

# Impact & strategy report 2021



Building back fairer and happier

TOYNBEE  
HALL



Thank you to the many people who have supported our work this year.

We are grateful to all those who responded to our emergency Covid-19 appeal when the first lockdown was imposed, supporting those in our community who were hardest hit. And of course to all our donors and volunteers who have helped us to adapt and respond to people's longer term needs, working together to begin the process of recovery.

Our community will need your support more than ever this year, as state support falls away. If you would like to make a donation or talk to us about how you can help, please contact our Fundraising Team:

**Call: 020 7392 2970**

**Email: [fundraising@toynbeehall.org.uk](mailto:fundraising@toynbeehall.org.uk)**

**Visit: [www.toynbeehall.org.uk/donate](http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/donate)**

**Or by post: Toynbee Hall,  
28 Commercial St, London  
E1 6LS**

# Welcome to our Impact & strategy report

*by Jim Minton, Chief Executive of Toynbee Hall*



At the beginning of May 2021, I sat in the beautiful community garden which is now the centrepiece of Toynbee Hall's completed redevelopment. Alongside me, safely socially distanced, were a group of local residents, planting seeds in small pots so that, as spring turned to summer, they would flower and bloom for everyone to enjoy. Some of the people planting had barely been out of their own homes for much of the past year. Some had lost friends and family members. Some had faced fear, frustration, loneliness and poverty. But their spirit, and the joy they felt at being able to come together to plant, and nurture and grow, was incredibly uplifting.

2020 and 2021 have been desperately tough years for very many people. Their impact has felt relentless; both for the people we work with, and for us as an organisation anchored in a community that was experiencing many inequalities long before Covid struck.

Despite great wealth and investment in our part of inner London, creating gleaming buildings and the obvious prosperity of the City of London, the reality for many people living around Toynbee Hall has for far too long been one of entrenched poverty, poor housing, limited access to justice, insecure employment, and systemic barriers to accessing opportunities.

The pandemic and the lockdowns hit these communities extremely hard. Overnight, people lost income, families were trapped in unsuitable crowded accommodation; elderly people, already vulnerable, were suddenly alone and

isolated; and young people had their lives and futures put on hold, creating real anxieties about the future.

It is huge testament to the resilience of these communities that the response was so swift, so urgent and so creative. It was vital that Toynbee Hall played our part in that response; and I hope this report gives a flavour of the effectiveness of the collaborations and collective action through a hugely challenging period. As we now tentatively find ourselves emerging from the crisis, while at the same time coming to terms with the loss and trauma, our focus is now more than ever on our ambition for a fairer and happier future.

Throughout the pandemic we've continued to learn from our communities about what is important to them, shaping our thinking about how we can contribute more in the future. That learning is captured in these pages, as is – excitingly – the emerging strategy and direction we will take over the coming years. Reflecting on a time of such change, and such a huge effort by so many in our team, our partners and the community, it is almost impossible to predict what the future will bring. But we owe it to the communities around us to help them drive recovery, reshaping the systems that hold people back and keep them in poverty. We offer our deepest thanks to everyone who has supported us in so many ways. Together we can and will shape a fairer and happier future.

Jim Minton, Chief Executive



# How the pandemic has affected the communities around us

*"Most of the older people who I see live alone and don't have access to digital equipment and they are also not aware of how to use them, which is hard to connect them to any social activities online. They have said that being housebound for more than four weeks has affected them mentally and are now forming a depression."*

*All I can do is call them and just listen to them over the phone and assure them to think positive that we will get through this. Other than that they are still in total isolation"*

Shomee, LinkAge Plus Outreach Worker

While the pandemic has increased pressure on us all, it has disproportionately affected those who were already facing existing inequalities and systemic barriers. Ethnicity, social class, disability and immigration status are just some of the factors which limit entitlement and access to good employment, safe and stable housing, welfare support and online services, undermining people's ability to cope during a health or economic crisis.

Throughout the past 12 months, as well as supporting people directly to meet their needs, we made a commitment to create platforms for them to share their 'Pandemic Stories', describe and document their experience, and advocate for change through a community-led research project, led by ordinary people, in dialogue with their peers and neighbours throughout the crisis.

Community members told the Pandemic Stories researchers how Covid had affected them:

## WORSENING HOUSING CRISES

Overcrowding was already an issue for many families locally, and through the pandemic, many more grew anxious and scared for their health, or became ill because they couldn't safely social distance. Young private renters are struggling with rents staying high even when incomes have been cut and our debt advisors have seen many younger people; 20% more under-30s are now seeking debt advice.

## DESTITUTION & LACK OF BASIC ACCESS

People with 'no recourse to public funds' have little choice but to rely on their networks for support but, as incomes dropped, many faced destitution. This particularly affects ethnic minority groups because in some cases their immigration status bars them from accessing state support.

## DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Overnight the internet became the only way to access essential services such as food shopping, health services, claiming benefits and paying bills. It became virtually impossible to do many of these things face-to-face. They needed equipment, affordable broadband, and support to use new technology and build their confidence to be able to meet their basic needs.

## DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT

Many studies have confirmed the experience of our communities, showing that women, people with disabilities and people from minority ethnic groups have been disproportionately impacted, both by the pandemic and by the lockdowns. People already facing systemic inequality have been confronted by even bigger barriers to accessing services; they already work in lower-paid, less secure jobs and face more risk factors in their lives and homes. 59% of people who use our advice services are from black and ethnic minority groups, rising to 72% across the London-wide Debt Free London partnership.

## PROFOUND INCOME SHOCKS

While many better off people have made savings while working from home, the experience of people in our communities has been the double shock of earning less but needing to spend more: 51% of people surveyed said their income had reduced due to COVID-19. Expenditure also increased, for example, needing to feed children at home while schools were closed.

## LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Many of our Community Centre members depend on our programme of social and physical health activities to fend off loneliness and isolation, socialise, and get advice and support. Shutting our doors – and seeing so many other services close down overnight – was truly heart-breaking and the lack of face-to-face connections left a huge gap for many people. We did our best to maintain contact, both through phone calls to check people's essential needs, and through supporting volunteers to create befriending relationships and form connections to those being asked to shield or isolated in other ways.

# Who we have worked with

Throughout the pandemic we've worked hard to adapt and respond urgently, listening to what people need and working with other groups to support our local community cope during the crisis.

## People in housing need

Housing costs were already a burden on many Londoners before the crisis, and the sudden income shocks caused by the pandemic have made things worse for many people. The proportion of people coming to us or one of our Debt Free London partners for help with debt caused by rent arrears increased by almost a third, from 36.2% in 2019/20 to 47.5% in 2020/21.

## Working with young renters through Covid

Throughout the pandemic we continued peer research with young renters, funded by Berkeley Foundation, to help understand and support action for change, bringing them together with landlords to help co-produce solutions to the challenges of being a young renter in London. They told us they struggled particularly throughout the crisis because moving home was impossible for many months; young renters tend to be mobile and move regularly, often to find cheaper accommodation or to be closer to jobs. 20% of our peer research participants have moved 5 times or more in the past 5 years, but most were unable to do so in 2020.



**MORE THAN 50% OF INCOME SPENT ON RENT**

Most young people spent more than half their income on rent.

Young renters often didn't know their rights, and even when they did they lacked the time and confidence to communicate them



**20% OF YOUNG RENTERS HAVE MOVED 5 TIMES OR MORE IN THE PAST 5 YEARS**

Anwar lives with his wife and two children. His first priority is supporting his family, and he works hard to make sure they have enough income to cover costs. Up until the crisis started he was managing by working as a self-employed Uber driver, but this work stopped suddenly with lockdown and, as he had only done this for 9 months, he wasn't entitled to self-employment support. Not knowing when any money would be coming in threw the family finances into crisis.

*"I can't afford to stay at home. Many people are in the same situation, I'm hearing so many stories. I know quite a few families who are in much worse situations."*

## People in insecure and low paid work, or unemployed

It's striking that, among the thousands of people we worked with during 2020, just 17% were working full time, with many people having precarious incomes and changing responsibilities. A significant proportion of the people we supported were either retired or semi-retired (20%), illustrating that they also faced other challenges through their age or vulnerability. 16% were looking for work, and another 13% were unable to work due to illness or disability. Between them, these three groups account for almost half of the people who used our services. Across London, the Debt Free London partners have seen a large increase in the proportion of unemployed people seeking help with their debts.

## People dependent on the social safety net of benefits

67% of people who used our advice services had some income from Housing or Council Tax Benefit. Those receiving Universal Credit are 85% more likely to have rent arrears and 43% more likely to have priority debts. 74% of people who came to Debt Free London for advice received some form of benefit.



# Adapting to a new reality: our impact in 2020/21



**20** tablet devices  
**6** laptops  
were distributed to digitally  
excluded clients.

In early March 2020, we were planning to finally celebrate the completion of our redevelopment by opening our wonderful new public gardens and community spaces as a springboard to create a fairer and happier future. But as the pandemic struck and we entered the first national lockdown, instead of opening up, we had to close our doors. No one could be certain how long the lockdown would last – but we could see from the start that we would have to respond urgently. So we immediately set about adapting, to ensure we remained accessible, open, and there for everyone who needed us.

## Reaching out to the community around us

Our team responded incredibly, and within 24 hours we had moved our advice services online and set up a *First Response* phone service, which we could promote across the community through numerous networks - including mutual aid groups - with whom we quickly made contact. We recruited and trained more local volunteers – many who spoke different languages - to reach out across the community. And we found new ways to tackle isolation, informed by community members around us, and ensured we were always available to help people with advice, and to navigate new and complicated systems.

*"It has made a difference, helping me to talk on the telephone. I wasn't really with anyone during lockdown, just mainly on my own, so I only spoke to people on the telephone. Sam's friendly and talkative, she seems a nice person. I'd like Sam to carry on phoning as I find her interesting to talk to. I haven't met her in person but the way she talks, it keeps me interested. She's very friendly and helpful and she got Toynbee Hall to send me colouring and face masks. I like the colouring in, it passes the time. It's been nice to meet someone new and I wouldn't have met her otherwise."*

Sandra\*, 62

## Keeping connections strong across the community:



**16**

### LOCAL MUTUAL AID GROUPS

were assisted with infrastructure and support for people in the hyperlocal area with **5000** people actively helping others in the neighborhood.



**4152**

### PHONE CALLS

were made by staff and volunteers to people who would otherwise be socially isolated.



**156**

### ISOLATED AND VULNERABLE PEOPLE

in our community were matched with community volunteers through the new Befriending service.



**481**

### PEOPLE

joined our online Community Centre taking part in daily virtual activities, more than the number (323) who physically visited the Community Centre the previous year.

# Offering support and advice to the community around us

Our face-to-face advice centre had to close, but by rapidly adapting so we could deliver everything by phone and online, we were still there for those who needed urgent advice and support.

*"I cannot express gratitude enough for the overwhelming level of support I received. Somehow I was made to feel like an old friend yet everything was still so professional and handled with the utmost expertise. I felt at some points I was in the bottom of a well and in despair and your support was like a lifeline guiding me out".*

Free Legal Advice Centre client

**1679**

people  
received advice  
from our newly created  
*First Response*  
helpline.

**710**

people with cancer were helped to access benefits. Unable to do our usual outreach in hospitals, we maintained access to our partnership with *MacMillan* through a phone and online service, ensuring that on average every person who we supported claimed an additional £3800 in benefits.

Over  
**8500**

calls or email contacts were made or received in total through the year via *First Response*. Our teams kept in contact as many people needed more than one conversation to help solve their problems.

**753**

people received legal advice from *The Free Legal Advice Centre* remotely. This was compared to 1,060 people the previous year, when they could visit our centre in person.

**2680**

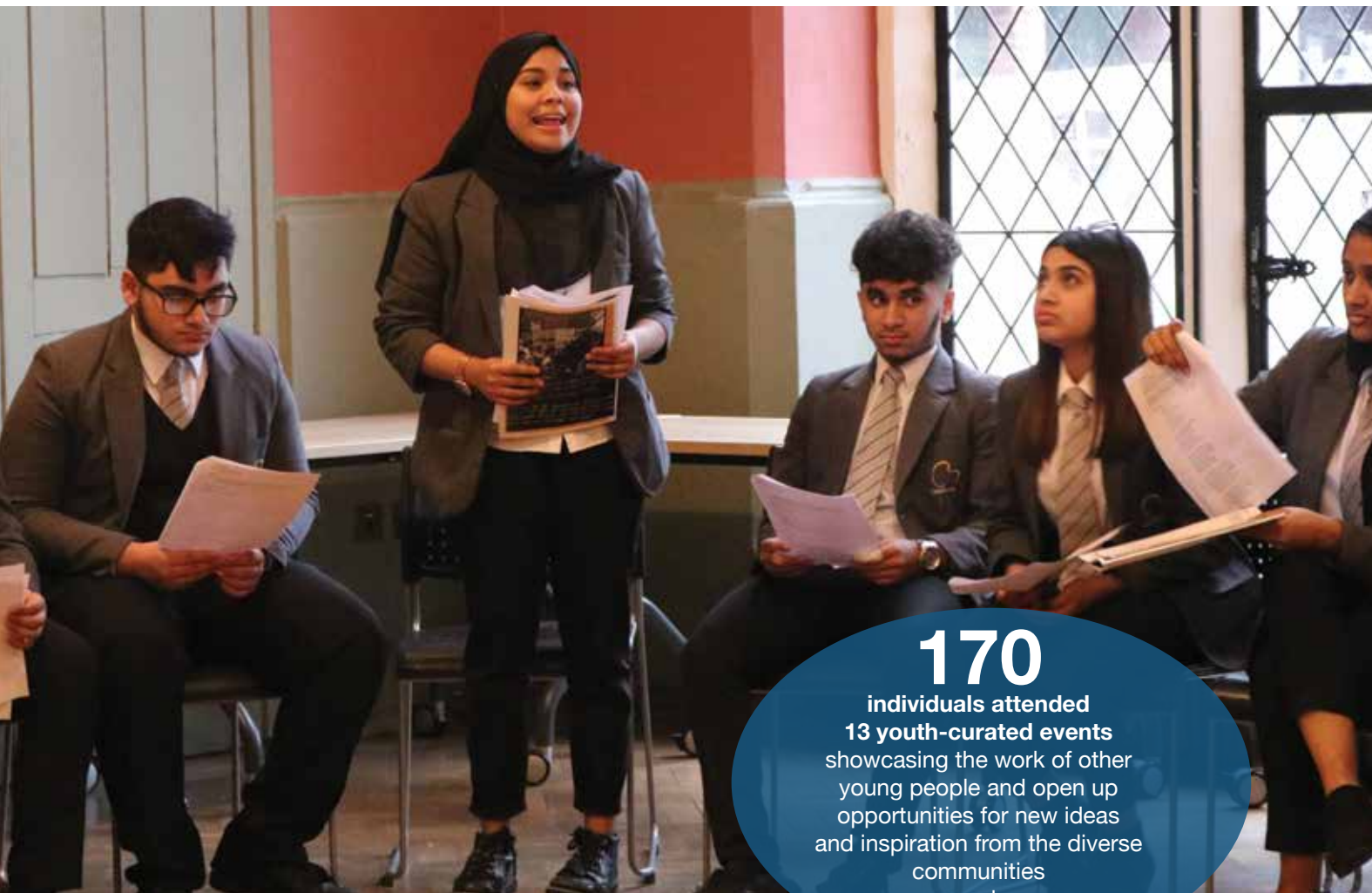
contacts were made  
by *The City Advice*  
team.

## Improving financial health through the crisis

*Community Money Mentors* continued to support each other and the broader community with financial health and wellbeing advice – which was more needed than ever by many people during the series of lockdowns. Having completed the course, 70% of *Money Mentors* graduates were either 'confident' or 'very confident' in their financial futures compared to just 30% who felt this at the start of the programme. As we were no longer able to offer the course in person, we expanded our digital platform, allowing us now to offer remote and blended courses, increasing our reach and accessibility.



# A platform for young voices



**170**  
individuals attended  
13 youth-curated events  
showcasing the work of other  
young people and open up  
opportunities for new ideas  
and inspiration from the diverse  
communities around us.

Before the pandemic, our pilot When We Speak youth project supported 12 young people to become local change makers with micro-grants, supporting them to create their own social action projects on the issues affecting them. This year we only awarded 4 microgrants as the programme was limited due to COVID but these projects still had a big impact.

Young people were among the hardest hit by the pandemic, missing out on schooling, college, work and social opportunities for long periods. We knew many other services had to close their doors, so we aimed to keep in contact and run events and activities, providing opportunities for young people to use their voice for change and develop their ideas to support each other through the crisis and beyond.

*"We, the young people of Tower Hamlets want a say in the decisions that affect us. We can make things better if the people in power share their platforms, our voices are listened to equally and our talents are used for good... The future is ours – so it's only fair we help shape it."*

A participant of the When We Speak project

**10**  
young people  
benefitted from paid activism  
opportunities through  
Toynbee Hall  
and partners.

As a result of the 4 microgrants  
awarded to help kick start youth-led  
social action projects, more than  
**60**  
young people participated  
in programmes created by local  
change makers.

Above: Young Person performs  
spoken word piece in the Lecture Hall

## Working in partnership across East London

LinkAge Plus is a partnership of five hubs offering advice, support, social activities and outreach to people aged over 50 in Tower Hamlets. In the year prior to the pandemic, there were 22,552 visits to LinkAge Plus activities. These activities were impossible to maintain during the pandemic. However, the need for support was as acute as ever, as older people across the borough faced challenges around shielding, including social isolation, accessing services and getting their essential food and medicine. So it was vital that strong partnerships like LinkAge Plus were there for those most at risk, even if we couldn't meet them face to face in our community centres. Having rapidly adapted the partnership to an outreach based model, during the year we and our partners were able to support people in new ways:

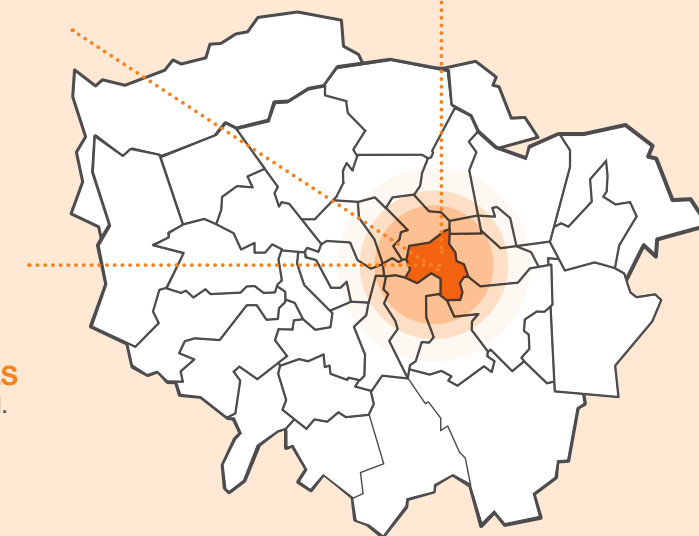
  
**6040**  
CALLS

were received by clients  
who are still shielding or  
not yet confident to leave  
their homes.

  
**7364**  
HOT &  
COLD MEALS  
were provided.

  
**2619**

OLDER PEOPLE  
were provided with  
support by LinkAge Plus.



## Making the most of our spaces, despite the lockdown

The series of lockdowns through the year meant our spaces couldn't be the hub for community activities and inspiration that they had been before the pandemic. But we were determined to make all our assets work for those around us. Our community centre became a food distribution hub for Solidarity Britannia Foodbank, who provided food to 400 families each week, particularly targeting those people with no recourse to public funds, who would otherwise have been destitute.

We were also proud to be able to play our part in tackling the pandemic itself, and gave space to our partners in the NHS to establish a community rapid testing centre in our spaces, providing free, immediate testing for hundreds of people every day.

By August 2020 we were ready to resume some face-to-face services, We added simple exercise classes and conversation bubbles and had small



Socially distanced seated exercise class,  
October 2020

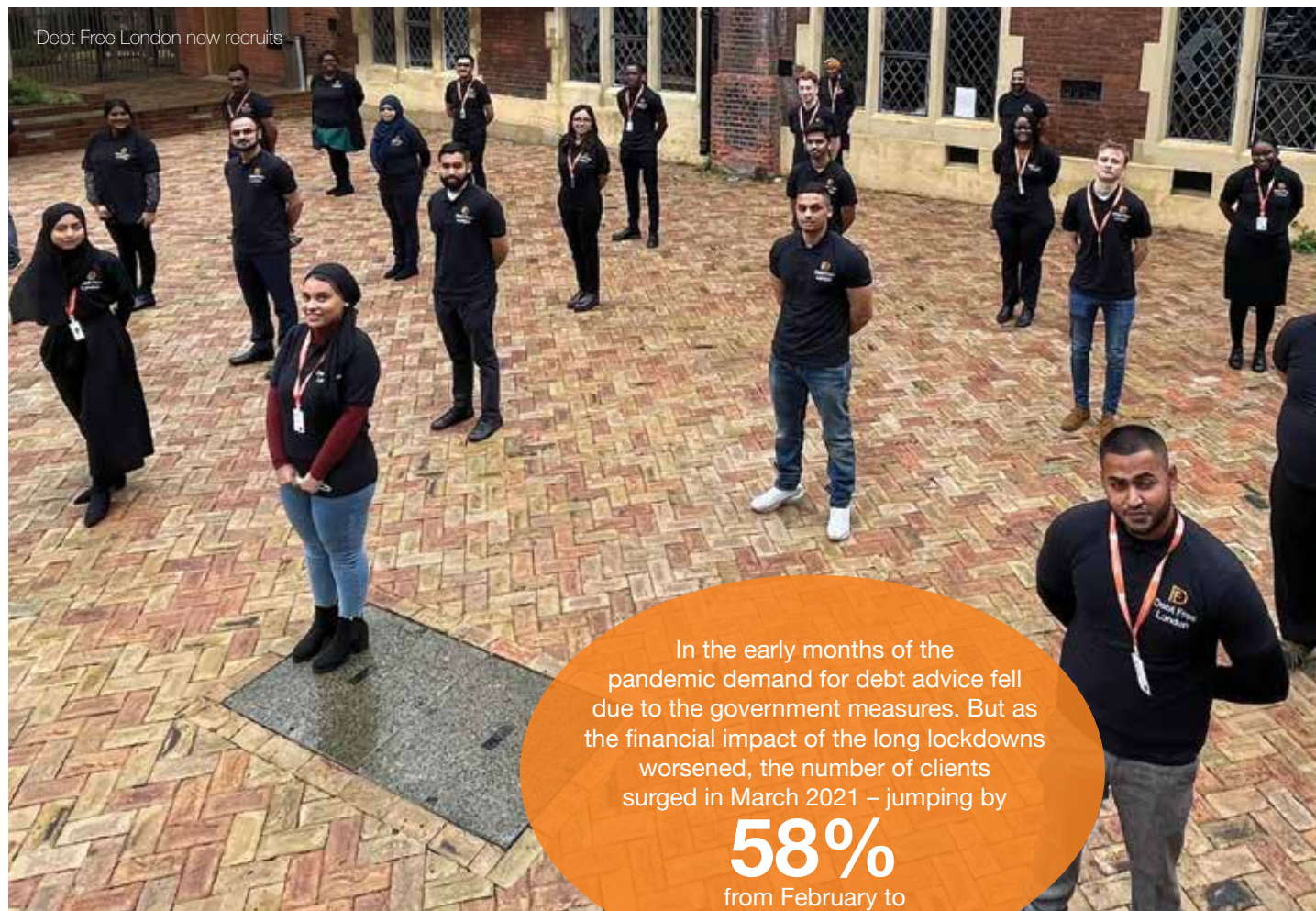
groups of local residents coming to our halls – safe and socially distanced (and tracked and traced) – but able to keep themselves fit and healthy. Further lockdowns meant we had to stop and start again with these activities, but by spring 2021 we had once again begun conversation classes, IT support and gardening in small safe groups. May 2021 also saw us reopen our Advice Centre, repurposed to offer digital and face-to-face experience, while keeping everyone safe.

*"It's so very important to be able to come to Toynbee Hall, during the pandemic we've been locked down for so many months and it was so difficult for me. So when Toynbee Hall invited me to join the conversation bubbles I was so happy."*

*This enables me to get out of my home at least once a week and socialise with people I know and been meeting for so many years. And also there's the opportunity for us to physical exercise like yoga. It's very good for me in the sense of my mental, social and physical wellbeing."*

Debbie\*, Community Centre Member





## Strengthening debt advice across the capital

Our Debt Free London partnership of 15 charities across the capital adapted during the pandemic, in response both to immediate need and to an expected significant long-term increase in personal debt due to the economic shocks of lockdown. We rapidly replaced face-to-face advice with an 'omni-channel' service so that people could still get advice, through text, phone, WhatsApp, web and video chat. In February 2021 we launched a new 24-hour service so that people could access advice and support through the night and at weekends.

Despite the challenges people faced, our partnership actually advised fewer people during the pandemic than in the previous year (when we'd helped

over 24,000 people in total). Because our partnership relies heavily on people coming to advice centres, once they closed there was a delay before people began to find our support online. And crucially some of the drivers of debt were paused – with utility companies no longer chasing unpaid bills, and an eviction ban in place for much of the year – meaning that some people may have been less immediately anxious so would not have sought help.

However, as these measures cease, and the economic uncertainty continues, a surge in personal debt is predicted for next year and beyond. So crucially during 2020-21, we began planning for the future, strengthening London's debt advice capacity by recruiting and training 60 new debt advisers for the partnership. All of these changes will help ensure that our partnership is stronger than ever for Londoners.

**14,821**

**PEOPLE WERE HELPED**  
with problem debt by the Debt Free London Partnership in the first year of the pandemic.

**92%**

**MORE CLIENTS**  
than in the year before were looking for work or registered unemployed.



**60**  
**ADDITIONAL DEBT ADVISERS**  
were recruited and trained as we anticipated the leap in need.

## Working with communities to shape systemic change

Given the disproportionate impact of Covid on East London's diverse communities, providing platforms for these communities to co-produce solutions and shape systemic change has become more vital than ever. In February 2021 community members who had led our Pandemic Stories peer research enquiry were invited to present their findings to the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Universal Credit and Food Banks.

The peer researchers told their stories, and recommended the solutions that would make the most difference to them and their friends and neighbours, including proposing a minimum income guarantee, so everyone can cover their essentials after housing costs, and recommending that the £20 increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit should be made permanent and extended to legacy benefits.

We are committed to seeking out and creating opportunities for those directly affected by these issues to speak directly to people in positions of power, so they are involved in creating effective solutions.



Conversation bubble 2020

## Looking ahead

We have done our utmost to be a positive force for good, working with and supporting the communities around us through an unparalleled crisis. But we know that even our best wasn't enough; systemic inequality and unfairness meant that too many people entered the pandemic already vulnerable to its health, economic, social and psychological impact, and we and our local partners couldn't prevent family after family experiencing loss and hardship. So what we've seen and heard during the pandemic has only reinforced our belief that we must build back better, and meet the challenges of systemic inequality and exclusion head-on.

All of the learning and experience reflected in this report gives us the platform from which to seek to build – with the communities around us – the fairer and happier future we aspire to help create.

Our emerging strategy breaks this down into three overlapping levels: our local neighbourhood; our city, London; and the wider impact across society that we can inspire. And there is a fourth pillar, about how we are as an organisation, ensuring we are as effective as we can be in delivering on all of this and that we truly live the values we aspire to.

At the heart of our strategy is our deep commitment to co-producing everything with the communities around us; and so our ambitions are less focused on 'what' we might do – and rather on 'how' we might achieve it.



# Our strategic ambition



## A fairer and happier East London

*Our local community and wider neighbourhood are our heartland. We were established here in 1884, and enjoy deep roots, friendships and strength of connection with our local community, which has withstood the enormous changes that the area has been through in our long history. Our ambition for East London is that:*

Local residents and community members will value Toynbee Hall as a place of community sharing and celebration, family support, social reform and personal growth. People from all parts of the community feel welcome here, and know that their views, ideas and experiences are valued as essential drivers of social and economic reform.

People can access a wide range of information, advice, support and development services, enabling access to justice, to rights advice, to the support they are entitled to, and helping improve their financial health and wellbeing; in our space, through outreach, and through continuing to improve our digital offer.

We offer green space, as well as accessible, open facilities and support – in person and online - for a wide range of community activities, ranging from cultural to wellbeing activities for all ages - to skills development, to participating and driving social reform and inquiry.

Our programme of events and activities – and our physical and online spaces – are genuinely inclusive; we build our position and reputation as a place where others can come to promote and co-create socially valuable thinking and ideas - while at the same time generating revenues and partnership opportunities for Toynbee Hall; and we offer space and time for the community to programme their events.

Fundamentally, we create mechanisms for East Londoners to speak directly with those who have the power to change things; we constantly seek to understand need, and help build a shared understanding with the community itself, working together to tackle systemic inequalities.

## A fairer and happier London

*Toynbee Hall has an important role to play in connecting, facilitating, sharing, partnering and creating platforms for communities to shape change, and ensure that London's status as a dynamic, thriving world city delivers benefits to all of its communities. Our ambition for London is that:*

We are established as a key voice in London, playing a leadership role in the capital to support the drive for recovery and beyond; ensuring the experience of communities including those we work alongside are increasingly at the forefront of policy change.

This will lead to us shaping further collaborative, participatory work, led by communities, around the establishing of a robust safety net for Londoners; the green growth agenda, skills and learning, regeneration and community assets; and other aspects of the recovery agenda.

We will create and enjoy strong connections and participate in collaborative, London-wide projects where we can bring a distinctive local or thematic perspective. Through partnerships with key London think tanks, funders and social infrastructure institutions we bring more resource to our part of London; and at the same time share our learning and influence change across other communities.

Our successful Debt Free London partnership will evolve to enable even more people to benefit from high-quality debt advice and is part of a wider better co-ordinated advice landscape across the capital. As further opportunities to build the partnership emerge, we will look at how we create a governance and operating framework to scale debt advice, while not distracting from the focus of Toynbee Hall's core work on co-production of change.



The outcomes of all of this work across London will be that policy and practice are better informed by the experience of Londoners; there is an agenda for Recovery which reflects and is shaped by the needs and aspirations of London's communities; partnerships are strengthened through the engagement of civil society; and as a result, the capital city is a fairer and happier place for all of its communities.



Seed planting session in Toynbee Hall garden  
Above: Toynbee Hall's Community Fun Day February 2020



A fairer and happier future

We are often asked if we are a local or national organisation. The answer is both. We have been reminded even more strongly by the experience of the pandemic that, more than ever, systemic and structural barriers – and national and global forces – can prevent our community, and others across the country, from prospering and thriving. So our ambition for change, and for shaping that fairer and happier future, beyond London is that:

We will develop, learn from and share our model for community-led change – where local people are genuinely at the heart of identifying systemic barriers and shaping solutions, giving them platforms to share and advocate for change at a national level.

We will contribute to learning and practice around people and equity – ensuring that the voices of communities can hold us to account as an organisation which lives by its values of justice, challenging racism and other discrimination – and that we do the same to those in power.

As well as supporting those in financial crisis we will continue to work in partnership to tackle the drivers of debt and scarcity – and to develop new solutions to supporting and nurturing financial health, always shaped by the experience of our community.



Top: Team members at Toynbee Hall's Shape the Future staff day

We want to become a place that is understood as somewhere that communities can challenge, connect, experiment and learn and in doing so create a whole system approach to change

The outcomes of all of this will be that we shift the dial of national policy and practice so that it is better informed by the experience of communities. And that the needs and concerns of those communities take higher priority. More funding and support will come to those people and places which need them most – so that they can act to make change for themselves. The result will genuinely be a fairer and happier future for everyone.

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Research group present their findings, March 2020

Our aim is to be a fairer and happier organisation

This year has brought both challenges and opportunities for us as a team, as an employer, and as a place to practice social reform internally as well as externally. The move to remote working has transformed us into a more networked, digitally-capable and confident team. And increased global awareness of systemic racial injustice has intensified our focus on being a fair, inclusive and empowering employer. Our ambition for our team is that:

We are a diverse team, with increasingly strong local connections, rich in both lived experience of inequality and learned expertise around social reform, which we share generously with each other, the communities we work alongside and our many partners across East London and beyond.

Toynbee Hall team members in our outdoor space



*“I’ve been feeling down for a few weeks, but after seeing people I haven’t seen in almost a year on Zoom I am feeling like a spring’s day, re-energized and hopeful.”*

Tech recipient and Zoom Coffee Mornings organiser

development opportunities for our team, and championing colleagues to take the next step in their journey, either here or elsewhere.

The outcomes of this approach will be that our team can speak with ever greater authenticity about the lived experience of systemic inequality and injustice. More people across East London – and more young people in particular – will see Toynbee Hall as a place of opportunity where they can start or develop their career in social reform. The result will be that working at Toynbee Hall will be a doubly positive experience; both as a fair and inclusive employer whilst on the team, and as an empowering launchpad for future success in creating a fairer and happier future for all.







Community Centre Members enjoy an afternoon in Victoria Park

“I find much to justify hope that if not in our time, in some time, the forces at work will make a happier and better East London”.

Samuel Barnett, Co-Founder of Toynbee Hall

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