Neighbourhood Networks

Learning from our first 3 months "live"

January 2026

What's this about?

These slides share some learning highlights from the first three months of <u>Neighbourhood Networks</u> activity in Barking & Dagenham. They provide an overview of what networks have been up to, followed by early insights into:

- Effective ways of working and collaborating
- Emerging value generated by the networks
- Barriers and enablers to establishing networks

The learning shared is drawn from intentional experimentation within each network. Evidence has been gathered through structured discussions and reflection within individual networks, alongside a quarterly learning event held in November 2025 in Eastbrookend Discovery Centre (shown on the right), where all newly established networks came together to reflect on their first three months of activity.

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Context

Background; Learning Questions; Our Early Ambitions

Background: A new group of "hyperlocal" networks

September 2025 marked the launch of the first three Neighbourhood Networks (see map on the right). Each brings together at least three local VCFSE (Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise) organisations around a dedicated £28.8k funding pot, to work alongside residents in shaping neighbourhood activities. The programme seeks to strengthen connections, skills and collaboration across the borough, and to release strengths into the community, with a long-term aim to reduce pressure on health and local authority services.

Of the three first networks, some brought together organisations without prior connections, while others formalised and deepened existing relationships. It is an ambition to establish ten networks within the first two years of the programme.

Neighbourhood Networks is intentionally learning-focused - with support provided by Learning Partner Care City to help networks adapt and refine ideas and capture learning along the way. This summary has been produced by Care City.

Barking & Dagenham

Our Core Questions

On the right are some overarching learning questions that networks are exploring in the programme.

These have been co-produced based on learning from recent experiences and precursors to this programme in Barking & Dagenham, including the LBBD funded Connect programme.

1. **What's happening across the networks?**

   We're reflecting on what networks want to spend money on, and the kinds of initiatives and outcomes that feel like a priority to residents.

2. **How are we working and collaborating, and how might we do that more effectively?**

   We're exploring how networks are engaging, working and collaborating with one another and with residents, and how this can be refined over time

3. **What's the value being created by networks?**

   We're exploring the benefits of networks for organisations, residents, and wider organisations and services in the borough.

Early learning ambitions

Alongside our regular *network-level* learning questions shown on the previous slide, we are exploring a series of broader *place-level* questions every three months, so we can better understand how asset-based community development can happen, and be supported, across the borough.

Our focus this quarter was on exploring:

What are the barriers and enablers to getting networks up and running?

A full set of our learning questions (at the level of networks, an place) is included in Appendix 1.

What's been happening so far?

Resident engagement
Exploring residents' priorities

Testing different approaches to resident engagement

Engaging with residents in a Neighbourhood Heart Hackathon

Given the central ambition of the programme to develop *resident-led* ideas, a key theme of early activity has been resident engagement - networks have been unpacking what local residents want, for their neighbourhoods, and exploring different ways of surfacing this.

Across the networks, different approaches have been taken. Approaches have built upon prior experiences while also being exploratory in nature - **networks are self-consciously testing different ways of engaging with residents** to access ideas and build momentum around networks as something residents wish to participate with. Each network is approaching engagement from a different starting point - some are building on top of existing, detailed work that's already been done at a neighbourhood level, while others are bringing together approaches from individual organisations and looking for patterns within results.

Initial networks have all taken slightly different approaches to engaging residents. For instance, **Heath Park network** have quickly conceived a **"Neighbourhood Networks Panel" , which will give up to 10 local residents direct power over how their funding pot will be spent**. As a network with strong prior relationships between organisations, and three months of recent community research under their belt (exploring local priorities), they felt able to move swiftly to a concrete idea for how money decisions could be made. Engagement was therefore focused on primarily on *promoting this opportunity* and building momentum around the network (see promotional leaflet on the right).

In contrast, **Neighbourhood Heart Network** are engaging residents through a series of "Hackathons" - events designed to stir engagement and enthusiasm around a shared vision. Reflecting on the first hackathon, the network shared that "together with residents, we practiced Deep Democracy (a way of making sure every voice is heard and valued) to dream up a shared vision for our neighbourhood's future. **We asked: "What would you do if you could invest £1 million in your neighbourhood?"**

Promotion for the Neighbourhood Heart Hackathon

Unlike the aforementioned networks, where preexisting strong relationships are being deepened, **Parsloes Potential** is bringing organisations together to explore deep collaboration between them for the first time. Here, ==organisations have been reaching out through their own channels and then combining findings to explore overlaps and commonalities in resident priorities and desires at the Neighbourhood level==. Within this network, there has been ongoing reflection on question of "who is our community?" and the wisdom of doubling down on deeper engagement with residents already connected or trying to explore more unknown territory.

Parsloes Potential Network, meeting together
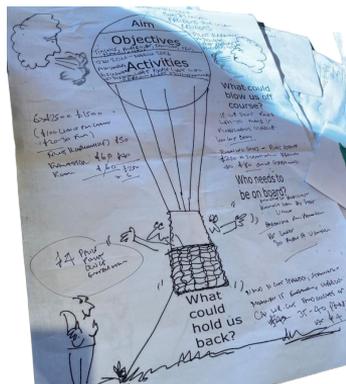
An air balloon metaphor used to help surface resident ideas

As a newer collaboration, ==the network is looking to explore how far resident desires map against what they offer==, to find gaps and opportunities. Related to this, they've noted how some approaches to engagement can lead people to default to the kind of things that they know organisations provide, so they are keen to get explore the right, nuances ways of having these conversations as time goes on. Different methods for engagement so far have included polls on established community whatsapp groups, and short in-person 1:1 conversations to unpack people's desires.
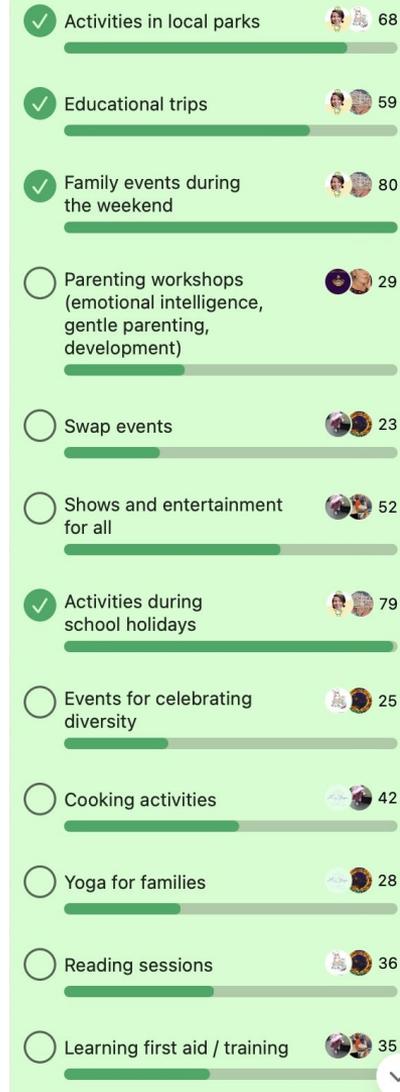
Exploring resident priorities

Networks' focus has largely been on establishing, and building momentum, which means they have tended to go out with relatively broad questions to explore residents desires. Yet, each has already seen solid ideas and patterns emerging.

A commonality across networks has been interest in events and activities that cater for families. In particular, this includes more opportunities during evenings and weekends, events that cater for whole families (over e.g. specific age ranges) and, linked to this, opportunities that give parents breathing space and a chance to take a step back from the relentlessness of parenting. A specific example of this is the desire for the return of a Christmas Bazaar, in Heath Park.

On the right - showing responses to Early Years Cocoon CIC's WhatsApp poll (in the **Parsloes Potential** network) - we can see some nuance to the desire for family friendly activities, with focus on access to the outdoors, a desire for educational content, and the network has also found enthusiasm around emerging ideas for a "dry disco" and community cinema programme.

Another big emerging theme is safety - with residents expressing a desire to feel safer visiting the shops, or in accessing parks, with recognition of how isolation feeds on the absence of this feeling.

✓ Activities in local parks	68
✓ Educational trips	59
✓ Family events during the weekend	80
○ Parenting workshops (emotional intelligence, gentle parenting, development)	29
○ Swap events	23
○ Shows and entertainment for all	52
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○ Events for celebrating diversity	25
○ Cooking activities	42
○ Yoga for families	28
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○ Learning first aid / training	35

Family activities emerging out of the Heath Park network

SATURDAY FAMILY FUN FITNESS

Brought to you by
HEATH PARK NEIGHBOURHOOD NETWORK PANEL

Led by Baj from Baj Fitness

FREE Sessions for the Whole Family!
Get moving, have fun, and meet your neighbours!
All ages welcome - children to grandparents!
All children must be accompanied by an adult.

No booking required - just turn up!

DATES
December 6th, 13th, 20th & 27th
January 10th & 17th
Time: 1pm - 2pm
Venue: Heath Park Community Centre
Rusholme Avenue, RM10 7PR

Heath Park Consortium

JOIN US!
8 local residents choosing activities for OUR community.
Want to be part of the panel? Get in touch!
heathparkconsortium@gmail.com
07889 008828

Discussing resident engagement and participation in our quarterly learning session

Learning about collaboration

A snowballing approach to participation
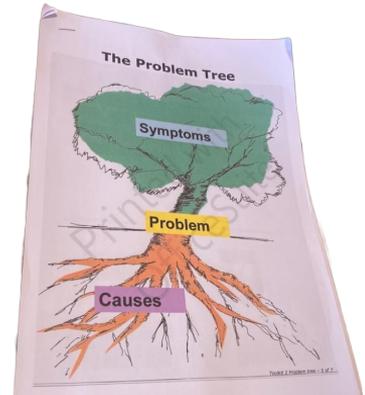Reflecting on the role of money

A snowballing approach to participation

Most networks are taking a deliberately gradual, "snowballing" approach to resident participation- starting by building awareness, whilst taking presenting opportunities and building momentum and ideas at each step . For instance, Neighbourhood Heart aimed its first Hackathon at key community partners with lots of energy for this work, seeking to build a foundation of enthusiasm and momentum. They then aimed to widen their reach by asking participants to invite a friend for the next hackathon**.**

Parsloes Potential tested going into deep questions quickly, using a root and branch metaphor with residents (shown on the right) to dig into whether activity ideas might address causes or symptoms of local challenges. They reflected that this wasn't as helpful as hoped. They were seeing better results when talking at a broader level and building a foundation of energy around the network - this level of detail could be something to return to later once residents were bought in to the new project.

Additionally, while Heath Park are moving quickly into direct resident participation in budgeting decisions in their resident panel, they have seen ideas surfacing organically by placing leaflets in the right spaces - residents have curiosity and imagination just waiting for an opportunity to unleash. For example, **leaflets in local shops, next to shopkeepers that residents are already used to chatting to, has given rise to unprompted ideas that are feeding into what's next.**


A visual metaphor to help residents unpack the benefits of different ideas

Reflecting on the role of money

As networks have started to shape and prioritise ideas in the spirit of "collective wisdom" (a topic in our quarterly meeting), we are seeing a lot of diversity in how money features in this process. This is raising helpful ideas and questions about how and when it's helpful to foreground money in community engagement. ==Networks have been keen to explore such questions as they have been exposed to what others are up to, and how that differs from their own approaches==.

For instance, **Heath Park's** resident panel provides direct influence over how money is spent, with clarity on a budget that residents will direct. In contrast, **Neighbourhood Heart's** Hackathon approach has focused on participatory approaches to the developing the narrative and vision that the community is working towards, and they are building energy around this by co-creating values and documenting and sharing this process. ==Rather than going out with a specific budget available through the programme, the network shared a broader hypothetical question - "what would you do with £1,000,000?" - to try to keep early conversation on ideas==.

Reflecting on how "collective wisdom" is showing up, in our quarterly learning session
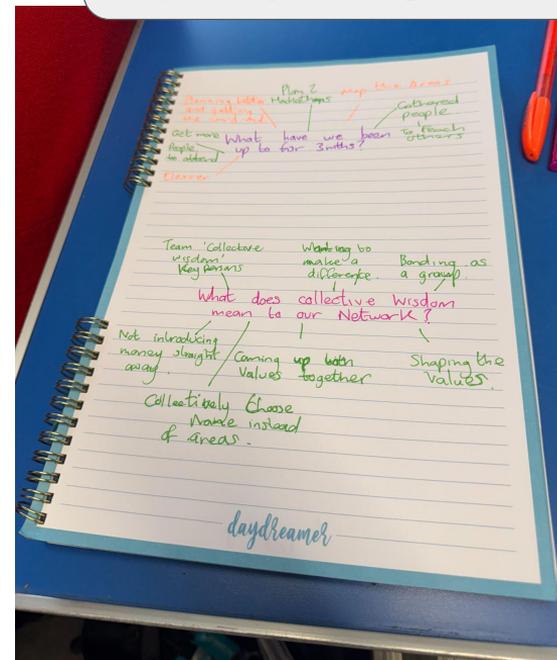
It will be valuable going forwards to keep an eye on differences in how conversations feel, when money is on the horizon, and ask:

- **When does money focus minds and when does it get in the way?**
- **How do we talk about and spend money in empowering ways?**

On similar note, networks have shared uncertainty over the appropriate way to reimburse resident time, raising questions like:

- **What counts as participation?**
- **Should there be a standard rate for participation across networks for fairness?**
- **How do we make this also about civic responsibility?**

These questions feel like just the beginning of a conversation that will run throughout the programme.

Deep democracy and power-sharing in action in the Neighbourhood Heart Community Hackathon

Early value

- A fresh opportunity
- Reinvigorating community ownership
- Growing a collective ambition to work towards

A feeling of fresh opportunity

We've heard repeatedly within network discussions about a sense of "fresh opportunity" that comes with new or deeper collaborations. One organisation has remarked on how **new relationships bring "excitement"**, while another has shared that the programme has given them an opportunity to breathe new life into old ideas that may have gotten overtaken with trends or which are not always prioritised by the local authority (e.g., a Christmas bazaar featuring local crafts, which though it felt very "traditional", there has been wide enthusiasm for). Another organisation remarked on how the programme offers a chance to think more deeply about emerging ideas and think beyond the initial thoughts into their implications.

Sitting aside discomfort

One organisation shared the discomfort that comes with the excitement, and the urge to stay with "what we know". In light of this, we've reflected on the importance of reminding one another of the experimental nature of the networks. Finding the right way to talk about this was a focus in our kick-off in September. We spoke about the need to stay on top of safeguarding and feel confident to experiment without fear of harmful consequences. **We committed together to "being open to getting things wrong" which we unpacked as "taking risks and experimenting, in a safe way".** This is something we'll have to keep returning to - unpacking how failing in safe ways, can look and be continually encouraged in the context of the VCFSE sector.

Reinvigorating "community ownership"

In our collective learning session, we spoke about the opportunity to rekindle a sense of "community ownership" over what's happening in neighbourhoods, through the programme, and the importance of this in making things a success.

"With neighbourhood networks there's an opportunity to not only implement what we've discovered but for residents to be part of the process." - Network reflection

Networks are keen to take advantage of this opportunity.

While being sensitive to cynicism

At the same time, we've reflected on the cynicism that residents can express, on the basis of seeing initiatives like this launched in the past and then quickly fall away.

There is concern that residents will be tired of being asked what they are interested in, or what's needed locally, which has raised the importance of two things in particular:

1. **Taking action and testing ideas quickly (over endless talk and meetings)**

2. **Framing conversation around what residents want to *do* (rather than see, or have provided for them)**

Growing a collective ambition to work towards

In our November learning session, alongside reflecting on recent activity, we also welcomed a new network - **John Smith House** - and invited them to share their hopes, fears and questions.

They raised the topic of sustainability and **they shared the idea that, if we could demonstrate real impact through the programme, we could open up bigger funding pots in 18 months which all networks might apply to as part of a collective** - money which could both sustain activity emerging through the networks and scale it.

An note on sustainability made by the network joining the programme

SUSTAINABILITY & POTENTIAL EXIT STRATEGY IF IT DON'T WORK

With open questions about a collective vision

While it was helpful to reflect on long-term opportunities the programme could open up, this revealed some bigger questions and diversity in possible visions of the "success" of the programme. **Conversion about accessing larger funding pots led to reflections on the role of VCFSEs as "intermediaries" between residents and the money**. It was noted that many people in the programme began simply as residents taking action on their ideas, of their own backs. And we reflected on the extent to which we should be aiming at seeding less institutional, pure "grassroots" working in neighborhoods. It feels important to keep exploring co-creating this evolving vision as we progress, and keep it open to many versions of "success".

Place-level learning: How to setup a network

- What helps and what gets in the way?
- Structure versus freedom

What makes establishing networks easier?

When exploring the things that support networks to get off the ground, we heard about the value of:

- **Prior effective collaboration**: People reflected on the value of knowing they were surrounded by existing and supportive partners, who they trusted as sources of knowledge and experience.

- **Shared ambitions of making a difference**: We also heard about the value of faith that network partners shared a genuine willingness to benefit their community.

What makes things more challenging?

Time & capacity: We reflected on the lack of time available to VCFSEs and the challenge of sharing jobs without creating unfair pressures.

Jargon: Some people reflected on not being familiar with language being used.

Availability of local assets: One network reflected on the challenge of lacking a central venue to focus around. Together, it will helpful to think about how networks with less defined geographies or regular spaces might operate in different ways to those with more established "bases", how this need to travel around the borough may bring benefits as well as challenges, and whether "community asset transfers" might support access to space where needed

Structure versus freedom

In the knowledge that some organisations are very new to this way of working, while others have been doing it for a long time, the Neighbourhood Networks programme was designed to provide a balance between two things:

- **Structured support and processes** to provide clarity on key principles and ambitions on the programme, and on how this could these could be brought to life quickly.

- **Freedom for networks** to take their own approach, and let community take the lead in how they want to develop and deliver ideas.

We used our November learning session to check in on how this balance was feeling. Generally, it was felt to be good, though there were some specific points where networks thought we could adapt either the programme or the learning support, to achieve a more helpful mixture.

Networks reflections on the balance between structure and freedom

Organisations valued **learning tools** available to them, including scrapbooks and reflection templates, insofar as they ==prompted helpful questions, encouraged reflection in advance of meetings, and catalysed regular curious conversations== within networks,

However, it was felt that some of these could be adapted, and their framing adjusted - their format wasn't always suited to easy completion and data capture (with helpful tweaks being identified) and ==networks reflected on the importance of not being bound by specific processes or structures for coming together and developing and capturing ideas==.

We also discussed *when* it's helpful to ask questions and *their purpose*—for example: ==were the questions within the current process for networks drawing down funds genuinely helpful, for whom, and did they support learning or *monitoring* (or something else)?== In early 2026, we'll be exploring some more holistic approaches and tools for working with data and "evidence" in the programme, and how we might work with both it in ways that better support networks in developing ideas, whilst also enabling collective accountability, wider learning, and capacity-building across the programme. Additionally, ==it feels important that we move away from the notion of a "central team", working separately to networks, and build a feeling of collective responsibility for shaping and sharing the story of the programme's impact together.==

A learning tool designed to help network pursue a "test and learn" approach to developing ideas

# Local Authority reflections and reciprocal learning

Local authority reflections

Emerging learnings here have been shared with commissioning teams in London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD). In the spirit of two-way learning, they've shared the below reflections and observations on what's coming up so far:

- We note the current progress around emerging networks and their partners - we are keen, in due course, to see the networks develop ways to expand their membership.

- Current priorities (family type activities and community safety) speak well to day to day experiences of residents.

- How do we bring these current priorities alongside contributing to other LA priority areas too, such as issues concerning poverty / health inequalities? We need a process for working through which issues should be brought to NNs versus other routes (Connect and emerging health networks), to ensure we don't distract from resident day to day priorities. We are jointly testing this currently - e.g. DDM and place based healthy weight work, Learning difficulties and autism friendly borough, Good Food Retail.

Photos from our Neighbourhood Networks learning session
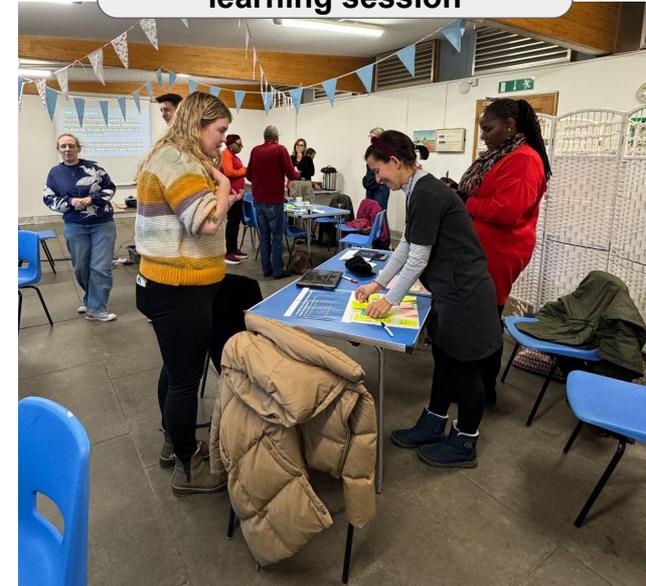
- We note that NNs will take time to build and strengthen and that in the longer term, more and wider partnership building will be possible.

- Resident engagement – LA applauds this breadth of approaches. Very much in line with the Borough wide approach and advocated by Cllr Worby - the Lead Member for Health & Social Care. Can the variety of approaches to resident engagement be published as a best practice guide on the NNs website.

- We encourage the importance of quick 'wins' for residents to show potential of the networks in meeting more far reaching ambitions – medium to longer term.

- It will be good to see connections being made with social prescribers (if this isn't already happening) so they partner by referring into family based events for example.

- We are encouraged by the progressive thinking to apply for funding collectively in the future.

- Reflections on where resident reimbursement is most important: it's important to keep as the NorthStar of the project the 'shared genuine ambition to make a difference' – creating a strong sense civic responsibility.

What's next?

–

What next for the Neighbourhood Networks?

Based on our learning, over the coming months we'll also be experimenting with:

- **Plugging networks into emerging opportunities in the borough**: We're looking to engage interested networks in the Healthy Weight and NNHIP Health Networks programmes.

- **Setting networks in the context of broader neighbourhood health work**: We'll looking to clarify the best role of neighbourhood networks in the context of broader neighbourhood health initiatives running across the borough. This means getting clearer which local challenges are best served by the neighbourhood networks, versus emerging health networks, versus intensive 1:1 working alongside residents through initiatives like Connect.

- **Developing our approach to working "in partnership"**: We'll be looking to experiment within and beyond the initial structures and processes we've put in place to support learning. We'll be working alongside networks to tailor learning support to suit their context. And now we've built some stronger relationships and shared knowledge, we'll be exploring more provocative and cross-network approaches to stress-testing and developing ideas together as a VCFSE sector.

If your have questions or reflections about what's here, please message michael.roberts@carecity.org
If you are interested in establishing or joining a network, please message jenny@bdcollective.co.uk

Appendix 1

Questions in our Learning Framework

Network Level Learning Questions

What we're doing	How we're working	Value we're creating
- What are networks choosing to spend money on? - What is the focus and shape of the initiatives being developed by networks? (which communities, in what way?) - What resident outcomes are networks seeking to improve? (e.g. reducing inequalities, mental health)	- How engaged are residents in networks? - To what extent is power shared / collective wisdom being used? - How are initiatives developed or thought through? (inside and outside of meetings) - How are ideas being prioritised? / What's the process for deciding on funding allocations? - To what extent is network activity drawing upon knowledge of and access to borough assets? What is enabling / blocking that? - How are people being brought into networks? - How sustainable does network activity feel, for organisations / residents?	- What's going well / not well within networks? Biggest successes and challenges? - What are the experiences of residents participating in networks? - What are the experiences of the organisations participating in networks? - What impact has network activities had to individuals in a place? - What implications does learning about value creation have for wider prevention work?

Place Level Learning Questions

Barriers and enablers to getting a network up and running

- What makes successful network delivery possible?]

- What gets in the way of setting up a network?

- What are barriers / enablers to network growth and effectiveness?

Collaborating across networks

- How do/can we share learning well across networks?

- How do/can we come together to identify common opportunities?

    - How do/can networks share information, resources, and opportunities?

    - How do different networks understand each other's roles, priorities, and strengths?

    - To what degree do networks feel they are co-creating solutions across the place, rather than competing for space/resources?

- How inclusive is place-level collaboration of smaller, less-resourced organisations alongside larger ones?

- How well are cross-network activities addressing shared local challenges and opportunities?

- How effectively do collaborations leverage diversity of perspectives to strengthen outcomes?

Working across a "place" (with broader organisations)

- How well do networks understand what's happening across a Borough?
  - What are networks looped into? What assets do they know of locally?
  - How linked are networks to services / other agencies?
- How much trust exists between networks and between networks and wider system partners (e.g., statutory bodies)?
- To what extent do networks feel they have an equal voice in place-level decision-making?
- How can LBBD remove barriers to networks being able to achieve change?

What's the broader impact of networks for the Borough?

- How do networks and their members perceive the added value of coming together at the place level?
- Are the collaborations leading to stronger influence for VCFEs in the borough?
- To what extent is leadership distributed across networks rather than concentrated in a few individuals/organisations?
- How is the quality of life for communities being improved through collaborative work?