to build their new home.**

During our support by phone, the same question came up again and again – ‘when would we be open again’? Every time one of us stopped by the centre, someone was waiting outside to ask the same question.

It was not all stories of doom and gloom, there were also positive stories.

Rainbow Haven’s Drop-in Support Coordinator is a Syrian refugee who has been in Manchester since 2015 with his software developer wife Zainab and their two young children. For him, lockdown has been a chance to connect and become more anchored in his community. Most of his neighbours are older retired British people and Mohammad found himself in a position to help them.

“I saw massive queues at the supermarket and knew it was very difficult for older people. So I said, if you need any help, then I can help you as a son. In Syria it’s very important to help your older relatives. I bought their shopping and gave them hand sanitizer when it was really difficult to find it. I think they were really pleased.”

I asked him how lockdown had changed his feelings toward his Manchester neighbourhood. “I feel closer than before. And safer. I know they [my neighbours] will look out for my kids and they can always ask me for help when they need it.”

When the government put a moratorium on evictions across the country, accommodation for newly arriving people seeking asylum became scarce. Contingency accommodation was set up which meant that 250 people, around 100 of them newly arrived in the UK, were put together in a single venue while waiting for their asylum application to be processed. Rainbow Haven was one of the first organisations to offer support to the new arrivals. We worked with the local health care team to set up an emergency medical service, then coordinated with partners to run drop-in advice sessions and wellbeing support.

Many had crossed the channel in tiny boats just days before and exhaustion was etched on their faces. Forced into a nomadic existence, they were at the end of an arduous and dangerous journey. To travel across Europe from war torn countries such as Yemen or Syria can take months, or even years. People told me about surviving in makeshift shelters, and walking hundreds of miles with their possessions strapped to their back.

They’d seen their homes destroyed, their cities razed to the ground. The neighbours, colleagues, and friends that were part of their everyday social tapestry were gone. Everything that provided that connection and belonging was gone, and they were set adrift, at the mercy of the asylum system.

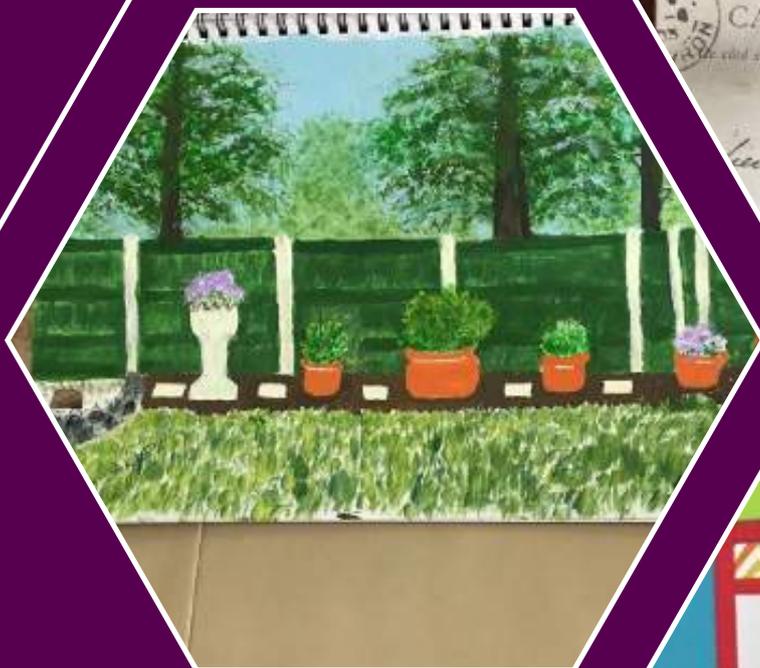
The temporary accommodation was safe and the beds were warm, but the people supported there had little autonomy and a strong sense of still being in transit. They told me of the stress of being held in limbo as they just waited for the next stage of their life to start. Lilia, one of the regulars at the Women’s Support Group, had been forced into a nomadic life for almost four years. She described to me, in poignant detail, her hopes for her new home, the houseplants she would nurture and the two cats she would adopt (“they can play together while I’m at work!”).

Lockdown shone a light on the massive inequality in the lives of the people sharing our city. For the lucky ones, our homes were a sanctuary where we could hunker down and keep safe from the threat of the pandemic, for others it was like being in prison. For many, the government’s ‘Stay at Home to Stay Safe’ messaging rang hollow as they dreamt of a real home to stay safe in.

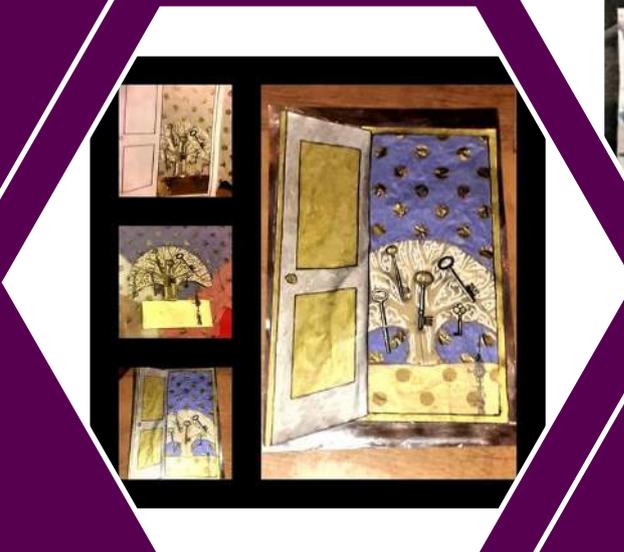
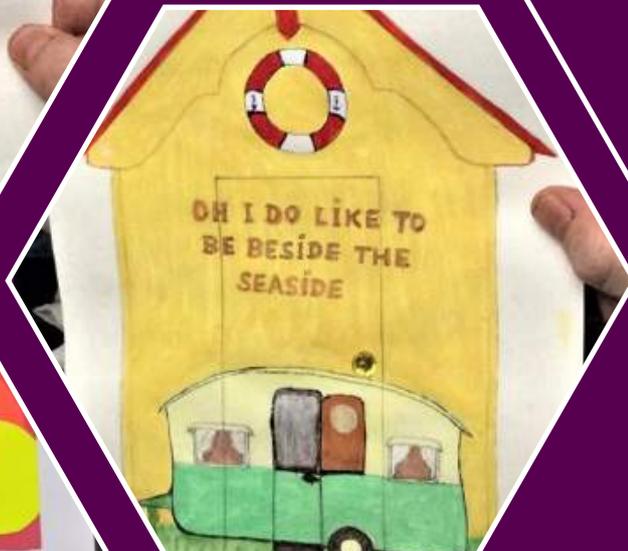
We all develop a strong emotional attachment to the places we live. Our physical surroundings play such an important role in creating a sense of meaning and organisation in our lives, so it is not surprising that our sense of the place we live is closely tied to our sense of who we are. For our refugee service users, forced from the places that connected and anchored them, Rainbow Haven provided that space and it will again.

East Manchester and Gorton has a significant population of people who are seeking asylum and who will most likely settle here. They come to us desperate to find a new community to belong to. At Rainbow Haven, we can help people connect with each other and with Manchester and to start putting down new roots in our neighbourhoods. We want them to finally find their place in our city, to thrive here and to build their new home.

# Pictures from residents



Gorton Visual Arts has been creating artwork in and around Gorton and Manchester since 2006. The group consists of local residents led by artist Ian McKay. During the pandemic, Gorton Visual Arts provided their members with art packs through the post to enable them to continue to create and stay connected. These are some of the artworks they made.



# Just be kind



Working with refugee families with children with special educational needs

Pipeeh Miyalu, Chief Officer,  
Warm Hut UK



**Warm Hut works with French-speaking asylum seekers and refugees living in Greater Manchester aiming to alleviate depression including emotional wellbeing and supporting people with concerns around unemployment, homelessness, housing, discrimination and social and economic deprivation.**

Warm Hut UK has been working with Francophone and Lingalaphone families and individuals from refugee backgrounds in Manchester since 2013. The majority of our service users live in Gorton and Levenshulme. In the area, there are a significant number of families who have experienced generational unemployment, are benefit dependent, who have few aspirations, have low skill levels and live in poverty. The pandemic has highlighted issues that have been swept under the carpet for a long time.



**The pandemic has highlighted issues that have been swept under the carpet for a long time**

We work with families whose children have special educational needs (SEN) who often find it a very lonely situation to be in. They have said that not much has changed in terms of support during the Covid-19 crisis. However, Covid-19 has highlighted even more starkly some of the issues that SEN families face daily. It is an uncertain time for everyone and some are carrying more emotional baggage than others. We know help is out there but often having the knowledge of which door to knock on can mean the difference between accessing help or not. In many cases, people are unaware of services available to them, due to barriers such as English not being their first language, not feeling welcome or maybe not having knowledge of how the system works.

One of the things we are hearing is that it would be helpful if there was just one platform where people could go to access all the information they need in times like this, for example, help with food if you are self-isolating or help with childcare if you are going into hospital. Warm Hut UK does help with these things but our service users say that it would be useful to have all of these organisations working together under one umbrella. One of our clients summed it up well by saying “As humans we have been through a lot, and we came out stronger, more powerful and better people. We can always pull through if we are together as one. It doesn’t matter what the colour of skin is, every life matters and every disability is just different ability.”



**We work with families whose children have special educational needs (SEN) who often find it a very lonely situation to be in. They have said that not much has changed in terms of support during the Covid-19 crisis**

The young people we work with are also being significantly impacted by Covid-19. We are seeing a huge knock to their education and career plans but more importantly to their confidence and mental health. We are currently supporting one young person, Junior from Levenshulme, who was getting ready to go to university before the pandemic.

“Usually this time of the year is an exciting mark of new found independence for young people leaving the nest. Whether it is going to university or the transition from high school to college. Memories are formed for life from this adventurous period but now all of that has been devoured by the uncertainty brought on by the disease known as Covid-19. This uncertainty about our future seems to increase, particularly in regards to dealing and adapting to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. We have had to delay or cancel plans due to the regulations imposed by our Government. I was used to routine but now I am finding it difficult to get used to a situation where there is no structure. I am trying to stay positive as I am using this time to learn new skills and spend time with my close family. We hope to get through this together.”

We have seen in mainstream media how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people are more likely to die from Covid-19 when compared to people from other backgrounds. It has been reported how doctors and nurses have chosen to treat some patients over others.

These reports have made people fearful to get help when needed. They would rather suffer in silence at home than seek help. Since the pandemic, we as a society have lost our human touch. It feels like it has become every man for himself. You would think in a time like this we would all come together as one. We really need to learn to embrace each other's culture and diversity. Covid-19 has shone a light on inequality. People feel they are being treated unfairly, they are feeling isolated, not part of the community and feeling outcast. The lack of sense of belonging is having a huge knock-on effect on families, and on individuals' mental health and wellbeing.

Warm Hut UK works to support people with a variety of different concerns or needs and all are hugely important. SEN families rely so heavily on so many organisations providing resources and they continue to need investment. It is equally important to make sure that those investments are also reaching BAME organisations, not just because BAME people are more affected by Covid-19 but because mainstream services do not always cater for them effectively. We know people need support, and the resources to help them, but in a time where there is less funding and more demand for support there are great concerns. Kindness and compassion can have a hugely powerful impact for those who need it.

There is a quote I like very much which we at Warm Hut use in supporting people, **"Everyone is fighting a battle you don't know about, so just BE KIND"**.



**The young people we work with are also being significantly impacted by Covid-19. We are seeing a huge knock to their education and career plans but more importantly to their confidence and mental health**

# Windmills or giants?



Supporting older neighbours in partnership

Raymond Ola, Service Coordinator, Levenshulme Good Neighbours

Levenshulme Good Neighbours CIO is a befriending charity supporting isolated older people with low mood and limited mobility in our community since 2012.



When faced with the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020, the level of uncertainty seemed unmanageable for a lot of people. There were far fewer things within our control on both a personal and professional level. When the Prime Minister's statement concluded that evening, living rooms all over the country filled with questions: 'What will happen tomorrow? When will this lockdown end? Will I get sick? Will anything happen to my loved ones?'

As a nation, it felt like we were part of a collective battle against the unknown and my mind turned to my favourite novel, Don Quixote. I wondered 'Is it windmills or giants we are fighting?'

I needed to find a way to alleviate this uncertainty. I needed a focus and a plan for our older residents and their befrienders. Levenshulme Good Neighbours work with around 300 older adults each year, 60 of whom are in befriending relationships. We are proud that these matches are made with preferences and interests in mind rather than through the availability of our volunteers. It is a personalised service, one that takes into account the individuals we work for and our longest matched neighbours celebrated six years of friendship in 2020.



Finding the solution to one simple question became my mission: 'How can Levenshulme Good Neighbours safely reach out to our older neighbours at a time when they need our support more than ever?'



**It is not only our older neighbours that experienced loneliness.... The befriender became the befriended**

## Partnerships

The Covid-19 crisis has been the ultimate test of our working relationships with our community partners. Organisations and residents in Levenshulme have shown that they are robust, they are strong, they are connected and they are resilient. During the first lockdown, Levenshulme used contrasting slogans to the ones heard on the radio or on the telly. Levenshulme chose to spread the word about 'social solidarity and physical distancing' rather than about 'social distancing'. We understood, from the very start, that the response to Covid-19 was not just about physical needs, it was also about social needs.

Levenshulme Good Neighbours came together with other local community groups and organisations and prioritised four key areas of work:

- Looking after older people's welfare
- Ensuring that everyone had access to food
- Providing activities to keep people entertained
- Tackling digital exclusion

By the time Manchester City Council's Community Response Hub began, the Levenshulme approach was well established. We fought the virus collectively with our partners to ensure our older locals were fed, entertained, stayed crafty, felt accompanied and motivated throughout the pandemic. This had a beneficial impact for both our older service users and our volunteers in the community.

## Different experiences

Our older neighbours split into two categories. Surprisingly, some were thankful to see the world coming to their doorstep. They found schemes, such as meals being delivered, free IT equipment and mutual aid cards to be uplifting.

On the other hand, others felt their confidence levels eroding as they watched their world shrink each day. The Covid-19 crisis has left some, who it had taken us a long while to persuade to take pleasure in being out there in their communities, feeling lonely, isolated and craving social interaction.

It is not only our older neighbours that experienced loneliness. We recruited a new pool of volunteers who volunteered not just because they wanted to do something good but also because they were feeling isolated and needed contact with the outside world. The befriender became the befriended. Sympathy for older neighbours transformed into empathy.



**Organisations and residents in Levenshulme have shown that they are robust, they are strong, they are connected and they are resilient**



## We are the experts

We have invaluable insight into the lives of our older neighbours. Our volunteers have spent over 11,500 hours befriending them and learning about

their needs and wishes. We spend time one to one with people, we know about their shifts in moods, their interests, their eating habits and we hear their personal stories. We really understand the impact of the pandemic on individuals' lives.

We need to recognise and understand that people in our neighbourhood get older and for some, getting out into community spaces is not feasible and for others it is not desired. If there is one thing we have learned throughout the pandemic, it is that we can bring a sense of belonging and community to a person's doorstep.

It pleased me to see a shift in my work from activities and events in communal spaces for the maximum numbers of older adults to taking an individualised approach. This personalised support is how it should be; it is what we have always championed. Instead of being driven by numbers, we have been given the opportunity by our funders to support people in a way that is most meaningful to them.



**If there is one thing we have learned throughout the pandemic, it is that we can bring a sense of belonging and community to a person's doorstep**

## **A trusted partner**

I am pleased to say that our relationship with the public sector has developed positively throughout these testing times. We found that our partners from the health and social care statutory sector are not only willing to listen to us, but they have relied on our expertise to understand the individuals that we collectively support. We have replied to letters from local GPs inquiring about the wellbeing of some of our most isolated, older neighbours. We have taken phone calls from social work teams where the conversation centred around our service, what support we usually provide for older adults and how we planned to adapt.

Community groups and voluntary sector organisations continually attempt to demonstrate the valuable contribution we make to improve the health and wellbeing of those we serve. We have been banging this drum for decades and banging it loudly. Right now, it feels like we have a moment in the spotlight and the attention of our partners in the public sector.

It feels like the script is beginning to change and we are emerging from the Covid-19 crisis as a trusted partner, rather than an afterthought. It is time to build on this work and ensure that we are valued as community partners not only in crisis but long into the future.



**Right now, it feels like we have a moment in the spotlight and the attention of our partners in the public sector... It is time to build on this work and ensure that we are valued as community partners not only in crisis but long into the future**

So, 'how can Levenshulme Good Neighbours safely reach out to our older neighbours at a time when they need our support more than ever?'

**The answer is simple. The solution to all of our problems is each other.**

# What has surprised you most?

“

How important letters are during lockdown.”

**Gorton  
Visual Arts**

“

The community coming together to support people who have had Covid-19. We have truly nice and good people in our community who are willing to support one another.”

**Beautiful Mind**

“

People work close together all the time – this has not dropped off during the pandemic!”

**4CT**

“

Our members have been absolute treasures. We have had people donating money to support the company.”

**The Circus House**

“

Boundaries have come down as people are more comfortable in their own homes. People have joined us in PJs and with pets and kids in the background!”

**The Owl and  
the Coconut**

“

We actually recruited some new members! I put a notice on the fence around the green explaining why people couldn't use it and as a result people contacted me wanting to join the club.”

**Debdale Bowling Club**

“

I think the togetherness. All of our volunteers have a set of numbers and call members every week. It has been wonderful to see because some groups might have die off throughout all of this, but ours have come together. The positivity has been so surprising.”

**Peter Quinn  
Friendship Group**

# Baked beans and blood pressure tests



The solutions to health inequalities lie in communities

Rich Browning, CEO, Healthy Me Healthy Communities



**Healthy Me Healthy Communities is a not-for-profit social enterprise, founded in 2012, making a positive difference to people's health, lives and local communities.**



For over eight years, Healthy Me Healthy Communities (HMHC) has been improving health and life outcomes for Manchester residents by working with people on things that matter to them. We involve partners, services and stakeholders, so we can reduce health inequalities together. At the heart of our approach is co-production, demonstrated through our Community Grocers that offer subsidised groceries, volunteering, training and access to services and support. To address the underlying causes of poverty, our Community Grocers offer baked beans and a blood pressure check alongside apples and accredited courses.

In immediate response to the Covid-19 outbreak, we provided welfare calls to all of our members ensuring they have access to food, services and importantly a friendly voice at the end of the phone line. Working with the University of Manchester, this grew into a wellbeing befriending service for those most isolated, and the distribution of 'stay at home' welfare boxes and the 'make-aways' home cooking club.

We understood how much our members would be missing social interaction and the sense of security that comes from knowing that there is a place of information and support on your doorstep. Pre Covid-19, almost every intervention we carried out involved increasing social interaction and strengthening peer support networks. We reopened our Grocers, venue permitting, starting in Harpurhey, quickly followed by Gorton, Hulme and Rusholme. Pre Covid-19 issues remained for our members, only this time they were much more obvious and magnified. Members who previously struggled to make their household budget stretch seven days were running out of food earlier with children at home. Those who had to decide between food or fuel were now going

without electricity for longer, and those who found access to health services problematic were now holding back on contacting health professionals.

We welcomed back our Gorton members at the Gorton Community Centre, and early support centred around fuel poverty, loneliness and mental health, with every day and enduring mental health problems exacerbated by Covid-19 related anxieties about shopping and accessing services. Members welcomed their ten minute slot for food, household essentials, information and service referrals including to the Be Well social prescribing service (HMHC is the neighbourhood host organisation). As time went on, member needs and aspirations went full-circle back to money management, mental health support, training and employment.



We have worked with the Gorton Community Centre for over three years, a centre managed by an award-winning team of volunteers, retired women not content with putting their feet up. Instead they manage much valued services, including a wonderful community allotment garden. Stop by and be warmed by their awards cabinet and marvel at the regular visits from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth who only last year bestowed on them her highest award – Queen’s Award for Volunteering. The Gorton Community Centre is like so many established community assets. They become part of the fabric, the reliable friend who just gets on with what they do best – a warm non-judgmental welcome for their community.

Behind the scenes, the neighbourhood team have been supporting the committee to strengthen and secure the centre’s future for the next generation of Gortonians. This will be a mix of much-loved community activities and new HMHC food services, workshops and training from our new Gorton Community Centre Hub - coming soon!

Then, one day in March 2020, the committee had to self-shield, stay at home and protect their own and loved ones’ health, resulting in the centre closing and revenues drying up whilst the bills continued to drop through the letterbox. There is nothing new to see here. Shoestring budgets for community centres are

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**We have worked with the Gorton Community Centre for over three-years, a centre managed by an award-winning team of volunteers.... Stop-by and be warmed by their awards cabinet and marvel at the regular visits from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth**

the norm and centre volunteers dedicate their time to opening the shutters, balancing the books, listening and responding to changing community needs and being part of the plethora of interventions, integrated services and initiatives (whilst making sure they don’t themselves become a health statistic).

There is no disputing that Covid-19 was a shock to every way of life and every way of working. From the outset, it tested every system to its core, exposing existing fracture lines of the nation, society, neighbourhoods and individual lives. At a societal level, Covid-19 shone a powerful spotlight on the fragility of our welfare state, on the ever-declining respect for older people with every news bulletin telling of the unforgettable and unforgivable abandonment of care home residents. As the pandemic went from weeks to months, the existing fracture lines in health were becoming impossible to ignore with the death toll rising faster for Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) people, higher suicide rates for LGBT people and as more data became available, it became clear that disadvantaged communities were bearing a greater burden. Andy Burnham warns of a 1980’s style economic decline for the North of England with regional inequalities increasing.

“

**Shoestring budgets for community centres are the norm and centre volunteers dedicate their time to opening the shutters, balancing the books, listening and responding to changing community needs**

Addressing the causes of ill health, spotting illness earlier, providing support earlier, transforming services and care (exactly the kind of aims in the ‘Our Healthier Manchester’ strategy) are required more than ever.

Even more people feel further away from a positive tomorrow, let alone a positive future. Working together for a healthier Manchester remains the central pillar for supporting our most vulnerable residents, reaching our most isolated residents and for meeting their aspirations for a brighter future.

“

**We need to continue the amazing progress of the last few years in working together, respecting the knowledge found in our amazing neighbourhoods, valuing the expertise of the VCSE sector and recognising that health inequalities are rooted in communities and that's where the solutions lie**

From our work with hundreds of residents during the last few months, the one stand-out message is that people have loved the community coming together and the tangible feeling of a community identity. They want to see it live on beyond the crisis, to continue caring and looking out for each other. This is what strategists call a healthy neighbourhood and healthy households - social activities, community services, work and volunteering, community centres, healthy eating and looking after ourselves. The VCSE sector has a long and valued history of supporting and empowering people, addressing systematic discrimination and bringing about lasting positive social change.



To say that there is nothing new to see here is not to ignore the impact of Covid-19 but to urge decision-makers and resource allocators not to pause, not to disappear into strategy silos, not to plan single service responses and not to forget pre Covid-19 successes in addressing health inequalities together. We need to continue the amazing progress of the last few years in working together, respecting the knowledge found in our amazing neighbourhoods, valuing the expertise of the VCSE sector and recognising that health inequalities are rooted in communities and that's where the solutions lie.

Let's listen to the issues but also to the solutions: involve people and continue working together across sector boundaries. Remind yourself of the Manchester strategies that have started to transform work in reducing health inequalities and are making a real difference to people's lives. Let's renew our partnerships, create new networks and pick up the shining baton for reducing health inequalities together.



# We salute our volunteer army



Rapidly developing a volunteering programme in Levenshulme

Roxanna Locke, Centre  
Manager, Levenshulme Inspire

**Levenshulme Inspire is a community centre that puts on events, classes and activities which benefit the local community with the Inspire Café at its heart.**

When lockdown first hit we met as a team to talk through how we could best support our community and we decided to focus on the emergency provision of food, as this felt like the most pressing need. When the doors closed and the centre emptied, the requirements for our emergency provision began to increase. However, as we were down to a skeleton team of five at the time, it became very clear that we needed more support from volunteers if we were going to deliver all that was needed.

Our recruitment strategy was simple – to connect with as many of our current volunteers and people known to the centre as we could - but we were unsure of how much interest there would be in the opportunities available. We were entering a pandemic after all! As demand increased for support, we adapted our recruitment to use social media to communicate with our community. To keep things manageable we were specific in our asks and capped numbers. This was a new way of working for us. As we were low on both staff numbers and time and we needed to get the volunteers in place quickly, we weren't able to interview every volunteer. This required a great deal of trust from both sides, which at times was challenging.



**It became very clear that we needed more support from volunteers if we were going to deliver all that was needed**

As our activity increased so did our engagement on social media and the interest we received in volunteering became almost unmanageable, to the extent that in the end, we were forced to turn people away. Turning volunteers away was not something we wanted to do, especially during the pandemic but the level of interest risked overwhelming us. Many of our recruits were new faces, who were unknown to us and this was both exciting and challenging. It was particularly pleasing that many of our new volunteers were local people who lived nearby, but had never ventured into our centre previously.



To help us manage the influx of new volunteers and the roles they needed to fulfil, we successfully applied for a grant so we could employ a Volunteer Coordinator. This enabled us to create a structured Volunteer Programme to look after our volunteers and make sure that in their enthusiasm they weren't taking on too much. Since we've invested in our volunteer programme, we have been able to offer more support to our community and extend our projects. More recently, on our Winter Wellbeing Campaign and Christmas meal deliveries, we have been able to offer more one-off volunteering opportunities – again something we have never been able to do previously.



**Our recruitment strategy was simple – to connect with as many of our current volunteers and people known to the centre as we could**

Our local volunteers have been a great asset to us in understanding what is happening in the community. They've been our face in Levenshulme and allowed us to connect with the community at a time when it has needed us most. Our volunteers have given us so much more than their precious time, they've given us hope. By turning up daily, whether to deliver meals, cook food or pack shopping bags, they've all brought something unique. By reminding us that there is still a world outside of the centre, our volunteers have kept us grounded and focussed on what needs to be done, whilst also helping us to appreciate the value of doing something for others. As an organisation, the volunteers pushed us to be better, to work smarter and to make sure our processes were right so that we could keep everyone safe.



**As an organisation, we've realised the value of investing in our volunteers, creating structure and listening to them – their voices are so important to us**

The benefits of volunteering are endless, but particularly at the moment, volunteering has been a lifeline for those who have used this opportunity to connect with others and create some kind of structure in their lives.



**Our volunteers have given us so much more than their precious time, they've given us hope**

We were able to create volunteer opportunities for some of our more vulnerable centre users too. As an organisation, we've realised the value of investing in our volunteers, creating structure and listening to them – their voices are so important to us. Without our resilient and dedicated volunteers, we would not have been able to support our community and for that I'm truly grateful.

Thank you to all of the brilliant volunteers of Levenshulme Inspire, for all the bags you've packed, shopping you've delivered and phone calls you've made - you are all heroes.

# What is your hope for the future?

“

That the work we do is recognised as making a difference to people's wellbeing.”

**Gorton Visual Arts**

“

To open up and start dancing. That's what they used to come for, the dancing. You want to see our members when the music comes on, they just come alive... We will dance again.”

**Peter Quinn  
Friendship Group**

“

Gorton will recover and thrive because people will continue to collaborate.”

**4CT**

“

After all of this is over, I want to see a community that is completely united regardless of race, colour, sex or religion. I want to be able to celebrate humanity.”

**Beautiful Mind**

“

That we can get even more people from Gorton from all backgrounds out and about and enjoying gentle exercise and good company with our various activities – walking, bowling, gardening.”

**Debdale Bowling Club**

“

That we build on existing places with new places to be together, face to face and online so people have choice. Everyone has mental health and wellbeing needs to be looked after.”

**The Owl and the Coconut**

“

That circus skills are valued and have dedicated spaces and theatre shows, training, and I would like a place where I can put up a flying trapeze! It would be great to host a Christmas show for 2021 and a Circus Festival in Manchester.”

**The Circus House**

# Going where the wind blows



**Empowering South Asian women to believe in themselves**

**Shamime Jan, Director, Bollyfit Active CIC**



**Bollyfit Active CIC aim to empower women of all cultures, religions and races, creating a community of independent women united by fitness, health and wellbeing.**



**I want the women we work with to be able to adapt. The world moves at a pace and my greatest wish is for them to be able to move with it**

I believe that women are the backbone of any community and if we can strengthen women, support them to understand and improve their own health and wellbeing, we will build stronger communities. Bollyfit Active aims to create a community of happy and healthy women. One of our core values is to enable women to be heard, to give every woman the time to develop her voice so that she builds confidence in her true self. We hope that all women feel able to move on in their lives with self-worth and purpose.

What the Covid-19 crisis has done to nearly 100% of our service users is to put them into a 'frozen mode'. It feels like their lives are on hold until 'we come back to normality'.

It has been difficult to admit it but it feels like some are not able or do not want to adapt to a digital and ever changing world. They want their normal lives back. I can empathise with our frozen women. Why should they wish to adapt to a world where social isolation is the norm, where seeing family members is a luxury and daily exercise is limited to a solo walk around the limited green spaces within our neighbourhood?

I want the women we work with to be able to adapt. The world moves at a pace and my greatest wish is for them to be able to move with it. I find that teaching and working with women to understand that 'new things can be better for you' can be really tough.

## **Women-only spaces**

This has been especially difficult for women from South Asian families. When women are at home, they are a mother, a carer, a wife. It is tricky for them to be just themselves and to carve out a space to do this in their own homes. There is something so powerful about women coming together in dance and shared movement. A complete loss of inhibitions and a hall filled with laughter can shake even the most stubborn of cobwebs off, and leave you with a feeling of elation that lasts the entire day. This has been near impossible to recreate online, but we are giving it a good go.

There are also other problems for families in Gorton and Levenshulme. When logging into the computer is the only way to feel connected, we must strive to ensure that everyone has better access to the equipment needed and good quality tuition on how to use this technology in a way that is meaningful. For women who attend BollyFit, this is about having the confidence to say out loud 'this is my time', without worry that your family will not understand.

Our women formed friendships, they bonded through a love of dance and were given a secure and private space to express themselves freely. This is not an opportunity often afforded to them and it is truly considered a luxury. Women-only spaces in the local gyms frequently still have windows where you can be observed, or you must walk through the unisex spaces dominated by men to get to this space. For some women, this can mean that they will choose not to attend.

In our culture and religion, women-only spaces and environments are where we can thrive. South Asian women need a space to be celebrated, a space where they can be exactly who they are. We are created as individuals and Bollyfit creates a space where there are no judgements and no right or wrong way to express yourself. We need more of this in our neighbourhood and in our homes.



**South Asian women need a space to be celebrated, a space where they can be exactly who they are**

## Searching for happiness

Finding happiness has been a struggle for most this year, with questions like "what new lockdown hobbies have you started"? being commonplace in conversations with friends and family. For some, finding new creative tasks to complete has been a joy. For the wonderful women that had previously attended Bollyfit, this does not seem to have been the case. Women will only go out if they need to. It is difficult for them to change their routines and deviate from the structure that they have in their lives.

Often, our WhatsApp group would inspire people to come along to sessions. We are a community of women supporting one another. Going for a solo walk is just not motivating enough, nor is it the social norm for women from South Asian families. It takes an awful lot of energy from the group to draw our women into Bollyfit to begin with but once they're in, they see the value in coming together socially.



**It has been a tough and illuminating year, one where we have been able to reflect on how we treat others, especially those in Black and Minority Ethnic groups**

It saddens me to see that we have a community of women that rely so heavily on sourcing happiness from activities provided by others. I would love to see them believe in themselves enough to understand that happiness is an inside job and something they can share with others.

This is something that we try to embed through using our space to encourage peer support. We want women to share their challenges each week and we see such power in the room when someone offers a piece of useful advice or explains that they know 'just what you are going through.' Often, there is no safe environment where women can share. Even within their own friendships, there might be concern that their private information or feelings would get back to family members. We create a safe space for peer support and to share with one another. We also make time to celebrate one another and we tell our Bollyfitters to applaud themselves and to value themselves. This reinforces the message that happiness comes from within and you are more than enough.

## Health inequality

It has been a tough and illuminating year, one where we have been able to reflect on how we treat others, especially those in Black and Minority Ethnic groups. For years, I have worried about the underlying health issues that some of my family, friends and women that I work with may have due to not being fully understood or properly listened to by health care professionals.

Women often first come to Bollyfit complaining of periods of prolonged aches and pains. My first question to them is "what did your doctor say about it?" The response is usually "I was told to take paracetamol." It is quite often the case that our pain is dismissed and untreated which could have lasting impacts on both our physical and mental health. It also has further health ramifications, as our confidence in the health care system may be depleted and we do not feel able to return to our GP if the pain continues or worsens, in fear of wasting their time.

I want to change this and I want to work with those who are making strides to reduce health inequalities in our neighbourhood.

It is time that women from South Asian families come together to use their collective voice and to hold their health and care practitioners to account. We deserve to be listened to and to have access to the same quality of health care, information and advice as everyone else. We deserve to be believed.

It is my belief that this is down to confidence, having the inner strength needed to say “I would like a second opinion please doctor,” which is by no means an easy task. We each need to work towards this personal development. We also need to be providing women with the tools and skills needed to understand health inequality and how this can be impacting them so they are able to challenge what they think is mistreatment and discrimination.

Our neighbourhood needs a community of strong and happy women.

## Conclusion

Covid-19 has showed me that Bollyfit Active is needed by the community and it is also needed by the NHS and other health providers to support their patients. Bollyfit Active provides wholesome health and fitness benefits not only to the women who use the service but also has a unique ripple effect to their families and friends too. All of the learning from this strange and disconnected year will help me to structure my business for the future. There needs to be a focus on how to take our service users on a journey of becoming self-reliant. Our wonderful women need support on how to rebuild their sails so they can adjust them and head towards their chosen direction, no matter which direction the wind blows. Teaching our women to become resilient and adaptable is more important now than ever before. We need to educate our communities on being creative and strong-minded and to respectfully challenge those in a position of power. This will be our mission and it is essential for our future.



**I want to work with those who are making strides to reduce health inequalities in our neighbourhood. It is time that women from South Asian families come together to use their collective voice and to hold their health and care practitioners to account**

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- **capacity building for local groups**
  - **support for local people wishing to volunteer (Volunteer Centre Manchester)**
  - **policy support, insight and influence - including convening the city's Voluntary Sector Assembly**
  - **distributing grants to local groups and projects**
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