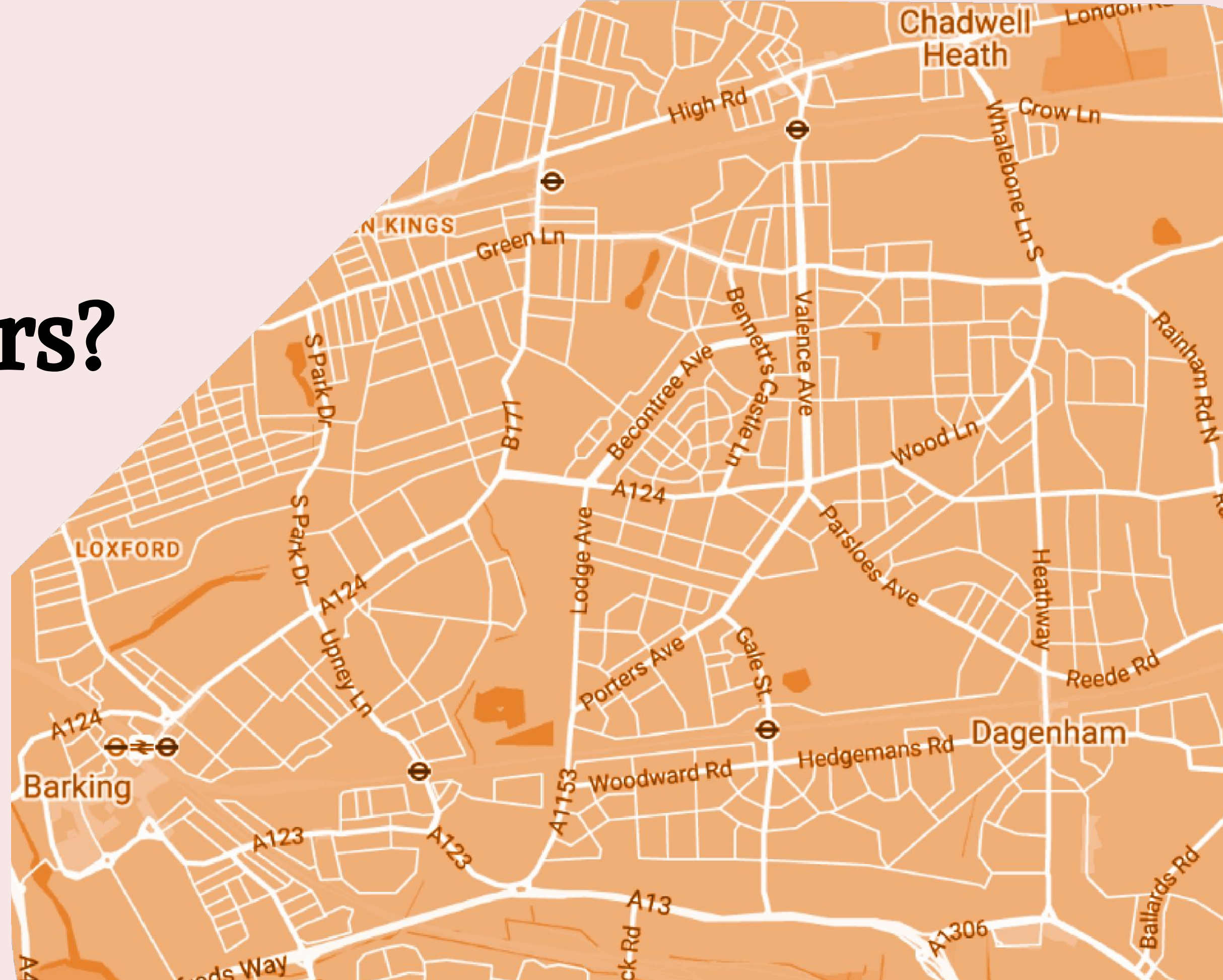


Community: A place where everyone matters?

What we're learning in
Barking & Dagenham



Connect



“The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer





About the Connect programme

We are a partnership of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations (VCFSEs) working with people who are isolated, lonely or housebound:

- Designed with people who've experienced isolation
- Getting to know each person really well
- Bringing community around people
- No time limit on support
- Surfacing what matters to each person
- Learning how to help people overcome barriers, pursue their aspirations and form dependable friendships

About this document

This document captures recent Connect team reflections on the importance of **helping people feel like they matter** - something that has emerged for us recently as **a key ingredient in building strong and meaningful connections** in Barking & Dagenham.

These reflections are drawn from members of the [BD Collective](#) involved in the Connect programme, and they have surfaced in our ongoing learning sessions since the start of 2025. Some come from people working 1:1 alongside residents engaging with Connect, and others come from broader VCFSEs and community groups within Connect's "Neighbourhoods" learning community, who are using a participatory grantmaking method to help [generate, prototype and fund ideas](#) to test how we can create friendlier neighbourhoods (ideas which may or may not include 1:1 working).

We hope that sharing what we're learning here can help enrich ongoing explorations of the role "mattering" plays in supporting social connection, and inspire questions, comments and reflections that support broader conversations.

Please share your thoughts and questions with us directly as comments in this document, wherever you find a copy, or with michael.roberts@carecity.org.



Background to these learnings

In a recent Connect learning session, we were joined by [Rachael McGrath](#) from the London Interdisciplinary School. Rachael has been exploring **how the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector talks about loneliness** - in particular how the idea of “mattering” features in that conversation.

Rachael’s study of this topic has explored loneliness in younger people - propelled by a [recent study](#) suggesting that forty-four percent (44%) of young adults in the US reported a sense of “not mattering to others” and proposes this may be a key driver behind the fact that 34% also reported feeling lonely. Rachael notes how feeling that “we matter” may be a greater challenge for younger people, who are still in the process of forging identities and understanding how they want to contribute to the world. Thanks to Rachael’s help and prompting, as a team we have had the chance to reflect on how essential the ingredient of mattering is to connection across the broad age range of people we are working alongside in Connect. Moreover, we have seen how it can be interestingly tied to people’s ability to continue to grow and reforge those identities as they age - but more on that later.

In short, it struck us that this link between mattering and connection captures a lot about what we are trying to support, across the Connect programme. **We are coming to see that long-term connections are closely linked to the ability of any person, group, or place to spark and sustain the sense that “we matter” in a number of different ways.** This post captures some of our project reflections on that theme.

The Connect Team in the Independent Living Agency offices



Two kinds of mattering

First, let's unpack two different kinds of mattering that have felt important in our discussions: (1) mattering to others and (2) mattering intrinsically. We have reflected on the importance of helping to support both and on how to approach this based on what we are learning about how these different senses of mattering interact and affect one another over time.

On the one hand, we can **matter to others**. We can feel that we, or the characteristics and skills we have, are valuable to the people around us. If we matter to others in this way, this is sometimes described as having "[social worth](#)". Feeling that we matter in this way is usually a big part of having a healthy sense of self-esteem.

On the other hand we can **matter intrinsically**. We can feel ourselves in some bigger sense to be worthy or valuable in ourselves. This means that we can matter in ways that are independent from our ability to do things for others or what people tell us about what we have to offer. This second kind of mattering doesn't need to mean mattering in any cosmic sense (though it can show up through religious beliefs of some residents). It generally means that we think our existence, experiences, feelings, and desires are important or valuable enough to stand up for, prioritise and invest in. In the Connect team, this was expressed recently as "mattering to ourselves" and we have seen the barriers to connection that residents face when they lack a sense of mattering in this way.



Learning 1

We need to be intentional about welcoming people into new spaces and be watchful of getting lost in “delivering” activities.



welcome

When reflecting on the ingredients of connected neighbourhoods, we've spoken many times about the significance of what happens when someone takes a first step into a new group, activity or community. We've seen how the camaraderie and the energy that can exist between long term members of any group can result in new joiners feeling unintentionally excluded, or thinking:

“Do they really need or want me here?”

“Am I interfering with people's existing relationships?”

“Do I matter as much as others here matter to one another?”

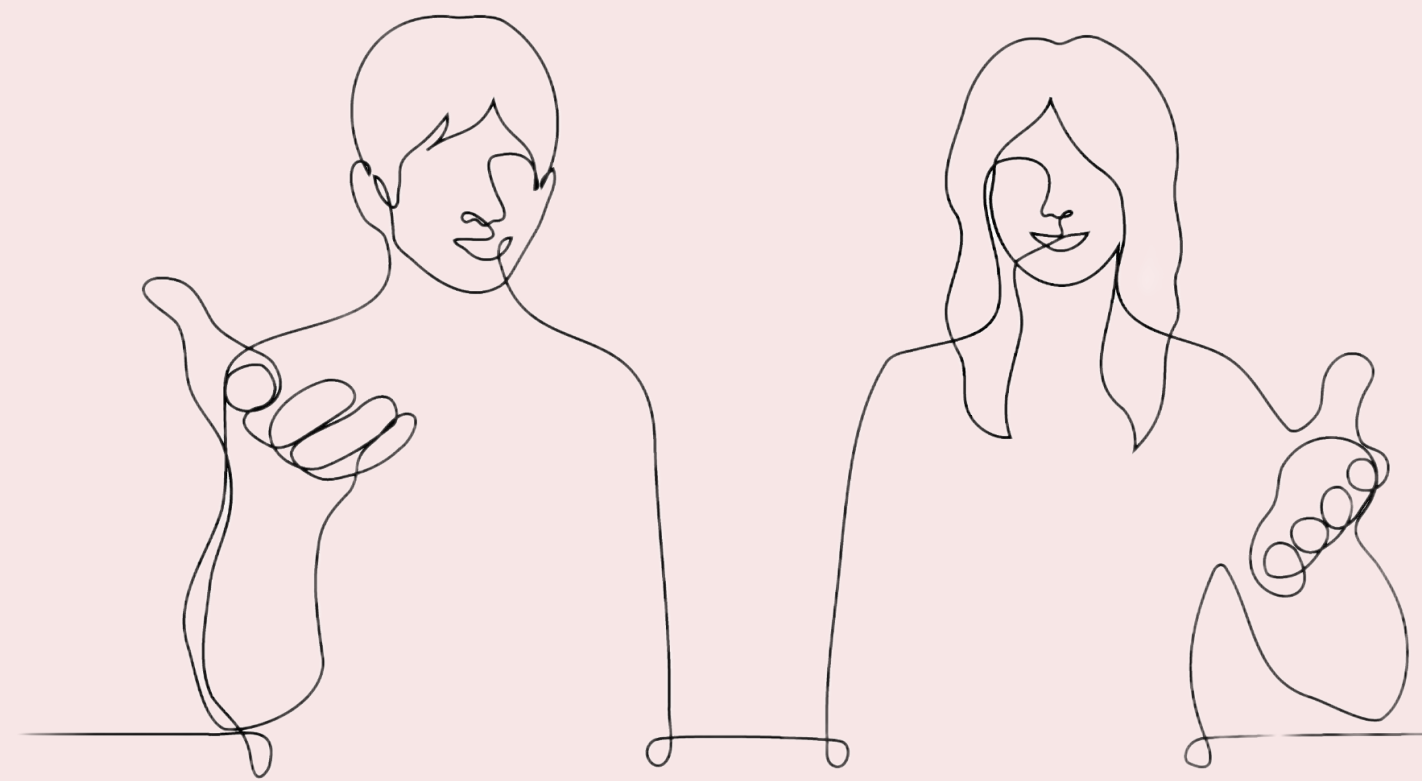
Some Neighbourhoods organisations are, therefore, taking very deliberate steps to recognise the presence and value of new people, for the group. For instance, for [Community Resources](#) this has meant ensuring that a volunteer is always available to sit with new joiners and to spend time with them being curious about their life. This can convey that a new attendee has some (social) value to the group. It can also reinforce to people that this person matters intrinsically - they have as much right as anyone else to be there in the group and to be part of the conversation.

This same idea is also reflected in broader conversations we have had around the importance of paying attention to the small, subtle dynamics of group interaction. We don't always need grand new initiatives to support connection - it may be most helpful to explore small practical changes in how we hold space for people, knowing that it's in these everyday interactions between people that the sense of mattering is given life.

Relatedly, we've reflected on how these small dynamics are shaped by the specific aims that are at the front of our minds, when we run community activities. For example, [Elevate Together](#) shared about a situation in which a person became ill during an event and the facilitator realised she was getting nervous about this getting in the way of the activity. She shared how it can be easy, in instances like this, to get lost in the goal of delivering an activity in a certain way, in a certain time, and unwittingly lose touch with the primary importance of the people there and what they need in that moment. This may mean needing to loosen our agendas and amend plans that we have put a lot of thinking into. With this example in mind, we have spoken about how "it's the people" that are the main priority. They matter more than our plans for the activities we are running.

**"People matter more than schedules.
We have to remind ourselves of this
sometimes"**

Nassaba Guibá, [Elevate Together](#) (Connect
Neighbourhoods)



Learning 2

Creating opportunities to contribute helps people see themselves in a new light, but requires curiosity to get right.



We started Connect with a core belief that people feel more connected to a community if they are able to shape what it looks like. Through our work, we have seen how this can transform the way people see themselves, in a way that unlocks longer term connection.

For instance, through engaging with Connect, one resident in the Thames View estate has found opportunities to invest in his passion for drawing and comics in [Humourisk CIC's](#) "Shed Life" community. The group is now looking to publish and distribute a comic book based on this resident's designs and contributions from other local residents. Within street engagement activities, the group is collecting residents' sketches of their superpowers, which will be incorporated into the final comic. This new "Shed INC" initiative is helping the resident who inspired the project to build his confidence and sense of mattering to others, while also inviting others locally to experience the same.

On a similar note, the Dagenham Rhythms Community Choir is ensuring everyone is able to contribute to the group's playlist, helping people feel that things wouldn't be the same without them. We now that once people have seen that they can contribute in ways like this, it can strengthen the sense that their desires are as valid to act upon as everyone else's. By repeatedly building people's sense of social worth, we can also reinforce their sense that they matter intrinsically too.

As partner organisations working ever more closely together, we are also getting better at picking up on each other's needs and at linking residents with skills from one group into another, where those skills can help. This is what will make Connect truly sustainable - it's not about us as a team "fixing" people - it's about unleashing the power latent in the community to nourish itself. This requires being genuinely interested and curious about residents and looking beyond our first impressions of them or the value they bring.

"This is what makes people keep coming back - they're seen in a different light to what they've experienced before" -
- Susie, 1:1 Connection Catalyst

"The more time we spend in getting to know people, the easier it is to see what they're good at and spot the right opportunities for them to contribute" - Susie, 1:1 Connection Catalyst

Moreover, we've noticed that, where people's families don't recognise what a person has to offer, this can be a big contributor to their social isolation.

Humourisk CIC have seen that it can be especially helpful when family members are around to witness people's new contributions within groups. This can help families see a person in a different way, and adapt their own interactions to better recognise their value.

This focus on supporting people to think reimagine themselves as people who have great things to offer is also central to our recent thinking about what it might mean to “graduate” from the Connect programme. We’re asking: how might we do this in ways that naturally loop people into supporting others?

Rather than thinking about the moment we finally “say goodbye”, might we instead think of their journey in Connect as moving gradually from someone receiving 1:1 support, into someone more freed up to provide care and friendship for others engaged in the programme too? “Gradualating” is the best term we could come up with to describe this difference, for now!



In a recent learning session, team members (pictured) chipped in with some gardening, at the spontaneous request of a local resident who'd discovered new opportunities to share his gardening skills with the Shed Life community.

“It’s been nice seeing residents going to Heath Park Community Centre together – people I’ve worked with individually. Now they’re there with one another, going to the yoga and afterwards they’re going to the cafe for cakes together, and helping one another with lifts to the bus stop. We knew enough about what was going on locally to help people connect with things they might enjoy. Now, I hear them say “I don't need you next time – I'm going to be fine”. It’s so nice to see it’s actually working.”

– Lisa, 1:1 Connection Catalyst



Learning 3

Conversational tools can show that we value each person and help us put their ambitions in the lead



As a team, we've seen that the tools we lean on to have early conversations with residents can help them to feel there is something different about Connect. These can show that, unlike some other initiatives they may have engaged, each person matters to us.

For instance, Connect team members working 1:1 alongside residents are using [SIGNAL](#). This is a tool that takes people through a structured conversation around 40 aspects of their life and prompts open-ended reflection on how people feel they are doing in each area. Residents choose a red, amber or green indicator to reflect these feelings. They are then prompted to pick specific areas they wish to focus on, based on what matters most to them right now. People's priorities need not match up with "red" indicators and they might be very different from what other people in their lives are telling them to focus upon.

"It's not about ticking boxes, SIGNAL gave us the space for a real conversation. You could see something shift. Jeannette [a resident engaging with Connect] began thinking about what she wanted, not just what others expected."- Abs, 1:1 Connection Catalyst

We've noticed how using SIGNAL in a conversational, curious way helps us stand out from other initiatives residents may have interacted with. People have been surprised that we are truly interested in the details of their life, we are willing to have a long conversation about that, and that they are important enough for this to be worth spending time on.

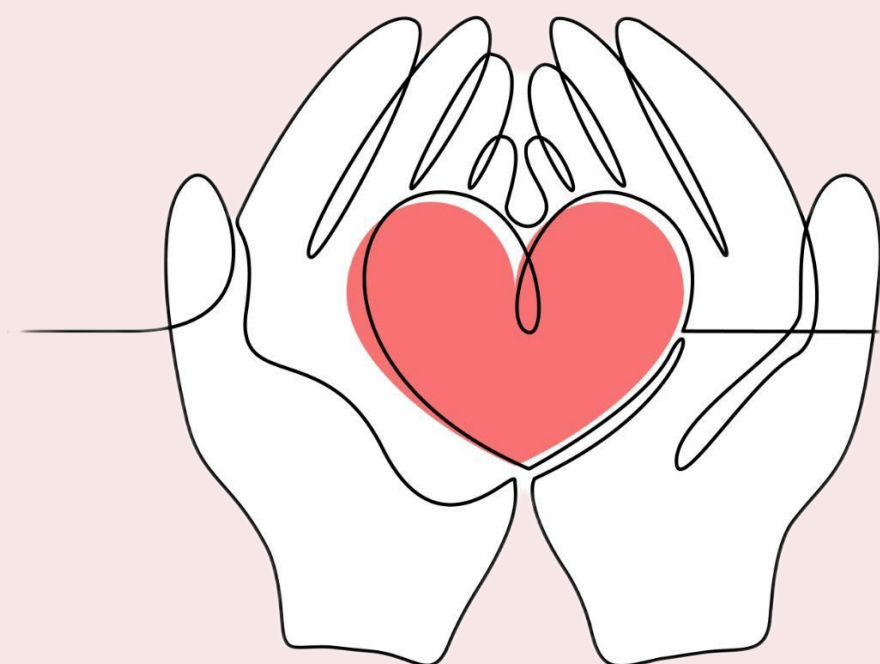
What's more, tools like SIGNAL have helped us to collaboratively identify small steps, which residents can take to move themselves in the right direction and build confidence in what they have to offer others, through accumulating small successes. One resident, Delfa, recently shared that she has printed out her life map and put it on the fridge to provide some perspective. People can find it helpful to have a visual reminder of the areas that they are doing well in, like the green dots shown on Delfa's map. This can help them feel like they have a more secure platform to test out new things and focus on what they have to offer others, even though there are other areas in which they may be struggling. More details about the benefits of SIGNAL that we're seeing can be found [here](#).

"It gave me structure and made me feel more positive. It was also a great ice-breaker with Abs (my 1:1 Connection Catalyst). By talking things through, I could explore different aspects of my life and make decisions for myself." - Delfa, Barking & Dagenham (shown on the right)



Connect Neighbourhoods organisations are also testing how they can have conversations that clearly put people's priorities first. For instance, while exploring how to create safe spaces to connect for isolated young adults who have experienced trauma, [Sure Steps Wellbeing](#) are approaching this from a perspective of "discovering what matters most" to those young people. They are making an explicit effort to go out to where people are, focusing on young people's priorities rather than their own, and consciously trying to model an attitude of "unconditional self-acceptance".

It is this focus upon the individual priorities and the value of each person that makes the project stand out, as noted on the right by recent intern, Heather.



“I was drawn to Connect because it’s all about person-centred care. You care about the actual people rather than just doing paperwork. Sometimes people just want to be listened to, and you get that. You care about working together as different organisations. Everyone is so genuine.”

– Heather Howarth, Integrated Health and Social Care undergraduate, Manchester Metropolitan University

Learning 4

Fixed identities and behaviours can get in the way of connection, while a sense of security helps people to experiment



Some people we are working alongside have retired from successful, high-status professional lives. While this means that they may have a lot to offer others, we have also seen that it can narrow the connections they have. For instance, residents who see themselves through this professional lens may be attached to ways of interacting that are more intellectual or specialised, and they may discount opportunities to join more mixed spaces or more “amateur” activities.

On the one hand, this is totally justified. Supporting people to feel confident in expressing what they want and don’t want is a big part of what we’re doing in Connect. And we often find a benefit in encouraging people to think beyond what their family or friends want for them and into what they want for themselves.

However, when preferences deeply rooted in someone’s professional identity meet with a situation that may now be very different, this can create barriers. We’ve noted how it can be helpful to gently encourage attention to broader skills people have, which may widen their sense of how they can enjoy interacting with others.

For other residents we are working alongside, they lack a strong sense of what they have to offer. If they have experienced lots of stigma or rejection because of specific health or life challenges, they don’t necessarily have a firm sense of identity that clarifies what they like or what they have to share.

We've found it important when working with these individuals to focus on building up that sense of intrinsic self-worth (I matter as much as everyone else) and bringing community around a person to show them that they are worthy of support and attention. This might mean inviting people into more conversations, or providing opportunities to offer their views and skills. We have seen that the more we are able to do this, the more flexible people can be with other aspects of their life too, where making some changes to very fixed behaviours can benefit their ability to connect with others.

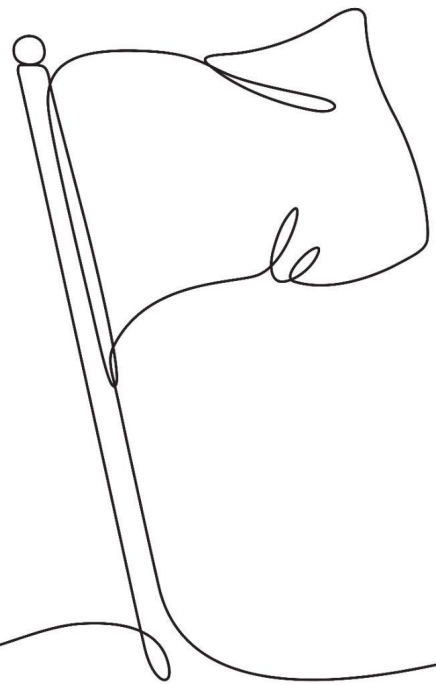
For instance, we've seen that one resident who has been attending Humourisk CIC's Shedlife group for a long time has been able to grow his sense of personal safety and support to the extent that he is now more open to helpful changes in his housing situation and hygiene habits. In this case, the resident took the opportunity to wash for the first time in four years, and accepted his community's offer to come together and support him through a decluttering and renovation blitz, to prevent his eviction. We are seeing that this openness to big changes that disrupt rigid patterns of behaviour requires feeling secure in other parts of life.



A recent Connect learning session in the Thames Community Hub

Learning 5

Being explicit about our values (i.e. each person matters) can bring others on the journey with us



As organisations, we are sometimes welcoming new people into community spaces and groups who may be difficult for existing community members to accept because of their cultural assumptions, or religious beliefs. For instance, a member of [Community Resources](#) recently recounted how one of their existing group attendees had disregarded a new person because they'd had surgery which significantly affected their speech following a cancer diagnosis. The existing group member attributed that to the person's own actions, believing it to be bad karma.

However, rather than judging the existing group member, the team noticed that they could positively impact this person's attitude by being explicit about their values-driven approach. By taking time to deliberately explain why they were taking time to welcome the new attendee, they were able to gently shift the person's attitude. They shared how they are driven to demonstrate love, practise commitment, bring hope and create peace, partly because they have experienced the benefit of those things themselves, and they want to show the same to others. And in sharing this with the existing group member, they noticed how her behaviour around this new joiner changed completely.

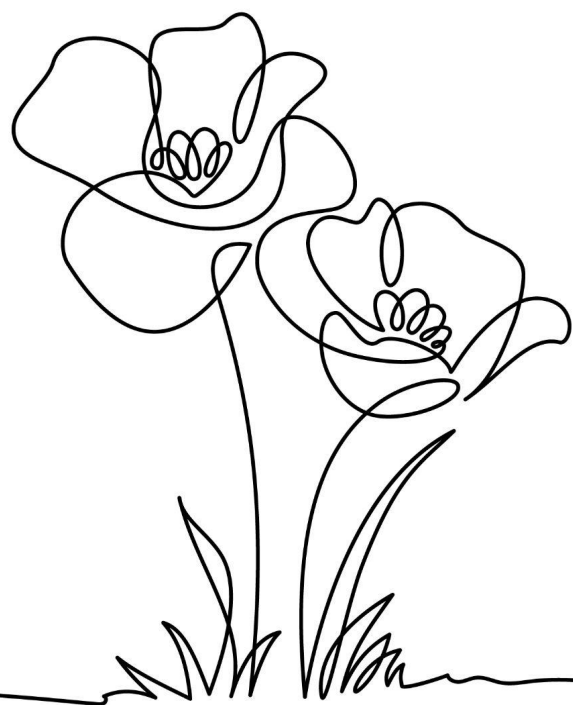
Being explicit about values like this can catalyse the "ripple effect" that happens when we show kindness or support to others and then see them pass along the same to others - something we have commented on a lot recently. [Elevate Together](#) have recently shared how they are testing new ways to strengthen this by putting extra focus on empowering their facilitators to be community leaders - people who embody and champion the principle that each person matters and spread that attitude around.



Team learning in Heath Park Community Centre

Learning 6

Gently encouraging attention away from needs and towards a richer life is helpful, possible (and can help people meet their needs too!)



When working 1:1 with residents, our Community Catalysts have seen that a lot of people are prevented from forming connections thanks to having a laser focus on specific personal needs. In particular, we have seen that people can be extremely focused on meeting their health needs (understandably!). However, this can be a problem when people think these need must be met before they get around to more exciting and nourishing activities they really want to pursue - especially when health problems are often beyond our control, and can hang around for a long time - sometimes forever!

Set against this, we know that a growing body of evidence points to the crucial role of social connections in supporting good health, with one [paper](#) suggesting that strong connections can increase the likelihood of surviving in any given year by a staggering 50%! Because of this, we've been conscious as a team of the importance of helping people focus away from their deficits (e.g. a deficit of good health) in a way that helps them focus on building the very things that may help them meet those needs.

On a similar note, we have been working alongside people who are hesitant to spend their own money to get to events, out of concern for not having enough to support themselves. Again, this is understandable, but it risks people being hyper focused on how to prevent bad things happening (e.g. running out of money), rather than on how they might enrich their lives. For some people, they really do need to focus on those more material and health challenges first. For others, we've seen the importance of being creative in how we're encouraging people away from the needs mindset, even in the midst of big challenges.

When we took this topic to the Connect Neighbourhoods teams, Community Resources shared about a woman who had come into their centre with very complex needs. She was fighting for access to children, talking to the police due to harassment from an ex-partner, engaging with the community mental health team, and anxious about moving to Universal Credit. She turned up to get help with this feeling of being overwhelmed.

When at the centre, this woman was invited to join other activities running on the day. And we heard how, at the end of the day, all she talked about was the people, conversations and activities she'd been involved with, rather than the overwhelming things that were happening to her. We saw that even when someone is overwhelmed and confused by what's happening to them, and doesn't initially appear to want to do anything else, we can help them think beyond their immediate circumstances. We can support an alternative perspective on life, purely by leaning into being intentional about welcoming someone into an enrichment-focused space.

Connection Catalysts working 1:1 alongside residents have shared how they look for small creative nudges to help people look beyond their challenges (e.g. making someone a birthday card that illustrates the meaning of their name) or use SIGNAL to help people gain some perspective on what they have to offer. This feels an important counterbalance to "solving problems" together.



What's next for us at Connect?

Building out our ability to share learnings and collaborate with local services

Within Connect, we're walking alongside people who are feeling overwhelmed or stuck in their interactions with public sector services. Alongside this though, we're also keen to collaborate with more individuals within the public sector in our "Connecting the Dots" sessions, which bring together people from different local authority teams to learn from resident experiences. We want to explore how we might provide smoother channels for residents, and identify effective ways for VCFSEs to work more closely alongside public services, in more cost-effective, community-powered solutions to today's social challenges.

Supporting broader conversations around the role of mattering and identity in building social connectedness through events and storytelling

The Connect team, alongside local residents, will be presenting on the programme and our learnings at the upcoming [Stronger Things 2025](#). We will also be telling the story of the programme in a community event at [Harmony House](#) on June 20th. We hope to use both these opportunities to provoke other local authorities and VCSEs to think about the significance of the sense of mattering in addressing loneliness, and the practical implications of that for our different sectors and organisations.



What's next for us at Connect?

Exploring broader ways to support people who are housebound

We've noticed that we often face the biggest challenges in supporting people who are housebound, and we need to be creative in how we are able to bring community around these residents. We are interested to see the impact of the Shed INC project mentioned above on this, but we are also thinking about where we might use technologies to make a difference here (e.g. providing improved access to technology or setting up digital buddy systems) or draw upon the strengths and connections of other residents working alongside us in Connect, to reach people we haven't yet managed to.

Sparkling more conversations about a "connection-friendly" place for people with disabilities

In our Neighbourhoods learnings, we have been picking up more and more on the challenges faced in the borough by people with visual impairments and other disabilities, when navigating the built and social environment. We have seen that people with sight problems have difficulty finding suitable transport locally, navigating poorly maintained walkways, or accessing shops. So we see a pressing need to have more community conversations to generate ideas we might test to make our place more conducive to connection for people with disabilities. This is something we hope to make progress on through the broader Neighbourhood Networks initiative about to launch locally.

If you'd like to collaborate in helping address anything mentioned here, have questions about the Connect, or have ideas about how we might work together please send a message to michael.roberts@carecity.org.