

MAYOR OF LONDON



London Family Fund

EVALUATION REPORT

March 2021

COPYRIGHT

**Greater London Authority
March 2021**

Published by
Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London SE1 2AA

www.london.gov.uk
Tel 020 7983 4000

enquiries 020 7983 4000
minicom 020 7983 4458

Photographs ©
Wheely Tots
Citizens UK
Kids Kitchen Collective
Centrepoint
Cares Family
Nature Vibezzz
Hackney Playbus (cover photo)

Copies of this report are available
from www.london.gov.uk

CONTENTS

Deputy Mayor’s foreword	5
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	11
COVID-19	17
Impact of the London Family Fund	20
Case studies	34
What works – programme design and delivery	39
Recommendations	51
Conclusion	54
Appendix 1: Demographic profile of parents (Year 1)	56
Appendix 2: Evaluation methodology	58



Wheely Tots

Deputy Mayor's foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fundamental importance of relationships and local connections. Over the past year, many of us have relied on the kindness of neighbours and friends for vital practical and emotional support. Never have we so clearly seen the value of having strong support networks and their role in sustaining healthy and resilient communities.

New parenthood can be lonely and challenging at any time. However, the lockdowns and social distancing measures throughout the pandemic have left many parents more isolated, lonely and anxious. At the same time, they have had to balance the responsibilities of parenting, homeschooling and work. As a parent myself I know how hard this can be, while trying to maintain positive wellbeing for you, your children and family.

It is in this context that I am grateful to share this evaluation report of the Mayor's London Family Fund. This was a pilot programme from the Mayor's flagship social integration strategy *All of Us*¹. It aimed to support innovative projects to improve social integration among families of young children in London.

Real social integration is about shaping a city where people have more opportunities to interact positively and meaningfully. It means supporting Londoners to play an active part in their communities and the decisions that affect them. It also means reducing barriers and inequalities, so that Londoners can relate to each other as equals.

This report shows the impact of investing in spaces where parents can meet to build relationships across differences and form stronger social and support networks and helps us understand how best to support families now and as London recovers.

Parents reported feeling more connected to their local area, lower levels of isolation alongside new diverse social and support networks. They also said they had the opportunity to learn new skills and felt empowered to be more active citizens.

¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/all-us-mayors-strategy-social-integration>

COVID-19 will have long-term social and economic effects on London's families. The collective trauma Londoners have experienced will likely have a significant impact on how we connect with each other. We must all now prioritise the building of supportive local networks and relationships. That is our best way to guarantee stronger and more resilient families and communities that can thrive regardless of people's backgrounds.

Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard

Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement

Executive Summary

The London Family Fund was a flagship programme in the Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration. It supported innovative projects that brought families together in the early years context to improve social integration. By this we mean the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves.

Social integration helps us develop trust and allows communities to thrive. Evidence shows us that relationships and social contact with different types of people can reduce unconscious bias and discrimination across communities².

A lack of strong and meaningful relationships affects the everyday lives of Londoners – from hate crime and discrimination to loneliness and people's sense of belonging in London. Unless there is social integration difference can become a source of division. The Brexit vote and, more recently, the pandemic has shone a light on clear divisions and inequalities in our society – healing and reducing these divisions is vital. Prosperity, wellbeing, health, and resilience are threatened when communities feel alienated and isolated³.

The fund aimed to help build relationships between families from diverse backgrounds by creating shared experiences. It is common for families from different backgrounds to move in separate social spheres. We know large gaps exist between different family's everyday experiences of childcare, housing, work and access to London's opportunities. These gaps make it harder to generate understanding between individuals and communities.

Through this intervention, we hoped to test an approach to modify this and generate major changes for families across London. This included creating stronger and more diverse social networks; reducing parental isolation and loneliness; and improving child wellbeing outcomes.

² GLA (2018) All of Us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration – <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/communities/all-us-mayors-strategy-social-integration>

³ GLA (2018) All of Us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration – <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/communities/all-us-mayors-strategy-social-integration>

Impact of the London Family Fund

The fund delivered a wide range of positive impacts on parents and achieved wider social integration outcomes⁴:

Generated diverse relationships and social networks

86%



of parents met new people and expanded their social group. Projects helped parents to form meaningful relationships with other parents in their local area. It is likely that many of these relationships and networks will be sustained long-term, as parents live locally. During the projects there was anecdotal evidence of parents continuing socialising and interacting with each other outside of project boundaries

68%

of parents said they had spent more time with people from a different background to them. Parents met and connected with diverse groups of people, this included, a different ethnicity, religion, social or educational background, or age

Reduced social isolation and loneliness

86%



of parents felt more connected to their local area. Projects gave parents the chance to meet and connect with new people in their local area, learn more about their community, volunteer or take an active role in projects. During the pandemic, some projects ran online, giving families space to continue to come together to build relationships and stay connected at a time of unprecedented hardship and isolation

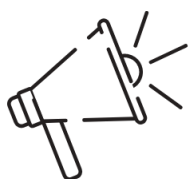
66%

of parents met people who they could go to if they needed help. Projects built support networks among parents. Sharing experiences, challenges, and advice with other parents provided comfort in knowing that they were not alone. This also boosted their confidence as a parent and overall wellbeing

⁴ All percentages reported here are from Year 1 projects only, and were captured through the parent questionnaire

Improved participation

- Parents had the opportunity to take an **active role in project design and delivery**. This ranged from helping out on the day, to co-designing activities, and taking up on formal roles, such as parent director



- Through some project activities parents became more **active citizens**; parents were supported to campaign on local issues, organise community events, and help to set up new services

- Some parents became more involved in their local communities, outside of project activities, through **formal or informal volunteering**, such as looking after each other's children

Increased opportunities

- Through volunteering and participating in projects some parents **gained new skills and experiences**, helping with future education or employment. Other used and retained **existing skills**

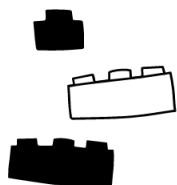


- Projects provided parents with **access to important services** in their local community. Through signposting and knowledge sharing from other parents and project staff, parents started using services or local activities

- During the pandemic, projects used their established relationships with parents to provide vital **crisis support to families**

Improved wellbeing of children

- Some parents said that attending sessions made their **child/ren more confident, improved their development and learning and prepared them for nursery**



- Projects gave children the chance to **meet others**, try new and fun activities, play with toys they don't have at home, and **play in safe spaces**

- As many of the families live in the same area, friendships between parents could become relationships between children when they're older

The evaluation explored what worked well in designing and delivering projects that aimed to improve social integration among families. From this learning the Greater London Authority (GLA) identified a set of recommendations for organisations and funders wishing to run or support similar programmes that build relationships between diverse families. The 'what worked' section can be found on page 39 and the recommendations can be found on page 51.



Citizens UK – PACT project

Introduction

Social Integration

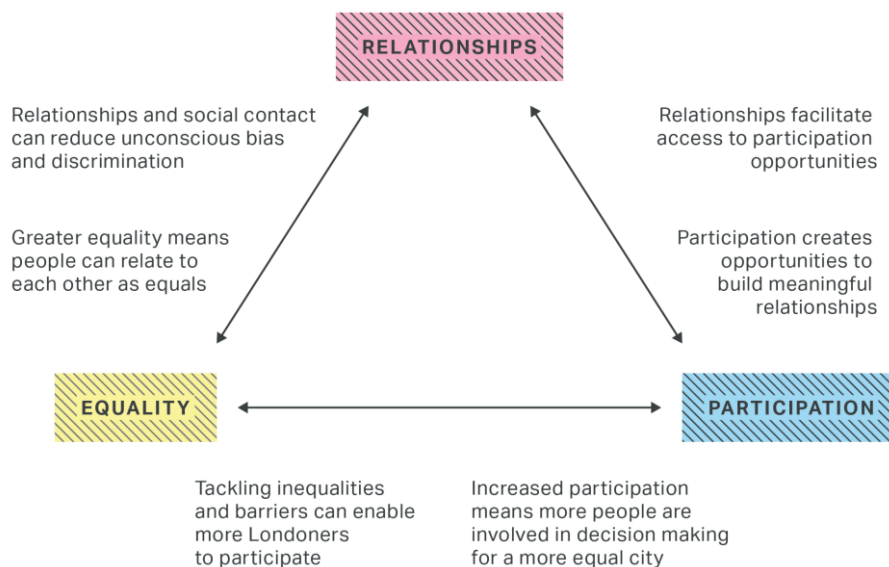
In 2018, the Mayor published his All of Us Strategy for Social Integration. For the Mayor, real and effective social integration goes beyond how people from different backgrounds meet each other. We use the following definition:

*“Social integration is the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves. It is determined by the level of **equality** between people, the nature of their **relationships**, and their degree of **participation** in the communities in which they live.”*

The Mayor’s approach to social integration considers aspects of our identities such as age, social class, and gender. It seeks to engage both those who already feel a strong sense of inclusion and belonging and those who do not. This approach also accounts for structural barriers Londoners face to social integration. It recognises that a society where different types of people come into contact, but where discrimination and inequalities persist, is not fully socially integrated.

The Mayor’s vision for social integration rests on three pillars – relationships, participation and equality. They are equally important and mutually reinforcing, as shown here.

Understanding social integration⁵



⁵ GLA (2018) All of Us: The Mayor’s Strategy for Social Integration – <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/communities/all-us-mayors-strategy-social-integration>

Methodology

The GLA City Intelligence unit evaluated the London Family Fund to:

- explore the **impact** of the programme and if it achieved the overall aim of **increasing social integration** by creating more diverse social networks, reducing parental isolation and loneliness, and improving children's wellbeing
- identify **best practice** in delivering interventions which focus on building family connections and networks via local activities. This included **what works** in increasing social integration among families.

The evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative data collected by GLA researchers. This included interviews with project leads, a questionnaire for parents, site visits, and project self-evaluation. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the methodology.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the Year 2 projects and posed challenges for the evaluation. As a result, the data included in this report is mainly from Year 1 of the fund. However key learnings from delivering projects during the pandemic during Year 2 were captured and are summarised in the report.

The London Family Fund

The fund was a flagship programme in the Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration. It supported innovative projects that promoted social integration among families in London in the early years context. The aim was to help build relationships through creating shared experiences for families from diverse backgrounds.

Having children is a great leveller and something many Londoners have in common. Evidence shows that this transition to parenthood makes people more open to forming new relationships with others who are different to them. There is, however, a distinct lack of social mixing in many family support settings. This is due to several barriers including the cost of support, lack of information and parental isolation; data from the Survey of Londoners shows that a quarter of parents in London are socially isolated⁶.

The aim was to build on this shared experience of parenthood. The GLA wanted to create spaces where parents could meet on a level playing field, regardless of background, to provide the opportunity to build meaningful relationships across differences, including ethnicity, disability, income and social class. They hoped this would lead to stronger and more diverse parental networks. This in turn would reduce the risk of social isolation and loneliness that many new parents experience.

⁶ GLA (2019) The Survey of Londoners: <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>

The programme provided grants over two rounds of funding. Year 1 ran from May 2018 to May 2019 and awarded £390,000 in grants to nine organisations. Year 2 ran from October 2019 to October 2020 and awarded £144,551 in grants to five organisations.



Total funding

£534k



Number of
projects

14



Number of
parents engaged

2,844

The GLA wanted the fund to:

- support projects working with hundreds of London's families to increase social integration
- generate major changes for these families. This included creating stronger and more diverse social networks; reducing parental isolation and loneliness; and improving child wellbeing outcomes
- share and promote best practice in the family services and early years sectors.

The GLA specifically funded projects that looked at new ways to provide family services for children up to the age of five. Funded projects met the following criteria:

- Funded activities which took place around the early years and family service settings to bring people together, but explicitly did not fund childcare places.
- Included parents in the development of their projects, ideally co-designing with parents where possible, and co-delivering projects with parents and families.
- Focused on bringing together and integrating families from different backgrounds, whilst building confidence and reducing isolation amongst parents.
- Did not focus solely on the child but also parental wellbeing and involvement.

Year 2 maintained a primary focus on building meaningful relationships across difference, whilst adding an additional emphasis on projects that prioritised intergenerational mixing.

The funded projects

The fund supported fourteen projects over the two years. These provided a range of activities to bring together families with young children from different backgrounds to promote social integration. A brief summary of each project is provided below.

Summary of funded projects:

Year 1 projects

Citizens UK – Developed a community-led social support programme, Parents and Communities Together (PACT). The project trained parents to run listening campaigns, where they identified issues among parents and created campaigns to tackle these, including one around housing. Funding also developed an antenatal and postnatal Parent University programme and a 'Baby and Me' course.

Eastside Community Heritage – Brought together families of children in reception from six primary schools across east London. The project focused on sharing the diverse cultural heritage of families through nursery rhymes and story-based activities.

Hackney Playbus – Ran play sessions at community estates and parks in Hackney, from their double-decker early years playbus. It provided an opportunity for young children to socialise and play, as well as access resources for learning and development. Sessions also gave parents and carers a chance to find out more about local family support services.

Kids Kitchen Collective – Brought families together through family cooking sessions, where families shared cooking techniques and prepared and ate food together. This included pop-up outreach sessions to families not already engaged and those with children under six months. The project also trained parents to plan and lead their own sessions.

Little Village – Is a baby bank, like a foodbank but for clothes, toys and equipment for babies and children up to the age of five. Funding was used to develop their drop-in sessions and engage with diverse families in Wandsworth and Camden. This included growing a network of parent ambassadors to support community outreach.

Nature Vibezzz – Brought families together by running a Forest School at various locations across Lambeth. Activities included making dens, nature walks, making magic potions from natural items and storytelling.

New Economics Foundation – Co-designed, parent-led nursery in Lewisham for and with families from diverse backgrounds. A group of parents joined as directors to support with: recruitment of early years professionals, sitting on the management board, and day to day

running. They then helped parents to co-produce the playground equipment and furniture for the nursery. Funding supported the network building and the co-design of the nursery.

Time and Talents Association – Supported families to develop a shopping centre hub in Southwark, where families could meet, support, and have fun with each other. Parents developed and ran the activities themselves to engage a diverse range of families.

Wheely Tots – Paired together families across north London that live near each other. Activities provided included cycling, sports, play and cooking. Parents and children tried new things together with the help of experts.

Year 2 projects

Centrepoint Soho – Accommodated young vulnerable mothers alongside older residents in sheltered housing. Funding was used to provide a range of activities to bring the two groups together to build connections.

The Cares Family – Tested a new type of social club model that brought together three generations: new parents, their young children and older neighbours aged over 65.

Her Centre – Offered women who had experienced domestic abuse chances to meet new families and to reduce the isolation and loneliness that follows a family breakup. This included a range of fun and learning activities for them and their children.

St Mary's Primary School – Ran weekly music sessions across three schools in London for diverse parents and pre-schoolers.

Laburnum Boat Club – Brought families together through water-based activities for diverse local families with young children. Activities included narrow boating, canoeing, nature walks, fun days and BBQs.

Profile of parents

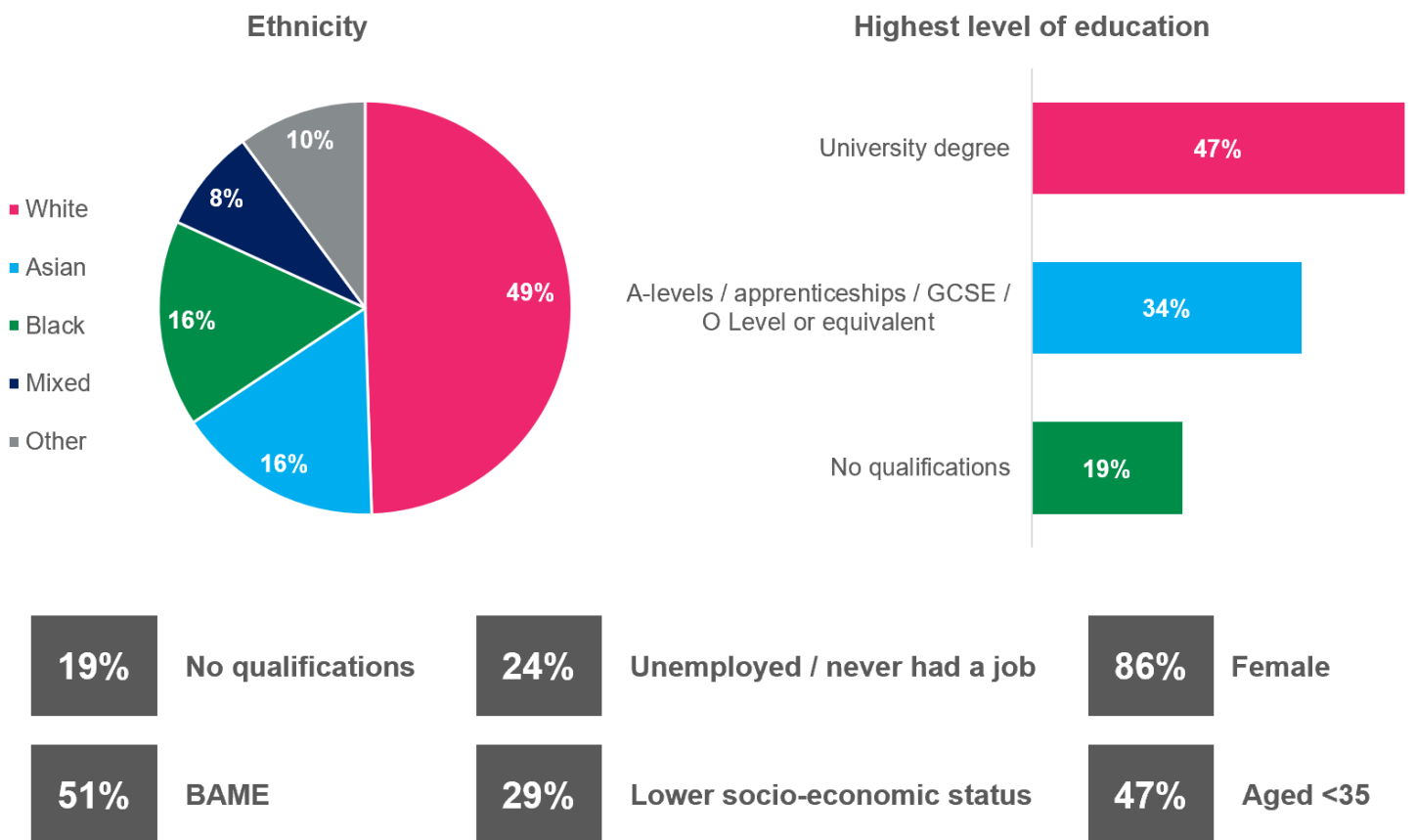
Through the 14 funded projects, the fund reached 2,844 parents. It engaged and brought together families across difference, including ethnicity, socio-economic status and social class. Out of those parents whose data was collected⁷:

⁷ Data was collected by projects and reported to the GLA in the project evaluation form. Please note: this data was patchy across the programme as not all projects were able to collect data on each question and for each parent, and the response rates varied by project. Additionally, these figures only represent Year 1 of the programme.

- 86% were female and 14% male
- 51% were black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and 49% white
- 53% were aged 35+ and 47% were under 35
- 47% had a university degree and 19% had no qualifications
- 39% were working or studying and 24% were unemployed or had never worked
- 44% were from a higher socioeconomic status and 29% from a lower socioeconomic status⁸

Compared to the London population, those engaged through the fund were, as expected, mostly female, under the age of 45, and not working. Appendix 1 provides a comparison with the London population.

Parent demographics⁹



⁸ Using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification three-class version, combining 'routine and manual occupations' with 'never worked and long-term unemployed'

⁹ Parent demographics are based on Year 1 projects only

COVID-19

Year 2 of the London Family Fund was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the UK entered a national lockdown in March 2020, projects had to suspend all face-to-face activities.

The pandemic largely prevented projects from delivering what they intended to. Despite this, projects demonstrated innovation, speed and flexibility to continue to support families during the pandemic; albeit slightly differently than originally set out.

Some projects were able to quickly transition online and continued providing activities to keep families connected and active. Others moved into crisis support, offering vital support to families such as check-in calls, delivering food and supplies, domestic violence support, and signposting. Only one project was unable to continue; due to the nature of the activity, an outdoor one, replicating it in an online space was not possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the fundamental importance of connections and relationships in sustaining healthy and resilient communities. Data from across London has revealed the strength of local bonds across many communities. These have been vital in the fight against COVID-19. From neighbours helping one another with shopping, prescription collection and signposting, to local communities organising social activities and local food banks. We have seen how quickly communities can respond at a hyper-local level, where larger institutions could not¹⁰.

Yet, we know COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on London's communities both on physical and mental health, and economic and social consequences. This also accounts for communities' ability to respond to the pandemic. The stronger and most effective community responses were in better off areas. These had more connected networks of residents, higher levels of neighbourhood trust and lower levels of isolation, compared to less well-off areas¹¹.

Community responses have helped to build bonding capital - the strengthening of ties between similar groups, both geographical and demographic. However, it has not always supported the building of bridging capital - connections across difference¹². Perceptions of who was and was not abiding by social distancing and lockdown measures has increased levels of mistrust between communities. This has layered over pre-existing societal divides

¹⁰ GLA (July 2020), Understanding the Experience of Mutual Aid groups in London

¹¹ Relationships Project (2020), The Moment we Noticed: Learning from 100 days of Lockdown

¹² Neighbourly lab (June 2020), Local Engagement during the COVID-19 Lockdown

and deteriorated pre-existing bridging capital¹³. COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures have also led to rising levels of loneliness across London. Higher levels of loneliness and reduced wellbeing were identified in disabled Londoners, BAME groups, women, LGBTQ+ Londoners, and young and older Londoners¹⁴.

The social impact of the pandemic is likely to have a major bearing on how we connect and interact with each other in future. This report highlights the positive impact investment in relationship building can have at a personal and, in turn, at a community level.

Funders, civil society and local authorities must prioritise work to build relationships and reduce social division, as we look towards London's recovery. It is this work that will prepare and help Londoners thrive and withstand future shocks. We must prevent a widening of inequalities - with already strong neighbourhoods becoming more resilient, and those with fewer social ties falling further behind.

The Mayor is committed to a recovery that supports communities and narrows social, economic and health inequalities. The London Recovery Programme aims to restore confidence in the city, minimise the impact on communities and build our economy and society back better.

[Find out more about the London Recovery Programme.](#)

Lessons as a grant funder

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the GLA acknowledged the huge challenges faced by London's voluntary and community sector and the need to support communities. They were one of over 350 funders to sign a [joint statement](#) pledging to offer support to civil society groups affected by COVID-19. Through this, they committed to four main ways of working to support Year 2 projects during the pandemic.

¹³ British Future (July 2020), Division, unity and social connection during and beyond COVID-19

¹⁴ GLA (September 2020), Rapid Evidence Review: Inequalities in relation to COVID-19 and their effects on London

These were:

- **Adapting activities:** acknowledging that agreed outcomes may not be achieved in the timeframes originally set. The GLA did not ask organisations to meet project milestones or outputs that were agreed in the funding agreement.
- **Discussing dates:** not adding pressure on organisations to meet tight reporting deadlines. The GLA requested projects to try and capture as much data and learning as possible, however this was not mandatory, and deadlines were flexible.
- **Financial flexibility:** allowing organisations to use money differently for example buying equipment and covering staff sickness. Foremost, the GLA committed to paying the funding that was agreed between themselves and organisations and paid upfront any outstanding payments. They also allowed funding to be used in other ways. These included sustaining organisations or adapting programmes to keep parents and other services users supported and connected. Funding was also used by some projects to purchase technology and internet access to keep people connected and participate in online activities.
- **Listening:** encouraging frank conversations between funders and grantees, with funders being supportive of their needs. The GLA set up calls with all project leads to set out the flexible approach. Afterwards, they were in contact with project leads to offer support and update them on further funding opportunities.

The Mayor has contributed close to £10m to the London Community Response Fund¹⁵. This will further support London's community and voluntary sector to respond to the needs of communities impacted by the crisis.



Cares Family – 3G Social Club

¹⁵ <https://londoncommunityresponsefund.org.uk/>

Impact of the London Family Fund

This chapter discusses the fund's impacts on the parents, children and organisations involved.

Outcomes for parents

Relationships

Real social integration is about living lives connected with others. The Mayor's vision is to support Londoners to build meaningful relationships with individuals from different backgrounds as well as their own. Achieving this means supporting Londoners to have more positive and frequent shared experiences. This was the fund's main objective.

The fund created new social networks and relationships between diverse families – **86 per cent of parents met new people and expanded their social group** from taking part in a project.

- This went beyond just meeting people, as projects helped parents to form *meaningful* relationships with other local parents. Across projects there were many examples of parents socialising and interacting with each other *outside* of set activities. These included meeting for coffee, going to each other's homes, visiting a park or playground, and going to other clubs or activities with their children. Others shared phoned numbers or chatted online. Parents who hadn't previously known each other often came to project sessions together or left together.

"I've made friends and I see people locally. We meet up outside the projects – we took all our kids to the Docklands last week." [Parent]

"It's good to share breakfast with other parents and be social with each other as we don't seem to know each other. I got to know and become friends with quite a few parents that I hope to see more of outside school as we all live very near each other. We are going for coffee next week after we drop the children off at school" [Parent]

Relationships formed across diverse groups - **68 per cent of parents spent more time with people from a different background** after joining a project.

- The timeframe of this evaluation means we don't know if these relationships will last long-term, or whether relationships outside project sessions will continue to be as diverse. However, some projects continued with other funding or have other activities and services for parents to join. It is also likely some parents will continue to see each other locally and/or in the future. For example, when their children start the local nursery or school.

“I've met a lot of new people via this – I met a lady from Pakistan today who's just moved here. I'll help her in finding new things nearby.” [Parent]

“We had a stay and play session today. There were two boys and their parents have both been involved in the group and live in the same area - one lives in the housing estate and the other has her own place on a mortgage. Both parents hadn't known each other before but have become close. Today they came to the session together and went to get tea after. One of them also has a new-born so the other mum has sometimes taken both children out to let her focus on the baby.” [Project lead]

Parents also met and developed strong **relationships with people of *similar* backgrounds**.

- Citizens UK's PACT project focused on engaging Southwark's Latin American community, many of whom had not known each other until joining the project. One parent had lived in London for six years but did not have any Latin American friends until she joined the project. This connection between people from similar backgrounds and demographic groups is also known as 'bonding'. It is vital for social integration and for enabling a more positive sense of belonging. This is especially so for those who may feel lonely or isolated or are new to London/ their local area.

Building relationships between families during COVID-19: The Cares Family

The Cares Family were funded in Year 2 to test a new type of social club model that brought together three generations over 6 months: new parents, their young children (0-5 years) and older neighbours (over 65 years). This project ran two pilot clubs before lockdown meant face to face projects had to stop.

The Cares Family transitioned their social club online (Zoom) and continued to support families and older neighbours to come together. Their online social club provided a virtual space for people to connect with others during times of isolation. The virtual social club ran from April 2020 through to October 2020 and involved a variety of activities

such as storytelling, singing and dancing, Desert Island Discs, and puppetry. In addition, the project hosted weekly phone-ins at 10am every Friday morning for anyone who wanted to speak to others in their local community in a challenging time. To help keep the community connected in between sessions, the project also created a Lockdown Journal and invited older neighbours, parents and children to add entries of their pandemic experience.

Despite the majority of the project being delivered online, it was still able to provide group interaction where participants had the space to get to know each other, socialise, and build meaningful relationships.

“Knowing there is someone I can call if I need to is extremely comforting.... Some good things have come out of this wretched COVID thing. This is one of them – it’s forced people in the community to get to know neighbours that they might never have even spoken to.” [Participant]

“One of our parents, ‘L’, who attended the pilot, bumped into one of the older neighbours she met at the club in the street, and told us how lovely it was to feel a new sense of community. ‘This is what the project is all about – building friendships and getting to know your community better.’” [Project lead]

To read more about the Cares Family 3G Social Club project please click [here](#).

Reducing social isolation and loneliness

Reducing social isolation and loneliness among parents was a key aim of the fund. Social isolation refers to the *quantity* of relationships that an individual has whereas loneliness refers to the perceived *quality* of an individual’s relationships¹⁶. While these are different, we have used measures of social isolation as a proxy for both social isolation and loneliness. This is because, both are closely linked and share many factors.

Throughout the evaluation, many parents reported feeling isolated before joining a project. In a few cases, this contributed to depression or other mental health problems¹⁷. This was due to not working and being home alone looking after young child(ren). Overcoming isolation, for some, was a key reason for taking part in the project in the first place.

¹⁶ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters/>

¹⁷ Research has shown a link between social isolation and loneliness with depression, along with a range of other health-damaging conditions. See: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/co-op-isolation-loneliness-overview.pdf>

Attending projects reduced parents' feelings of social isolation - **66 per cent of parents met people who they could go to if they needed help.**

- Projects provided motivation and a chance to leave the house and socialise with other parents. They did so through fun, non-judgemental and welcoming activities. At the sessions, many parents felt a greater sense of purpose and felt included in their community. Talking to others and sharing experiences, challenges, emotions, and tips helped them feel less alone. This also improved their confidence as a parent and ultimately their own wellbeing.

“Going to MumSpace has made me feel less isolated and has given me encouragement, through meeting other mums. There’s nothing else like this for mums. When I first heard about it, I thought ‘thank God!’” [Parent]

“You see the same people and build a local network. With kids it’s difficult to get anywhere a long way away. Maternity leave can be isolating – this is a great way to meet people in a similar situation.” [Parent]

Parents formed new social and *support* networks they could rely on, and the evaluation highlighted many examples of parents supporting each other both during and outside of project activities. This included looking after each other’s children (sharing childcare), informing other parents of local services and activities (signposting), helping new residents to settle into the area, and sharing parenting skills and advice.

“I’ve seen changes in my life. Gained friends. I see a friend I made here two or three times a week. We’re potentially going to share childcare too, so I take the kids here one week and she can have an afternoon and vice versa. I would feel secure leaving [my daughter] here if I had to nip home.” [Parent]

“There were a number of parents who organised a birthday party for one of the mums – she’s a single mum who had had a meltdown in one of our sessions before because her daughter wasn’t sleeping, and she was really struggling. The parents rallied around her and saw the ongoing need to provide support, one mum insisted she come over to her house and have a sleep whilst she looked after her child.”

[Project lead]

Projects improved parents' sense of belonging and involvement in their local communities - **86 per cent of parents felt more connected to their local area** as a result of taking part in a project.

- This was through meeting people, finding out more about their community, and volunteering. Projects provided a strong sense of community among parents themselves. Sessions weren't just about activities for children, they provided a space for parents to support each other, develop networks in their community, and feel part of something bigger.

“When I first came, I didn't know anybody, but then on the first day I met somebody who turns out was literally my neighbour. There's a real sense of community.”

[Parent]

“For family without relatives, this is your second home. This is your community and your family.” [Parent]

“It was like something shifted when we first started coming, it felt like we have somewhere to go. Suddenly my calendar was full after the first visit, I found out about lots of different things to do in the area and swapped numbers with other mums. London can be a lonely place but now I meet other families, it makes me feel a part of something.” [Parent]

Reducing loneliness and isolation during COVID-19: Centrepont

Alongside the local authority, Centrepont runs a shared intergenerational sheltered housing scheme that houses young vulnerable mothers alongside older residents. Funding from the Family Fund was used to provide a range of activities to bring the two groups together to build connections.

Centrepont was busy engaging residents and getting their project up and running when the pandemic hit. Unfortunately, due to the vulnerability of the older residents to the virus, the intergenerational aspect of this project was not possible. To support the young mothers and their children during lockdown, Centrepont ran music therapy sessions, child friendly cooking sessions, and 'jump around' PE classes once a week. Depending on the restrictions, these activities were able to switch between online and socially distanced delivery methods. Centrepont found that online engagement increased after periods of face-to-face interaction.

These activities gave the young mothers an opportunity to meet and build relationships with those living in the same accommodation. This resulted in parents forming support and childcare bubbles with each other, helping to reduce isolation and loneliness. Centrepont noticed that families met up to participate in online sessions together with

their support bubble. Overall, Centrepont saw the wellbeing and mental health of the young parents improve through this.

“I’ve formed friendship with a few mothers and my child has formed friendships with their kids. They interact with each other on music therapy days and decorative sessions and jump around sessions. I don’t feel lonely as I know I can interact with parents I have met during the lockdown as they are part of my childcare social bubble” [Participant]



Centrepont – Intergenerational housing service (online session)

Participation

The Mayor's social integration strategy shows that the degree to which Londoners' participate in their local communities is key to social integration. The main aims of the fund were to generate more diverse social networks and reduce parental isolation and loneliness. At the same time, many projects improved parents' participation and involvement in their local communities.

Projects improved parents' participation and led to increased **formal and informal¹⁸ volunteering**.

- Many parents were encouraged and supported to take a more active role in projects. The level of participation varied from support on the day (helping set or clear up equipment), to co-designing and delivering activities (running sessions or organising day trips). Some even took up formal volunteering roles, such as parent directors or parent ambassadors. Even lower levels of participation, such as helping on the day, made parents feel involved and connected to their local community. This also provided a sense of ownership of the funded projects. Overall, parents were far more involved than they would have been at traditional playgroups, where the focus is normally just on the child.
- Additionally, some parents started formal volunteering independent of project activities. Examples included volunteering at their child's nursery or setting up a parent group. Lastly, many parents took up informal volunteering, through supporting other parents another during project sessions or outside of project sessions through, for example, looking after each other's children.

“Parents have signed up as volunteers in both trustee roles for the management of the nursery and also as volunteers who will take on regular support roles in the classroom to support the nursery. Many of these parents have not previously been involved in local community activities in this way.” [Project lead]

“I was inspired to organise an evening parent's coffee meeting for parents at my daughter's school. This group inspired me to do that.” [Parent]

Through some project activities, parents became much **more active citizens and involved in their local communities**.

¹⁸ This is defined as providing unpaid help to a person, such as a friend, neighbour or anyone else who is not a family member.

- Some projects supported parents to campaign on local issues. For instance, Citizens UK parents campaigned to improve experiences as council housing tenants (see Case Study 1) and for Latin American representation in the 2021 Census.
- Other parents organised community events or helped to set up new services, such as the parent-led nursery in Deptford. For many parents, this was the first time they had been involved in something like this. Parents felt a strong feeling of pride in what they had set out and managed to accomplish.

Opportunities

The Mayor's social integration strategy is underpinned by a focus on equalities. To create genuine socially integrated cities we must reduce barriers that affect certain groups and inequalities that affect all Londoners. While this was not the fund's main aim, many projects gave parents the tools needed to overcome some of the barriers they faced.

Volunteering with projects gave some parents **new or improved skills and experiences** that may help with future employment or education.

- Volunteering provided some parents the opportunity to develop leadership, community organising, and public speaking skills.
- Some projects also provided training for parents. For example, Time and Talents trained five parents to lead shared reading sessions with groups of parents and young children. Kids Kitchen provided similar training, to parents who wanted to run their own cooking sessions, after which parents got an accredited CPD certificate. This gave parents transferable skills that could be used in other settings and ventures.
- Some parents also received training that improved their parenting and other life skills. For example, nine parents gained a Level 2 paediatric first aid qualification and sixteen parents gained a level 2 food and hygiene qualification through the New Economics Foundation project.

There were a few cases where **taking part and volunteering through projects led to job or education opportunities**. A parent at Kids Kitchen was able to transition from volunteer to a paid member of staff; their East London Coordinator. Another parent, who was actively involved in PACT and gained a lot from this involvement (see case study 1), started a level 3 counselling course. They are now applying for university.

“Our East London coordinator was initially a parent that attended Kids Kitchen sessions with her daughter. When the opportunity to train and work with Kids Kitchen arose, she grabbed the chance and started working as a session leader. Shortly after she took charge of East London Hub coordination.” [Project lead]

Through volunteering with projects, some parents were also given the chance to **use their existing skills** whilst they were out of work, helping to prevent parents from *losing* key employment skills. One parent at the parent-led nursery in Deptford was formerly a garden designer and led the redesign of the nursery’s garden.

“The nursery is giving mums the opportunity to participate in different activities. I have volunteered designing the garden and singing Spanish to the children. This is very important to me and my family in terms of my future career. It’s boosting my confidence because I have the to showcase to the community what I can do. I’m thinking of starting my own business teaching Spanish to children and designing gardens for children after this experience.” [Parent]

Many parents became **aware of and started accessing local services or activities** as a result of taking part in their project - *87 per cent of parents found out more about local activities or services* and *76 per cent of parents started using more local activities or services*¹⁹.

- Anecdotally, project leads reported that services accessed included health centres, food banks, children’s centres, and charities. Activities often included places that parents could take their children to like playgroups, museums, and festivals as well as community groups parents could join.

“It’s good how they work with other professionals such as the health visitor...here we can find out about other services and be referred to them.” [Parent]

- Parents heard about these activities and services through signposting from project staff and external visits (such as health visitors). Importantly, parents also shared this information with each other. This especially helped parents who were new to an area and who may not have known what was on offer locally.

“There’s always info about other things. I feel comfortable enough with the staff to ask them about things. For example, I mentioned that [my child] was interested in pirates, and he told me about a free exhibition on them in the area. I get a lot of info from the other mums too, like free activities going on in the Easter holidays.” [Parent]

¹⁹ Although this was not included in the parent questionnaire, 3 out of 9 Year 1 projects added questions to capture these outcomes.

“We signposted to over 20 different services, including Speech and Language Therapy, ESOL classes, Healthy Start Vouchers, HENRY (Healthy Exercise and Nutrition for the Really Young), free early years education and childcare funding, local children’s centres, Citizen’s Advice and housing support, as well as a range of family-focused community activities in the local area.” [Project lead]

Creating opportunities for families during COVID-19: Her Centre

The Year 2 project delivered by Her Centre initially focused on supporting mothers with pre-school children who have experienced domestic abuse. It provided a range of fun and learning activities to meet new families to build common bonds. The aim was to reduce the isolation and loneliness that follows a family breakup.

Prior to lockdown, Her Centre had run two group outings, one to the zoo and one to a picnic in the park, two open forums, four basic English classes, two IT classes, and one parenting class. They also ran seven Stay and Play sessions, which was a key part of their London Family Fund project. However, activities were then suspended in March 2020.

To support families Her Centre shifted to provide one-to-one support to parents through referrals and crisis work, including weekly food deliveries to twenty-six families who were identified as struggling financially. The project was able to provide emergency food donations to engage women in abusive relationships in a safe way during lockdown. This provided essential support at a time when level of domestic violence was on the rise.

“Our food for families has enabled us to support women and their families most in need and build links to our wider services. With our weekly food deliveries, we gave out a flyer with a range of advice agencies numbers for help with benefits, debt, housing, immigration and included our advice for those experiencing abuse, calling it family issues.” [Project lead]

Outcomes for children

The programme led to overall positive outcomes on **child wellbeing**²⁰.

- Attending projects gave children the opportunity to interact with other children, try new activities, play with toys they don't have at home, and provided a safe space to play, that might be lacking locally.

“The biggest benefit is that he can socialise with people. At home he is just with me. Here he can learn how to interact with other children, how to share, how to wait.”

[Parent]

- Some parents reported that attending sessions also improved their child(ren)'s confidence, personal and social development, and learning. One project lead said such activities prepared children for when they start nursery. As many of the families live in the same area, some of the children will likely go to the same nurseries or schools. This may provide further benefits when they're older.

“Coming to these sessions has been the best thing I think I have done since having my son. I love the relaxed atmosphere and feel so comfortable here. My son has also really grown in confidence at the sessions.” [Parent]

“The playbus is essential for me, as I look after my grandkids every Wednesday. They're so lively – it's nice to get them out. In the winter they can play on the bus. We live in a flat – we couldn't have these toys here.” [Grandparent]

There were positive **outcomes on parents** that will later impact on their child(ren). Through the project activities, support from staff, and relationships with other parents, some parents reported improved parenting skills as a result of taking part in a funded project. These included skills, tips, and ideas on a variety of topics such as child health, breastfeeding, first aid, cooking, and playtime. This, and sharing with other parents (realising they were not alone in their experiences), contributed to an increase in parenting confidence amongst parents.

Outcomes for organisations

Parents and children were not the only ones to gain from the funded projects. The charities and public organisations that received programme funding, as well as those connected to the projects, also benefited from the fund.

Many project leads said that without our funding the project simply would not have happened. **Funding allowed them to experiment and test out new ways of working.**

²⁰ Outcomes for children were not captured in the questionnaire, but were gathered through project self-evaluation, interviews with parents, and observation.

This was either by developing a new project from scratch or building on an existing project. This may have a positive impact on future delivery.

- Some projects were able to use the fund to secure other external funding, allowing them to continue the work they have started and provide long term support.

Funded organisations benefited from the opportunity to **develop existing relationships and/or build new relationships with similar organisations.**

- There were some good examples across the programme of joint working between funded organisations. This included creating new referral pathways or sharing resources.

“This idea of solving problems together seems to really resonate. We’re not being prescriptive and just offering guidance. Everybody enjoyed learning from each other – this is a highlight. We’ve subsequently gone on to embrace this concept for other projects because we’re such a small organisation – we’re very much living this peer to peer learning.” [Project lead]

Positive outcomes for organisations during COVID-19: St Mary’s Primary School, Lewisham

St Mary’s project was centred around weekly music sessions for diverse parents and pre-schoolers across three schools in south east and north London. It was well underway by the time lockdown hit and had delivered two full terms of sessions in one of the schools.

These regular sessions had allowed the school and project lead to engage with and build relationships with parents – especially those identified as being at-risk or vulnerable. In some cases, this led to the project lead offering support and advice to families and, in all cases, improved parental engagement with the school. Parents had also built new relationships with each other, and some reported positive impacts on the children.

In response to COVID-19, the weekly music sessions were streamed online. The musical nature of the sessions meant that this worked better than a Zoom group format. The online streaming format meant that there was no interaction between families. This limited the ability of the sessions to foster relationships. However, the online sessions still offered benefits to both families and the school. The format meant families could sing along themselves at home, providing a fun family activity during lockdown and social distancing restrictions. It also opened the sessions to more families, as the links were sent out to all families in the early years. This increased the project’s reach.

Importantly, it allowed the schools to continue to engage and stay in touch with families during the pandemic.

“Sending out a text link each week has been a valuable way of communicating with families. Regular communication and constant rhythm were useful for families and schools. It was useful for schools as well to send out something that wasn’t schoolwork or government regulations, or updates on COVID-19.” [Project lead]

Partner organisations linked to the projects benefited from the Fund too.

- Partner organisations had **better engagement with underserved groups**. For example, one school that Eastside Community Heritage ran sessions in said the project allowed teachers and the school to engage better with parents. Previously, they had very little contact with them, as parents would only wait outside when dropping off or picking up their child(ren). However, entering the school and staying around meant teachers could build a relationship with them.

“I think it’s made schools realise how to engage different with schools. I know one of the schools is going to continue doing some of the work after our workshops because they’re seeing the benefits of the parents coming into the school and better engagement with parents.” [Project lead]

- Being invited to attend and take part in sessions meant organisations could **support and signpost parents**. For example, health visitors and healthy family practitioners attending Hackney Playbus sessions were able to offer advice or answer questions, essentially providing a service in a non-traditional setting. It also allowed them to inform and signpost parents to their services. Organisations also received referrals from some funded projects. Though these were not recorded.

“Having the Hackney Playbus available across the borough has given us that opportunity to sit and chat to families about our services. We have successfully signed up parents to some of our Healthy Families workshops that are delivered in nearby children’s centres. Many of these parents have never used the children’s centre before or have gone to any family workshops.” [Healthy Families Practitioner]



Nature Vibezzz

Case studies

The following case studies²¹ demonstrate the impact projects have had on the lives of those involved.

Citizens UK

“My name is ‘C’ and I am a mum of three young children. I grew up in the Peckham area so there was always a mix of ethnic groups and religions and I was very fortunate to have friends from a variety of cultural backgrounds. However due to bad experiences earlier in life, I became very closed off from friends and family which made meeting and making new friendships extremely hard. I had become very shut off from the world. Things worsened after having my oldest child when I had no support and was in an abusive relationship.

I had a fear of rejection, felt completely on my own but also felt judged as a young mum. Hearing about Mumspace and being part of PACT was a lifeline for me. I am very thankful for the people that run Mumspace because they have brought me back to life. Meeting ‘I’ and then ‘K’, a fellow mum from my daughter’s school, has shown me that I was more than what I gave myself credit for, that it was ok to not be a perfect mum. This helped me to relax a bit and start feeling like I was part of something.

I went from needing to leave the house as watching the walls was driving me crazy to wanting to meet new people which I hadn’t done in years. Slowly I began to trust the volunteers, I started participating in activities even singing along to the songs. I became more interested in what was going around me. Through Mumspace and being part of PACT, I got to attend the parent university course and more recently another course called ‘Baby and Us’. Earlier this year, I attended and completed the community organising and leadership training, I have been to accountability assemblies which helped build my confidence so much that I got involved in something I was so passionate about, HOUSING! Since getting involved in the housing campaign, I have been to a meeting with the Leader of Southwark Council and chaired a meeting with the Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation.

²¹ Please note: these case studies were written by project leads, not the GLA. Names have been removed.

The thing I love about PACT is when I was in a really bad place and not attending Mumspace often, 'K' would pull me up on it, support and encourage me to keep going. When I was struggling, the encouragement I received from other mums and the workshops we have was so helpful. It would not have been possible without PACT. I have made true friendships being part of PACT, I know if I am not doing well or need a bit of help the friends I've made will not judge and will be there. Being part of PACT has brought me a new family and a sense of belonging in my community which I wouldn't otherwise have felt. It has also shown me what I really want to do with my life and created a new passion in me for wanting to help people.

This has led me to doing a Level 3 in Counselling course and wanting to go back to university to do a BSc (Hons) Counselling to start next year. This wouldn't have been possible without my good friend 'M' who I met at PACT. When I first brought it up, I even asked her to talk me out of it but instead she encouraged me and helped me believe in myself. I feel so alive thanks to the people I have met at PACT encouraging me to follow this dream and offering me opportunities to volunteer. I look forward to the future now but most importantly I am living in the present. The mums and volunteers I have met have pushed me to be a better mum, a better me. I know I can count on them just like they know they can count on me."

New Economics Foundation

One parent who has been very involved in the nursery is 'D'. 'D' used to work in a nursery and wants to go back. But she has three young kids and even with the free hours of childcare she receives, paying for enough childcare to cover her working hours would cost more than she would receive in wages. For working-class mums like 'D', the only choice is between going into debt to pay for childcare or giving up the job she enjoyed, both of which make her feel sad and ashamed. Chatting to mums at local playgroups in Deptford, 'D' realised that a lot of them were in a similar situation but felt really isolated. She decided to set up a WhatsApp group for local parents. It now has 119 mums who use it to support one another from swapping baby clothes to offering advice on accessing Universal Credit.

'D' is on the core stakeholder group of the nursery leading on outreach and recruitment of families to the nursery. She has successfully completed paediatric first aid training and food and hygiene training and aims to volunteer in the nursery when it opens in return for a discount on her fees. She has been part of the recruitment panel for the

nursery manager and is helping to run regular stay and play sessions that bring in a wide range of local parents. 'D' has also played an ongoing role talking to parents and reflecting the needs that low-income families face in accessing childcare. For example, 'D's experience has ensured that children that will use their free 15 hours and stay for lunch will be able to access subsidised lunches in order to be able to eat with their peers.

Little Village

'A', 23, first visited Little Village a little over a year ago, when her baby, 'R', was three months old, "I'd left home with my baby and one bag. It was a violent and chaotic environment and it wasn't safe for me or 'R'," says 'A'.

With the help of a social worker 'A' managed to escape and found herself living in a refuge in a new area, with no support, friends or family and absolutely nothing for 'R', "My refuge worker told me about Little Village," she says, "I was really embarrassed to ask for help, I'm a very proud person, but I was at rock bottom. I came in and realised within minutes that there was absolutely no need to feel ashamed. They gave me absolutely everything: a pram, clothes, bottles, nappies, even toiletries for myself".

As well as providing the essential equipment 'A' needed for 'R', 'A' found the emotional help and friendly environment a source of great support: "That first day I came to Little Village was the first time anyone had ever made me a cup of tea. It makes me feel emotional now to think about it. I was so used to being the one who had done everything for everyone else. Something so simple as a cup of tea can make the world of difference."

'A' returned to Little Village when 'R' was six months old, returning the items he'd grown out of, collecting the next size up, and offering to help and volunteer and she's been back every week since! When we launched the creche, we spoke to current volunteers about the project and discovered 'A' was a Level 3 qualified childcare worker. As she was caring for 'R' full time she had been unable to find work. 'A', along with another supported mum, 'V', now run the creche, offering weekly childcare for the children of other volunteers. "I've made friends here and Little Village now feels like a home to me. It's a lovely community."

'A' is now in a much better place than she was when we first met her. She's living in temporary accommodation but says it's nice and she has her own space. 'A' is awaiting a more permanent home.

Cares Family

One older neighbour, 'E' – who attended most of the 26 3G sessions over Zoom – told us he looked forward to them every week. Until two years ago, 'E' had never lived alone: he had shared a home with family and friends until he moved in with his wife. 'E' told us:

"It's been just over a year since my wife passed away, and it was extremely hard for me. I've never been on my own. I met my wife in my twenties, and we were together for almost 70 years. It was tough learning to get used to living by myself. I speak to my son and daughter often, but I felt very lonely. The 3G project gives me something to look forward to each week. I couldn't believe I was able to download Zoom by myself. My six-year-old grandson, Alfie, has it too so I have been able to use it to see him more often – it has been wonderful. I love coming each week and seeing all the little ones and especially love the music sessions as I enjoy sharing my love of music, especially Michael Bublé. The songs remind me of my wife and when I play them to others, I feel connected to her and it is nice to share that. The clubs are a real highlight of my week."

2020 marked 'E's 90th birthday and he was looking forward to spending it with his daughter, who lives in Florida. Lockdown restrictions meant he was unable to go. Instead he made plans with his son for the day – but he ensured those plans worked around his 3G social club attendance. On his 90th birthday, he came to our 'Create A Rainbow' social club and celebrated with friends he'd made during the pandemic, including children 89 years his junior who sang him 'Happy Birthday'.



What works – programme design and delivery

This section summarises **what worked well** in designing and delivering projects that achieved in bringing diverse families together to improve social integration. Additionally, it includes learnings from delivering projects online during COVID-19. This learning underpins our recommendations for organisations and funders wanting to run or support similar programmes that improve social integration among early years families.

Parent outreach

Parent outreach, especially attracting a diverse group of parents from different backgrounds, was a key part of all funded projects. The evaluation found that substantial time and resources were needed to effectively promote projects from the outset. Projects adopted different approaches to getting parents on board, either as service users or as volunteers. We were unable to assess how effective individual outreach channels were, as not all projects recorded how parents first heard about them, though most project leads agreed that outreach channels should be **multi-faceted**.

- Many projects relied on **word of mouth from a trusted source**. Some projects appointed '**parent leaders**' or '**parent ambassadors**' to help spread the word within local communities. These were parents who had strong networks and links within their community, and those who had benefited directly from projects. Both helped to promote the projects and spread the word. Involving trusted partner organisations that had a strong following among parents also helped engagement.

“Engaging facilitators to lead sessions who were already well known in the area, and who then promoted sessions to their networks, was successful. For example, Mrs H and The Singalong Band had a good following in Waltham Forest and helped engage new participants.” [Project lead]

- Some projects used **social media** to reach parents, either via their own social media channels or through existing online groups on Facebook or WhatsApp. This worked best when parents themselves shared information and their experiences on social media, including photos of the sessions.

“Running the sessions and talking to parents and then asking them to share with local networks has worked well. The WhatsApp groups seems to be more and more effective. When we ask new parents that come along how they heard about it its often because of people they didn’t know posting in an online group. At the beginning we did a lot of door knocking which got us some contacts locally, who have stayed, but then since then it’s mostly grown through word of mouth.” [Project lead]

- Running activities within or **near local amenities or services** helped engage new and sometimes underserved families. For example:
 - Time and Talents ran their project in a shopping centre where many parents pass through on a regular basis. That meant they could see the activities happening through the window.
 - Kids Kitchen ran sessions at a baby bank to specifically engage low-income families who were already using this facility. This helped Kids Kitchen reach a group of families they had otherwise struggled to engage.
 - Hackney Playbus chose locations that were in or close to deprived areas. It also ran outreach sessions to engage very specific groups of families, such as those living in homeless hostels.

“Another thing we’ve been focusing on is working with families in homeless hostels. What’s been effective is outreach Playbus sessions, so we did one on the doorstep of one of the homeless hostels – it’s only a 10-minute walk from our usual site but you need to do it right there if you want to engage those families.” [Project lead]

- Many projects also engaged **organisations in the community** to either spread awareness or refer people to the project. Across the programme, projects engaged schools, children’s centres, tenants and residents’ associations, local authorities, and health services to increase engagement. This appeared to work well for some projects, but it could be time consuming and at times difficult to engage with key stakeholders.

“Most sites we had local organisations to help us promote it, for example friends of the park or local children’s centre or staff at the adventure playground, and we sent emails out to local organisations like schools and nurseries.” [Project lead]

- Regardless of the outreach channels used, advertising key information about the sessions (activities, duration, location, and accessibility) was vital and **offering food at sessions** was a simple, but effective way to attract parents.

“I think it was getting out the word through word of mouth. Having breakfast – obviously food is a key thing particularly in an area with high deprivation where people are relying on foodbanks.” [Project lead]

- Lastly, an important finding from the evaluation was that many parents attended sessions for their children, not themselves. Parents were attracted to the activities and opportunities for their children to develop social skills and have fun. Advertising the **benefits for children** helped with engagement. Once parents were engaged, projects could focus their attention on the parent as well. However, some projects found it took parents a while to realise the projects also offered benefits to them.

“One of the challenges we’ve faced is getting parents used to the idea of going to groups for them. Parents are often, understandably, very child-focused, and much more likely to attend a group if they think it’s for their children. However, we work with a number of parents who are very isolated and there is a real need for taking time for themselves, widening their social circle, and learning about other local services that can help them. We’ve been able to reach these parents through things like the Play Club, and over time, encourage them to go to other activities which are focused on them” [Project lead]

Project sessions and activities

As the types of activities and sessions delivered varied across projects, from music to cooking, forest school, and co-designing a nursery, it’s hard to compare which were best at bringing together diverse groups of parents and promoting social integration. However, there were some key features of project activities that achieved positive outcomes for families.

Projects did best when they **actively encouraged and supported parents to interact** rather than taking a passive approach. It wasn’t enough to bring together a group of parents – projects had to foster interaction between them. For example, Wheely Tots paired families together and gave them a problem to work on. Kids Kitchen encouraged parents to share recipes and prepare meals and cook together.

- Many families face similar situations and experiences. As such, **encouraging parents to share** with one another helped bring them together and connect meaningfully. Examples included experiences of parenthood, advice on specific issues, or places to take their children. Many projects included this in their sessions and encouraged parents to talk about it. Sometimes this happened spontaneously.

“One parent came to the session today struggling to get her baby to feed from a bottle. She was worried that her baby wasn’t eating enough...Staff also asked other nearby parents who were relaxing on the play mats with their young babies for their ideas, and a conversation started between several parents, many of whom hadn’t spoken to each other before... Staff observed in the following weeks that although these mothers hadn’t known each other before, after this conversation they chatted more to each other.” [Project lead]

- Some activities celebrated or focused on different **cultures or religions**, whether through food, music, or acts of solidarity for a certain group or incident. For example, in one project, parents organised an event in response to the Christchurch mosque shootings. These activities were a great way of bringing together diverse parents. They provided an opportunity to share, get to know each other and connect on a personal level.

“Over the course of the year we enjoyed many cultural and religious festivals together, including Hanukkah, Christmas, the Chinese New Year, Holi, Easter, Ramadan, Black History Month, Sukkot and Diwali. We asked parents and carers who celebrate these holidays as part of their culture to help us plan activities for these special occasions, and to share their holiday traditions with other Playbus families from other cultures. This prompted discussion and exchange of cultural knowledge amongst parents and carers, while their children learned through play. We worked towards helping children, parents, and carers to see the ways in which their cultures and beliefs are similar by sharing and discussing practices and experiences.” [Project lead]

- Ensuring that **activities were inclusive** helped bring diverse families together. For example, Kids Kitchen used only plant-based recipes to ensure dietary restrictions (religious or other) didn’t stop certain groups from taking part. Having volunteers or staff that spoke **multiple languages** also helped to further engage and include specific groups of parents.
- Supporting parents to engage with the project and interact with other parents was vital. Key to the success of many projects, for example Little Village, was **providing a creche** or creating a safe space for parents to be comfortable away from their child. Knowing that someone was looking after their children in a safe space allowed parents to engage fully in the project and interact with other without needing to keep an eye on their children.

“Having a creche has transformed everything...If you want to involve parents you need a creche – we planned to include that from the start and has been very helpful in allowing parents to attend and engage.” [Project lead]

- Having dedicated **time for parents to socialise**, either before or after activities, helped parents interact and engage with each other. It provided a valuable space to

socialise (both child and parent). This is also something that many parents said is lacking from traditional playgroups or parent gatherings. For some projects, this time to socialise coincided with breakfast or lunch. Some parents said eating together (and setting and clearing the table) helped instil a sense of community and made the group feel more like a family.

“On the day the parents chat, and we have activities for the first 30 mins and then their children are brought in the room. Having that time beforehand for parents to get together, that works really well.” [Project lead]

- Using **online networks** helped develop and continue relationships between parents. Creating WhatsApp groups or other social networks meant parents could stay in contact outside of sessions and continue to support each other. Online networks also allowed project staff to keep in touch and keep parents engaged. For example, Kids Kitchen shared online recipes with parents between sessions.

Throughout the evaluation, project leaders and parents alike compared the funded projects with ‘standard’ playgroups. A key difference between these projects and standard playgroups was the **ethos to focus on the parent**, not just the child.

- Many parents reported that projects sessions felt more **open and welcoming**, and less cliquey than standard playgroups. For example, a few parents said that at other playgroups parents had been asked to leave if their child was deemed too naughty. In comparison, projects were seen as more tolerant and flexible.

“It’s so relaxed here. I’ve been to other playgroups but they’re so formal and baby oriented. Obviously, that’s good, but here there’s so much more of a community, there are things for parents to do too. Everyone gets involved and it’s run by mums, so they know what we’re going through. Other playgroups have asked parents to leave if their children are too naughty. I was asked to leave once.”

[Parent]

- **Staff involved parents in the projects.** This included making space to share ideas and make suggestions, co-designing sessions, and helping to run sessions. This meant parents felt more comfortable and equal and helped create a sense of ownership.

- Project leads talked about the need to be flexible with parents. Projects adopted a variety of **flexible and person-centred** approaches, like drop-in sessions, so parents didn't need to commit long-term. Some offered extra support to individual families and ran activities on different days. They also made efforts to fit activities within parent's existing schedules, such as hosting activities after school drop-off or in a shopping centre.

Activities for the **whole family** (including older or younger siblings, dads, and grandparents) helped to properly bring families together.

- Nature Vibezzz, encouraged older children (over 12) to take part and help at the sessions.
- Time and Talents ran one of their sessions on a Saturday, which made it easier for both parents (including dads) to attend.

Although the fund focused on parents, **carers and childminders** are an important group to include. New Economics Foundation noticed that childminders were sometimes unsure whether sessions were aimed at them. As reported below, including childminders had a positive impact on the project.

“Involving local childminder networks has been positive and has at some points provided contact back into wider family networks. We have also benefited from the skills and ideas that some childminders have brought to the sessions, sometimes leading activities or bringing particular resources to support sessions.” [Project lead]

Lastly, **frequency and duration** of projects is important. A one-off session can lead to positive outcomes. However, it probably won't create meaningful relationships between parents or enable projects to provide long-term support to parents. Projects that worked best in creating diverse and meaningful relationships were those where parents engaged frequently and for a long time.



Hackney Playbus

Co-designing and volunteering

Taking an active role in projects ultimately meant that parents engaged and benefited more from the projects. Parents appreciated contributing to the design and delivery of projects; it made the projects more relevant to them. While the level of co-design varied, this was a clear benefit over normal playgroups where parents feel they are just there to observe. Overall, it instilled a 'community feel' that was open and inclusive.

The ways in which projects enabled parents to be more involved was supportive and flexible. What worked well across projects was **offering different levels of involvement** for parents.

- For some projects, it was **informal** and involved canvassing ideas, asking parents what they wanted sessions to include and letting parents help-out and run sessions on the day. Sessions and ideas chosen and run by parents included organising day trips, clothes swaps, running exercise classes, and cooking specific recipes.
- For other projects, co-design was more **formal** and intensive. This included becoming a parent ambassador or parent director, sitting on steering groups and running activities. Formal co-design was at the heart of the New Economics Foundation project. There parents attended design and build workshops with architects and designers to create and install indoor and outdoor play equipment. They also developed the name and the brand of the nursery.

“Allowing everybody to contribute whatever they can – listening and giving opportunity to contribute whether just ideas or things that they can do. It created such a strong sense of belonging and ownerships, so people don’t feel disempowered.” [Project lead]

Although co-design was a positive theme of the programme, the **co-design process was sometimes challenging and a learning curve for some projects.**

- For staff, it was resource-heavy and required time. It also took time to engage parents and help them understand the process. In some cases, projects also initially struggled to achieve the outcomes they had hoped from co-design. For example, some projects wanted parents to come up with and design activities. However, parents sometimes suggested irrelevant activities or instinctively thought of their child and not themselves. One parent, for example, asked to run a homework club.
- A few project leads acknowledged the fine line between encouraging and supporting parents to become more involved and asking too much from them. Given the work required to engage parents, and their personal situations, parents should not feel obliged to take part or commit long-term.

“We’re doing more workshops than planned because co-design is so difficult. We spend a whole workshop just talking about co-design and then meet again to run sessions. Co-design can be difficult because parents change their ideas or sometimes forget they were on the ones who planned it. Sometimes new parents show up who weren’t involved in the co-design process the week before. You still get the loudest voices coming which can be an issue.” [Project lead]

Location and venues

Where projects took place were key to their success. For some projects, this was the crux of their engagement model and just as important as the types of activities offered. As with activities, the types of venues and location used varied across projects. This makes it hard to compare what type of venue or location worked best. There was however some important learning on what worked well.

- Some projects chose locations seen as **‘neutral ground’**. These were places where parents with young children felt comfortable going to and are often nearby anyway. For example, Hackney Playbus chose a park, Time and Talents a shopping centre, and Eastside Community Heritage, the school setting was chosen to use school drop-off - a time when diverse groups of parents are already gathered.
- Choosing venues that were within or **near local amenities or services** helped engage new and sometimes underserved families.
- Parents were drawn to projects because there was a (safe) **space for their children to play** in. As such, venues with play areas can help to engage parents, particularly if this is lacking where they live.
- Having or being next to some **outdoor green space or outdoor playgrounds** was also a plus, as these are places parents with young children frequent. Parents can also go to these places together after the session.
- There were some challenges with venues, mostly when external venues were used. A few found it time-consuming engaging with venues and gaining buy-in and in a few cases, venues were also not suitable. More lead-in time would have helped some projects identify more suitable venues.

Delivering projects online during COVID-19

Year 2 of the fund identified some key learning for running social integration projects working with families online, in response to the pandemic.

- Delivering activities online meant that some projects could **expand their outreach** by engaging with more families or relaxing criteria. Previous constraints or barriers to participation were removed through an online format, such as travel, timing, and venue. Importantly, running sessions online allowed whole families to take part, rather than just young children.
- The use of **break-out rooms on Zoom** created space and time during online sessions for parents to socialise and build connections. Although they do not replicate the offline experience, these enabled participants to interact in smaller and more intimate group.

“Talking to the group did me a world of good – made me feel less alone.”

[Participant]

- However, while running projects online opened new opportunities, it also created new barriers, notably digital exclusion. Some projects struggled to include groups, like older or low-income participants, in their online activities. The evaluation highlighted the need to **support digitally excluded participants** to take part.
 - **Providing equipment** (such as a computer or device), **training and technical support** (for example helping participants to download and use Zoom) or allowing participants to dial in via telephone helped reduce digital exclusion. Although the latter allowed some individuals to take part, it limited their engagement in activities as they couldn't see other on screen and was harder for project leads to manage.
- Posting **activity packs**, which contained project resources, such as arts and craft materials, and project information, helped engage families, reduce digital exclusion, provided fun activities for families, and kept neighbours connected.
 - Activity packs helped make sessions more interactive and enabled those who had to dial-in to participate more. It also meant all could join in more creative activities regardless of what they had at home or could afford to buy.

“The activity packs are very useful as it gives us all the tools required to be able to complete activities with the kids and makes it more enjoyable. It's nice that everything is mostly prepped for us and all we have to do is log on and participate with others” [Parent]

- The Cares Family used a lockdown journal and invited older neighbours, parents and children to add entries of their pandemic experience, to keep people connected between sessions.
- One project extended the activity packs to include other siblings, expanding the packs to other family members helped to provide a fun learning environment for all children. This also helped to take some stress off parents who had been looking for activities.

“I feel like it makes me happier and gives me more things to look forward to. I’ve been looking for activities to do and now that they are planned for me it takes a little stress off my shoulders. It’s also been nice having someone to be able to talk to whenever needed.” [Parent]

- However, not all projects were able to transition online, due to the nature of the activity, such as outdoor activities, replicating it in an online space was not possible.



Citizens UK - PACT

Recommendations

The GLA identified a set of recommendations based on what worked well in designing and delivering projects to increase social integration among families. These recommendations are for organisations and funders wishing to run or support similar programmes that build relationships between diverse families in the early years context.

- **Develop parent leaders or ambassadors** – these should be a range of parents from diverse backgrounds who are already involved in their community or have strong social networks. Having ‘influential’ parents on board can help to spread awareness among the community, support outreach and ensure sessions are parent-led.
- **Advertise the benefits for the child** – for many parents considering attending activities with their young child, their first thought was how their child will benefit. To engage parents in their projects, organisations should advertise these benefits.
- **Use local amenities or services** – for example schools, baby banks, shopping centres, or playgrounds, to help with outreach and awareness. This makes it easier and convenient for parents to attend. It also creates joint working between organisations and supports signposting and referrals.
- **Use online networks and social media** to promote projects, as well as enable interactions beyond the project sessions between parents and with project staff.
- **Incorporate activities that create interaction between parents** – projects need to engage parents and actively enable interaction between parents. For example, by getting parents to share experiences or work on something together.
- **Provide a creche or informal childcare** – to allow parents to properly engage in certain activities and have time to interact with each other away from their children.
- **Ensure sessions are open, friendly and non-judgemental** – parents appreciated the ethos of the funded projects, especially when comparing to experiences with more traditional playgroups. The first impression is important, especially when engaging with underserved groups.
- **Ensure projects accommodate different cultures and groups** – if the aim is to engage a diverse group of people, projects need to be appealing and inclusive to all groups.

- **Allow and encourage the whole family to participate** – likewise if the aim is to increase social integration among families, whole families (including partners and siblings) should be engaged and encouraged to participate.
- **Implement co-design into projects** – encouraging and supporting parents to co-design projects improves satisfaction. It also improves engagement with projects through a sense of ownership.
- **Allow different levels of parent involvement** in designing and running projects – parents have benefited from volunteering and being actively involved in projects. However, there are barriers to volunteering and not all may be comfortable taking on roles with greater responsibility.
- **Consider duration and frequency of projects** – for parents to form meaningful relationships, they need time for these to develop. Meeting once is unlikely to have much impact.

COVID-19 specific recommendations

- **Use break-out rooms when delivering projects online** – to allow participants to build connections through interaction in smaller and more intimate group discussions.
- **Support those who are digitally excluded to participate** – if projects are run online, provide equipment and training to support people to participate. Consider whether people can effectively take part through dialling-in on the phone, or if video access is needed.

Key learnings for funders

When designing grant programmes, funders should:

- **Consider the timing of grant funding** – if funding projects for parents with young children, then school holidays need to be taken into account and schools are likely to be key stakeholders. To ensure buy-in and engagement with schools and teachers, activities should ideally line up with the academic year.
- **Ensure the funding is long enough for the project** – delivering projects with families requires engagement with the community and time for parents to build trust, before activities can even begin. Developing meaningful relationships between parents also takes time.

- **Consider sustainability of funded projects** – given how long it takes to set up projects and start seeing positive outcomes, it also takes a long time to ensure sustainability. Funders should consider, for example, transition funding to keep projects afloat whilst organisations seek funding from elsewhere.



Kids Kitchen Collective

Conclusion

Social integration is about connections with others. It is about shaping a city where people have more opportunities to interact positively and meaningfully. It means supporting Londoners to play an active part in their communities and the decisions that affect them. It also means reducing barriers and inequalities, so that Londoners can relate to each other as equals.

The London Family Fund programme (2018-2020) aimed to bring families together across difference, in the early years context, to improve social integration. This aim was achieved through projects funded by the programme. Projects succeed in engaging and bringing together diverse families and generated major changes for these families. Parents who attended projects:

- Built new **relationships across difference** and generated **new social and support networks**
- Felt **less lonely and isolated**, with parents feeling **more connected to their local area** having met people who they could go to if they needed help.
- **Improved their participation and involvement in their local communities**, from taking an active role in projects, campaigning on local issues, helping a friend and volunteering.
- **Increased their access to opportunities**, some parents **gained new skills** and experiences, in turn helping with future employment or education, others had the chance to use and retain existing skills, and parents had **access to important local services**.
- Saw improvements in the **wellbeing of their child(ren)**, projects made their child(ren) more confident, improved their development and learning and prepared them for nursery.

The evaluation explored what worked well in designing and delivering projects that improve social integration among families. From this, the GLA identified a set of recommendations for organisations and funders who wish to deliver similar projects:

- **To reach and engage diverse local families**, projects should develop parent leaders or ambassadors with strong networks into their local community to help support outreach. Additionally, projects should advertise benefits for the child as many parents will engage primarily for this reason. Once parents engage, projects need to ensure sessions are open, friendly and non-judgmental. Sessions should accommodate and celebrate different cultures and focus on the parents. If projects are running online, supporting those who are digitally excluded to participate is crucial.

- **To build relationships between parent's** projects must use activities to **foster interaction** and provide time that allows parents to properly engage with one another (such as providing a creche or informal childcare). If projects are running online the use of breakout rooms, with small groups of parents, can help build connections.
- **To increase participation and opportunities** for parents, projects need to implement co-design into projects and allow for, and support, different levels of parent's involvement. This in turn can lead to parents volunteering outside of projects and developing new skills.

The programme has shown the significant impact that investing in these projects has both for parent and child wellbeing. It has helped develop long lasting relationships and support networks between parents as well as contributing to wider social integration outcomes.

This success helps us understand how to best support families, both in the current context and as London recovers. The GLA will be sharing this learning with others, including local authorities, funders and civil society organisations, and using it to build on and inform their own programmes and policies going forward.

The pandemic has shown, more than ever, the importance of relationships and connection to health and resilience of London's communities. Yet, more than ever, parents with young children are at risk of isolation and unprecedented hardships; increasing the wellbeing and resilience among families must be a priority. This report captures vital lessons for funders, local authorities and civil society on improving social integration among families in the early years' context.

As such, the GLA hopes this report inspires organisations and decision makers to understand the importance of and invest in the building of relationships between families and reduce social division. This needs to happen both in response to the pandemic and as London recovers.

Appendix 1: Demographic profile of parents (Year 1)

The table below shows the demographic profile of parents whose data was collected, comparing against the London-wide population.

Demographic	London Family Fund parents (%)	London population (%)
Gender		
Female	86%	50%
Male	14%	50%
Ethnicity		
White British/Irish	41%	41%
White Other	8%	16%
Asian	16%	21%
Black	16%	13%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	8%	6%
Other ethnic group	10%	4%
Age		
16-24	4%	13%
25-34	42%	23%
35-44	44%	20%
45-54	5%	16%
55-64	3%	12%
65+	1%	15%
Level of education		

Demographic	London Family Fund parents (%)	London population (%)
University degree or equivalent	47%	53%
A-levels/ apprenticeship or equivalent	17%	20%
GCSE/ O-level/ secondary school (up to 16 years)	17%	10%
Other qualifications	NA	12%
No qualifications	19%	5%
Work status		
Working	35%	81%
Studying	3%	7%
Not working – looking after house/ children	30%	7%
Not working – on parental leave	4%	NA
Not working – retired	3%	2%
Unemployed	14%	4%
Never had a job	10%	NA
Socio-economic classification		
Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations	44%	47%
Intermediate occupations	27%	23%
Routine and manual occupations	9%	22%
Never worked and long-term unemployed	20%	8%

Appendix 2: Evaluation methodology

Evaluation data was collected through the following:

- Interviews with project leads – conducted by the GLA at baseline, interim and end.
- Qualitative research with parents – conducted by the GLA during project visits.
- Parent questionnaire – designed by the GLA and answered by parents, supported by project staff. The questionnaire captured impact data and demographic data from parents engaged in the programme.
- Project self-evaluation – alongside GLA data collection, projects carried out their own self-evaluation (through their own questionnaires, observations, case studies etc).
- GLA project evaluation form – completed by project leads at interim and end. This form was designed for projects to record and report on project outputs and outcomes (including the parent questionnaire). The form also captured key successes and challenges with project delivery and feedback on the programme.

There are some limitations with the evaluation data. The breadth and quality of self-evaluation and administration of parent questionnaire varied by project, limiting the overall quality of data collected across the programme. This was understandable and was supplemented by the qualitative data collected throughout the year from parents and projects leads. It is a common challenge among grant programme evaluations when a mix of organisations and projects are funded. The report is mainly based on qualitative data collected through interviews with project leads and parents, and key learnings recorded in the project evaluation form.

Secondly, the evaluation only covered the duration of the programme and did not include any follow-up data collection. As such, it cannot assess the sustainability and longevity of the impacts recorded through the funded projects. For example, whether relationships that were created have become long-term and sustained beyond the duration of the funded project. We can however provide anecdotal evidence that this is happening.

Other formats and languages

For a large print, Braille, disc, sign language video or audio-tape version of this document, please contact us at the address below:

Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London SE1 2AA

Telephone **020 7983 4000**
www.london.gov.uk

You will need to supply your name, your postal address and state the format and title of the publication you require.

If you would like a summary of this document in your language, please phone the number or contact us at the address above.