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**London Borough of Hounslow**

**Thriving community  
workshops**

**Final key findings report  
October 2018**



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## Project details

<b>Title</b>	Thriving community workshops
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<b>Project number</b>	18116
<b>Author</b>	Sophi Ducie
<b>Research Manager</b>	Sophi Ducie
<b>Reviewed by</b>	Clare Rapkins

### M·E·L Research

2nd Floor, 1 Ashted Lock, Birmingham Science Park Aston, Birmingham. B7 4AZ

Email: [info@melresearch.co.uk](mailto:info@melresearch.co.uk)

Web: [www.melresearch.co.uk](http://www.melresearch.co.uk)

Tel: 0121 604 4664



# Research context

## Background

The London Borough of Hounslow is a vibrant and aspiring Borough; stretching from Chiswick in the north-east, to Bedfont in the West. With an estimated 273,000 people living in the Borough in 2017 over 140 languages spoken and almost one half of the population from minority ethnic communities, Hounslow is one of the London's most diverse boroughs.

The London Borough of Hounslow wants to see thriving communities across the borough, where the council works in partnership with a strong voluntary and community sector to improve the lives of all residents. Hounslow therefore wants to develop a new strategy taking into account the new challenges faced by individuals, communities and the voluntary community sector.

Hounslow has already carried out various research activities which has identified key elements which are referred to as building blocks; in creating a thriving community. The borough now wants to explore these building blocks with the voluntary community sector and residents to see if they are on the right track and to further drill into what makes a thriving community.

To support the council's in doing this and feed into the development of a thriving communities strategy, M·E·L Research were commissioned to deliver four workshops. In total, 14 participants (7 representing residents' groups/associations and 7 representing the voluntary community sector) took part in the workshops. It should be noted that all participants were residents of the Borough. This document presents the key findings from the workshops. The topic guide can be found in Appendix A.

# Key findings

## What is a thriving community?

The first part of the session focused on better understanding what makes a community thrive. Firstly, participants were asked to think about the word community and the word thriving and what this meant to them. Participants felt that to have a community people need to care and support each other and be able to work together. When asked what a community needs to thrive, participants felt that there needs to be energy within the community, people also needed to have a sense of pride in their local area. Investment, networking and growth were also mentioned. The findings were fairly similar between the community voluntary sectors and residents groups.

### Community:



### Thriving:



In summary, to have a thriving community, the key themes were identified:

1. Communication on what is happening in their local area
2. Information so that people can understand why decisions are being made
3. Integrity so that people trust the information being provided to them
4. People having pride in their local area
5. People working together and caring about each other
6. Needs are identified and people are aware of what services are available to them

*“If you’ve got all of those, you’ve got a thriving community because you’ve got people working together, communicating, getting the information they want, getting the right information honestly presented and having the services that meet their needs.”*

## Building stronger relationships

As part of the strategy, the borough wants to build on the relationships between the community, voluntary sector and the council. Participants were first asked how well they think the borough is currently doing in building strong relationships. Findings were fairly negative, resident group participants felt that the council see them as a problem and not part of the solution – these groups want to help the people they serve and are willing to work with the council to do this. Whilst participants from the community voluntary sector were slightly more positive about the council, but still thought that improvements need to be made around communication, trust and investment in the local area.

All participants agreed that the council needs to be viewed as part of the community rather than an ‘us vs. them’. *“They should start believing that they are part of the community, rather than a separate entity that’s putting together a thriving community strategy for the rest of the borough.”* Participants agreed that the council needs to improve on the relationships between residents, community and the community voluntary sector.

### So what should the council focus on when trying to build stronger relationships?

#### 1. Improve integrity

It is clear that there is a lack of trust between the council and the community it serves. Participants felt the council needs to address this for it to move forward. Participants felt that when the council had an agenda or wanted a specific outcome, they resisted engaging with the community about it as they don’t want any opposition. *“The big failing on Hounslow is the level of integrity, not because they don’t want to be honest but because at times that have an agenda...they don’t want to communicate to residents in case they try and stop it.”*

To improve this, participants suggested that the council should be more open and honest; and if for example savings have to be made participants would rather be told. The council and the community can then work together to best resolve the issue. Residents groups and the community voluntary sectors want to be trusted and fully utilised, thus breaking down the ‘us vs. them’ barrier. Participants also thought the council needs to be out and about more at a grass roots level. *“The other thing is that the management at Hounslow Council need to work with all council workers to say that all these people outside [Residents groups & VCS] are working to help the community, they’re not here to make your life difficult.”*

## 2. Collaboration and networking

The council needs to create a network of community bodies that work together with the council, but this needs to be a two way relationship with the council being a part of the network on an equal footing. The council needs to tap into the groups which are already established in the community and work with them as they are often best suited to engage with residents and those harder to reach groups. Some participants mentioned the Hounslow Hub website and thought this was a good start but some noted that the design was clumsy and some of the listings were wrong. They felt that the hub should not only be promoted to residents but should also be used by council officers. For example, if a resident contacted the council with an issue, the officer could direct them to a resident group or voluntary organisation that could best help them. *“If a resident has a problem, they usually go to the council first. A council that really believes in thriving community should give that resident their local association or community group contact, as well as trying to deal with it.”*

Resident groups would like to see the council working more widely with them. One participant mentioned that they had arranged a local event for 26 community groups and the council didn't want to be involved. *“I don't think that they go into the community enough and I think that they should have a roadshow once a year where they go into each of the towns and engage with the residents...the only way to connect is to go out on the road.”* Participants also felt that councillors needed to do more, *“...all councillors are briefed and they should go into the community and speak to resident groups and community groups...but in the West part of the borough there's a problem because some of the councillors aren't going out into the community.”*

Some of the participants discussed the G15+ group and how the forming of this group has started to move things in the right direction to improve engagement and open up a dialogue on a number of key issues. Participants who were involved in this felt it was a positive step but this needs to be used.

## 3. Improving community cohesion

Most participants felt that there was no easy answer when trying to improve community cohesion. Some participants felt that communities have fragmented into smaller interest groups (both online and within the community) i.e. religion, faith, conservation, other lived experience groups, level of deprivation etc. Although there was this vacuum between communities/groups, participants felt that more could be done to help bring different communities together such as hosting more community fun days, meet your neighbour events, street parties etc. One participant suggested that children should be used – *“...one gel that brings people together is children, they have no concept of*

*differences, they don't care who they play with and then that brings the families together and they start chatting."*

## Volunteering and social action

The borough would like to improve how residents can shape their community and help give residents a sense of pride about where they live. Firstly, participants were asked what social action means to them. Being proud of where you live, having a community identity, looking after your local area and being recognised were all commonly mentioned. All participants recognised that having civic pride is an important aspect the council should focus on and that there was a lot of work to be done. *"This is a major problem, which has now been recognised, there is a lack of civic pride."*

Proud of where you live  
Recognition  
Identity  
Having an interest

Helping to look after your area  
Being able to make a difference

### How can social action be improved?

#### 1. Work with groups at a grassroots level

In all in the sessions delivered, participants highlighted the high proportion of transient populations in the borough and that there was little that could be done to engage with this group. Participants felt that one avenue the council should use is, again, the activities already being delivered on the ground by groups such a litter picking. Participants expressed the level of litter in certain areas is a concern and that this added to the already low levels of civic pride. *"They need to look at the opportunities the community is presenting them with and launch themselves on them, for example, people litter picking."* Participants indicated that improving civic pride wouldn't be a quick fix, but rather baby steps were needed to move in the right direction. For example, if the high street was clean and litter free are people then less likely to litter?

### Volunteering

Recognising volunteers in the community was also an important aspect the council needs to improve. Some participants mentioned that the council used to deliver an annual event where volunteers were recognised; this has now been stopped. They felt something like this needs to be

reintroduced as it helps with morale. Participants also said that volunteering has a lot of issues around it such as; there being too much expectation on volunteers (and they don't actually have to turn up) and that there is also an expectation that there is a large reserve pool of volunteers around that don't need income from anywhere else – the big society just doesn't exist.

## **What can the council do to help volunteers and the community voluntary sector?**

### **1. Recognition**

The level of recognition needs to be improved, a number of participants or groups were presented with national awards and this has had a high impact on themselves and the organisation as a whole. *“The council could do a better job at recognising volunteers, there used to be the Hounslow volunteering awards but it's been stopped.”*

### **2. More collaboration**

Community voluntary sector and resident groups are open to being asked for help or advice, one participant mentioned, *“I've only had two emails in the past five years from a councillor asking for help.”* Groups would also like to see the council working with them when delivering community activities, for example litter clearing. A few participants mentioned that they have issues with fly tipping and no amount of knowledge and information provided to the residents will stop this. Therefore they suggest having the council enforcement team working with them during such activities.

### **3. Support for managing resources**

The community voluntary sector has issues with managing their resources i.e. HR, and they are limited in what they can do. *“People management is really tough and it's tougher when there's not a contract or incentive to pay etc.”*

## **Good quality community facilities**

There are many community spaces across the borough that are not fully utilised, therefore there is potential to make better use of these spaces for more community based services. However, this needs a strategic approach so that these spaces are best utilised and that community assets are not lost. Some of the participants noted that a 'Derelict Building Strategy' is already in place and felt that the council have tried to come up with the answer of providing community facilities and have therefore jumped to the conclusion without consulting. There is a need to understand why buildings

are derelict or not fully utilised. The council should therefore be including residents groups etc. right at the beginning of the decision making process. Participants felt that understanding the demand and need was vital for community development. *“Apparently they don’t even have a list of community assets, yeah; they need to start with that.”*

## Who should the council include in the decision making process?

### 1. Appoint a representative for each town

Each town should have a local representative that can identify what resources are available and what is needed. The council need to utilise people who know their local community as they will be best placed in identifying what is needed.

### 4. Engage with groups in the local area

The council should make better use of the groups listed on the Hounslow Hub website and engage with as many groups as possible. Participants also felt the council need to be more connected at a grass roots level as to what is happening in their community, this will help them drill into the reasons why negative communities are building up.

## Providing good quality community facilities – what elements are important?

Overall elements such as facilities being well equipped, well maintained and accessible were important to participants. Although the current level of accessibility to facilities was a concern for some community voluntary groups. This ranged from not having adequate wheelchair access to facilities not being well connected to transport services, *“...having a central location or infrastructure to allow people to get to the places.”* Participants also mentioned that hiring some spaces was like ‘jumping through hoops’, *“The hoops they wanted us to go through to hire the park was absolutely ridiculous and yet a park is one of the biggest local resources because it’s a large space you can do a lot of things in...they make it so difficult, impossibly difficult to do that and you think, who are you actually working with?”*

## Community influence

The council recognises that residents are often best placed to tell them what is needed in their local community. Therefore involving people in the design and delivery of services is likely to yield better outcomes. Generally participants felt that there was a limited level of community influence and that

this aspect needed to vastly improve. *"...we keep saying stuff and one to two years down the line it's the same stuff, they're not listening."*

## How can the council better include residents in the decision making process?

### 1. Revamp how 'Area Forums' are used

Participants views on 'Areas Forums' varied across the borough and the way they were chaired affected their delivery and effectiveness. A few participants felt that their voices were heard at 'Area Forums', but others said that this was not the case, *"They're not really interested in the public's view and that's why you can't talk. It's a fallacy of pretending you can. I would like to see more than 10 minutes... its 10 minutes and your maximum speaking time is 2 minutes; how do you engage with anyone in that sort of scenario."*

Participants felt that if there was a standard independent approach to chairing the 'Area Forums' then they would be more effective. *"[I see them] as a battle ground, I don't go anymore."* *"They're being used in my area as a grand standing opportunity for a councillor to take an officer to task about various things, all of which could have been solved behind closed doors."* Participants felt that the council could provide training to help the Forums be better chaired.

Participants felt that 'Area Forums' need to be more action based, in other words if there is something that can't be addressed at the meeting, this needs to be followed up and discussed at the next meeting.

### 2. Remove the hierarchy

Participants felt that there was a hierarchical structure within the council that needs to be addressed. Participants felt that the council need to recognise that there shouldn't be a hierarchical structure, but a network of councillors, officers and residents groups etc. working together as a collaborative body. Some participants highlighted that at some meetings even the seating layout was very hierarchal and created a 'your views aren't important' atmosphere for those tucked away in the corner. *"At the moment it is a hierarchy and it needs to be a network. What they're falling into the trap of is thinking that they can govern us rather than represent us, that's the problem."*

### 3. Use plain English

The majority of participants felt that the council needs to remove jargon and the level of detail in consultation documents. The borough is very diverse and the level of education will vary, participants said that you can't expect people to participate if they can't understand the consultation or the decision that needs to be made.

### 4. Be more inclusive

Using online methods to engage with residents was positive, but participants said not everyone is online e.g. can't afford it or there is an age barrier. Participants still felt that going out and about talking to people was the best way of engaging with the community and that people are inherently social animals. *"The best ideas always come from service users."* Participants recommended using the following:

- Host surgeries in the community on different days / times and make sure that the councillors attend.
- Stand outside supermarkets or on-street engaging with the public.
- Host public meetings via video i.e. live streaming.
- Councillors to write blogs and show their case work.

### 5. Integrate the concept of social action into schools

One focus could be on educating children from a young age about social action, what it means to be a caring citizen and how they can make positive contributions to their community. *"They need to engage with them and not use it as a tick box exercise."* Participants suggested the following:

- Set up a junior councillors group or a junior cabinet for Hounslow.
- The council to attend school assemblies and engage with young people so that their voices are heard.

## Support for local groups

The council wants to understand what support local groups need to help them thrive in their community.

### 1. Communication, listening to views and acting upon them

All participants agreed that communication between the council and resident groups / the voluntary community sector needs to be improved. *"I think groups have already told the council what's*

*required of them and it might just be something as simple as listening to them and taking action when they asked for actions to be taken.”* Participants want to see the council working with local group without being seen as a problem – they want to be valued. *“Local groups need the council to accept that we’re all on the same level. To accept local groups roles and to work with them. It ends up being a win-win because the more you work with the local community groups, the more they are able to provide services and a voice for residents, which means the council, is able to deliver better services more effectively.”*

Participants felt the council could do a better job at promoting the work resident groups and the community voluntary sector are doing. This might in turn encourage residents to want to get involved and help out.

## **2. Improve community capacity**

Participants would like to see the council working with the community in helping them to secure premises at affordable rates. For example help in securing stores/spaces for shops or rehabilitation activities.

Participants thought that the council could help groups tap into expertise in the community, to help them deliver better services. For example, skilled retired individuals who can advise and help improve voluntary community service delivery i.e. people management, finance etc.

Participants felt that not all groups were competent in accessing grants or other funding sources and thought that smaller, less established groups may benefit from help in this area.

## **Is the council heading in the right direction?**

Overall, the majority of participants felt that the council were moving in the right direction, but were concerned that it would be just a tick box exercise. *“I would like to see something positive come out of all of this. I’d like it to be a direction forward, rather than a tick-box situation...I’d like to see an implementation, an action of it [the building blocks].”* Participants felt the council needs to move away from hierarchal structure to a network based dialogue, collaborating with the local community structures at a grassroots level. *“I think the council undervalue the voluntary sector and the volunteer community that they have.”*

# Appendix A: Topic guide

## Welcome and introduction (5 minutes)

- Introduce self and M·E·L Research, an independent social research company
- Housekeeping - H&S, fire exits, fire alarm, etc. toilets, mobile phones switched off
- Consent to take part, be recorded, quotations, use of data in report (sign in sheet for signatures)
- All information provided will be treated in the strictest of confidence and you will not be identifiable in the report.
- No right or wrong answers
- No names given in the report or for quotes
- Discussion will last approximately 1½-2 hours

## Background and warm up

The London Borough of Hounslow wants to see thriving communities across the borough, where the council works in partnership with a strong voluntary and community sector to improve the lives of all residents. Hounslow therefore wants to develop a new strategy taking into account the new challenges faced by individuals, communities and the voluntary community sector.

Hounslow has already carried out various research activities which has identified key elements which we are going to refer to as building blocks; in creating a thriving community. The borough now wants to explore these building blocks with the voluntary community sector and residents to see if they are on the right track and to further drill into what makes a thriving community.

We've therefore been commissioned by Hounslow to help them explore this.

**ROUND TABLE:** Please introduce yourself (first name) and tell us a little bit about how long have you lived in Hounslow / how you are involved in the community (VCS group).

## Section 1: Thriving communities [10 mins]

I'd like to start with looking at what a thriving community means. So let's start with community... [Someone in the group to write down key words on the sheet provided]...

- 1) What does the word community mean to you?
- 2) Now let's think about the word thriving...what does thriving mean to you?
- 3) Can you think of any good examples of thriving communities (locally, nationally or internationally)?

➤ Why do you think these communities worked so well?



Section 1.docx

## Section 2: Exploring the building blocks

As mentioned earlier, Hounslow has identified five key building blocks to help create thriving communities across the borough. This is what they want to base their new strategy on and they need to know if they are on the right track. I now want to explore these five building blocks with you.

### BLOCK 1: [20 mins]

The first block I would like to explore with you is **building stronger relationships** between the community, voluntary community sector and the council.

- 4) How well do you think the council is currently doing with this?
  - Why do you say this?
- 5) What aspects do you think the council should focus on when trying to build strong relationships?
  - What about supporting greater networking for VCS groups and resident groups?
    - How best can they do this? Is there anything that they should focus on when doing this?
  - What about improving the level of outreach to groups who are disengaged?
    - How do you think the council could reach these groups?
    - And what part could VCS and residents groups play to better engage with these groups?
  - What about how the council interacts with other partners such as businesses, faith groups, funders etc.?
    - How important is this and how could collaboration be improved?
    - How could these partners help strengthen these relationships?
    - Are there any specific groups that should be involved when trying to create a strong community?
  - Hounslow is very diverse, how about people getting on well together?
    - How important is this to your local community?
    - What aspects should the council focus on?
    - How best should they do this?
  - What about Hounslow Giving – does everyone know what this is?
    - How effective do you think this will be at building stronger relationships in the community?

*Hounslow Giving is a new initiative that brings together residents, communities and voluntary organisations, businesses, funders and other key stakeholders to raise funds.*
- 6) Are there any other aspects Hounslow should consider in their strategy when building stronger relationships with the community and voluntary community sector?

### Block 2: [10 mins]

The next building block I would like discuss is **volunteering and social action**. The council would like to improve how residents can shape their community and help give residents a sense of pride about where they live.

- 7) So what is civic pride – what does this mean to you?
- 8) What do you think the council should focus on when improving civic pride?
  - What about the council better recognising different forms of volunteering such as xxxxx?
  - What about the support provided to volunteers or to organisations finding volunteers?
- 9) How do you think the council can better support residents when volunteering?
  - What impact do you think this will have on volunteers?

### Block 3: [5 mins]

The next building block the council wants to focus on is providing **good quality community facilities**. There are many community spaces across Hounslow that are not fully utilised, therefore there is potential to make better use out of these spaces for more community based services etc. However, this needs a strategic approach so that these are best utilised and that community assets are not lost.

As a part of this building block, the council wants to take a holistic approach to reviewing community buildings.

- 10) Who do you think should be involved in this process?
  - How best could the council engage with these groups?
- 11) When providing community spaces, what elements are most important to residents / organisations? (explore accessibility, well-maintained, well equipped)

### Block 4: [10 mins]

The council know that residents are often best placed to tell them what is needed in their local community, therefore involving people in the design and delivery of services is likely to yield better outcomes. The forth building block the council wants to focus on is **community influence**.

- 12) How can the council better include residents in the decision making process?
  - Why do you say that?
- 13) What about Area Forums, how are these viewed?
  - Do you see Area Forums as a place where resident and community groups can go to, to get their voice heard? Why do you say this?

- What needs to change to make sure residents and community groups feel that their voices will be heard?
- 14) What about making better use out of social housing tenants such as housing forums?
- Do you feel this is a good platform to engage with residents? Why do you say that?
- 15) How do you think the role of councillors could help residents and groups be more involved in local service design and delivery?

**Block 5: [10 mins]**

The last building block the council wants to include in their strategy is **support for local groups**.

- 16) What support do you think local groups need to help make communities thrive?
- What about helping community groups accessing funding sources?
    - How could this be done?
  - What about infrastructure support?
    - Is there anything that is lacking?
  - Are there any training and skills support that is needed to help residents and local groups be more active?
    - What about supporting local groups when bidding for external funding sources?

Thank you, before we finish does anyone else have anything else they would like to add?

THANK AND CLOSE: Thank you, that's all the questions I have.



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