



20 Years of LinkAge Plus

2006 - 2026



Toynee Hall
For a fairer future



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Two decades of community impact

Executive summary

For 20 years, LinkAge Plus has been at the heart of community life for older people living in Tower Hamlets, helping thousands of residents stay connected, active, and supported in later life.



What began as a pioneering national pilot has grown into a deeply valued community infrastructure rooted in relationships, trust, and local knowledge. From the outset, the ambition was a whole-systems approach: to reduce isolation, improve wellbeing, and make it easier for older people to access the support they need to live well.

“At the heart of LinkAge Plus is a vision of a strategic, whole systems approach to older people, which puts older people at the centre of policy-making and service delivery. The aim of LinkAge Plus is to develop and deliver services which are accessible, relevant and tailored as far as possible to individual needs.”

Evaluation of the Tower Hamlets LinkAge Plus Pilot, July 2008

That original vision remains at the core of LinkAge Plus today with our 20-year journey encompassing:

- An enduring focus on reducing isolation and improving wellbeing
- Deep community relationships built over time
- Trusted local networks supporting thousands of older people
- A legacy of innovation grounded in early pilot learning
- A model shaped by residents, not just services



From pilot to today

LinkAge Plus began as a national programme of pilots, coordinated by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2006, exploring new ways to support older people through joined-up, community-based approaches.

Early evaluations highlighted both the ambition and the complexity of building something new. They showed that real impact takes time: services need space to develop, relationships take time to form, and trust between communities and organisations is essential.

Crucially, the pilot phase revealed something that has remained true ever since:

Meaningful support for older people is built through relationships, not just referrals.

The Tower Hamlets pilot demonstrated a number of key things:



The importance of local outreach & trusted community connectors



The time needed to build partnerships across organisations



The value of flexible, community-led delivery



The central role of voluntary & community organisations in reaching isolated people

These early insights helped shape what LinkAge Plus would become 20 years later.



Building on those early foundations, Toynbee Hall, Sundial Centre, Sonali Gardens, Neighbours in Poplar and Age UK East London, have evolved LinkAge Plus into a rich, place-based network of support that includes:



Connection

social groups, learning & community-building events



Health promotion

exercise classes, targeted health events & integrated partnerships



Wellbeing

support to access essential services via practical support, information & referrals



Advocacy

a voice for older people via the Older People's Reference Group



Outreach

meeting people where they are at in the community



Partnerships

strong local partnerships across statutory & non-statutory services

LinkAge Plus is now less a 'programme' or 'service' and more a community infrastructure for connection and belonging.



“While looking through archival material, one thing that became clear is that LinkAge Plus did not start from nothing. Long before the national pilot arrived, the project partners understood their communities, had built trusted relationships over decades, and were already creating spaces for connection, support and participation. In many ways, LinkAge Plus became a way of bringing together and strengthening that existing community knowledge and commitment - something that continues to shape the programme 20 years later.”

Emily Bird, Community Partnerships Manager at Toynbee Hall



What has been achieved together

Stronger social connection

- 1,000's participating in social activity
- Groups now integral to community life
- Reduction in isolation through sustained engagement

Community strength and exchange

- Residents contributing as volunteers, organisers, and leaders
- Growth in peer-led groups
- Stronger neighbourhood connections

Wellbeing and confidence

- Increased access to other services
- Better wellbeing and sense of belonging
- Support for independence in later life

Trusted local presence

- Recognisable community anchors
- Relationships built over years
- Trusted routes into support

Stories behind the system

The real legacy of LinkAge Plus is best understood through people:

- Older residents who found friendship after years of isolation
- People rebuilding confidence after bereavement or life change
- Volunteers who discovered a new purpose through supporting others
- Community groups that have become long-term hubs of connection

These stories reflect what the early pilots hinted at, that small, local connections can have life-changing impact when sustained over time.

Joan's Story

I have been coming to LinkAge Plus for four years after my physiotherapist recommended me. I feel much better since coming here. I do a lot of exercise classes at the centre. I feel a sense of community at LinkAge Plus.

I feel very positive having been here for a while. It gets me out of the door. It stops me sitting on the sofa at home and doing nothing. I find it very encouraging, and I can see myself improving as the weeks go on, like being able to walk a bit more every week.

The best thing about coming here is regularity. Everyone here has been absolutely wonderful, caring, remembering your name and help inform you on what's going on.

Primla's Story

I come to LinkAge Plus Monday – Friday. I enjoy meeting people, I don't feel lonely and I'm very independent. My family asks me every evening what I've done during the day, and I have things to share with them. My mental health has improved, I feel less stressed. Regarding my physical health, I do the exercises, I feel happy. I've got company, I don't feel lonely. Coming here and trying new things means I can continue to learn and keep my mind working.



Partnership as the foundation

From the earliest pilot phase through to today, LinkAge Plus has relied on partnership working between:

- Other voluntary and community organisations
- Local authority teams
- Advice services
- NHS and Primary Care partnerships
- Volunteers, faith and community leaders

Over time, these relationships have become the backbone of delivery, enabling trust, reach, and responsiveness.

Partnership highlights

LBTH Tackling Poverty Team

Work alongside the Tower Hamlets Tackling Poverty Team has helped connect older residents to financial support - maximising income amongst pension aged residents.

LinkAge Plus has supported hundreds of targeted mailouts to increase take-up of welfare benefits, as well as distribute the borough's warm packs.



English National Ballet

Our partnership with English National Ballet has created opportunities to engage in weekly movement sessions, demonstrating the important role that arts plays in later life.

The programme has created opportunities for creativity, expression, and shared cultural experiences.



East London Business Alliance

Collaboration with East London Business Alliance has supported digital inclusion, helping older residents build skills, confidence and reduce digital isolation.

The partnership has helped older residents feel more connected and included in an increasingly digital society.



Tower Hamlets Integrated Falls Pathway

As LinkAge Plus enters its third decade, the development of the new Integrated Falls Pathway demonstrates how the programme continues to evolve in response to changing needs. Developed in partnership with Tower Hamlets Community Health Services (ELFT) and Barts Health Older People's Services, the pathway brings together clinical expertise and trusted community-based support to help older people maintain independence for longer.

Through community screening, LinkAge Plus is identifying residents who may otherwise fall through the gaps, connecting them to targeted interventions before crisis occurs. The Stronger & Steady Programme, delivered at LinkAge Plus hubs combines evidence-based exercise, falls education and ongoing community support.

Early outcomes from the pilot have shown clinically meaningful improvements in mobility and confidence, including average improvements in Timed Up and Go (TUG) scores across cohorts, alongside high levels of participant satisfaction.

The programme reflects a wider shift towards integrated neighbourhood working, where health services, charities, and community networks work together to support people closer to home.

Data from first cohort:



Over 70% reported improvements in health needs and confidence in preventing falls



Felt staff understood their medical, personal and social needs



Felt listened to and involved in their care



Rated the overall service experience as very good

Are there any benefits you have found from attending the Stronger and Steady Falls Exercise class?:

“My coordination and balance have improved...I like the social aspect of the class, as I’m almost housebound and the class gives me a reason to leave the house.”

Focus Group Responses from Stronger & Steady Participant

Support during a global crisis

During the COVID period, LinkAge Plus played a vital crisis-response role, supporting 2,619 residents with essential care, safeguarding contact, and community connection when isolation was at its peak.

LinkAge Plus became especially critical in Tower Hamlets due to the borough's exceptionally high vulnerability to the virus. In this context, older people in the borough faced heightened risk of severe illness, isolation, and reduced access to everyday support as services were disrupted.

A rapid and sustained safeguarding response was delivered through welfare calls and befriending, ensuring regular contact with vulnerable individuals. This was supported by video calls and socially distanced visits, maintaining human connection even under strict restrictions.

Vital connection

6,040 welfare calls

5,000 telephone befriending sessions

68 video calls

401 socially distanced visits

Vital support

7,364 meals delivered

831 shopping drops

577 instances of practical support

104 prescription deliveries

Vital community

270 physical activities*

372 social activities*

*All activities delivered within covid-guidelines at time of delivery e.g. socially distanced, online

This was a critical public health response within a borough experiencing some of the most acute pandemic inequalities in the country.



“I enjoy the hubs and wouldn't be without them. Since losing my partner the hubs have helped me so much. I've met lots of new friends. It gets me out of the home and helps me to stay active.”

LinkAge Plus Participant

Older people leading change

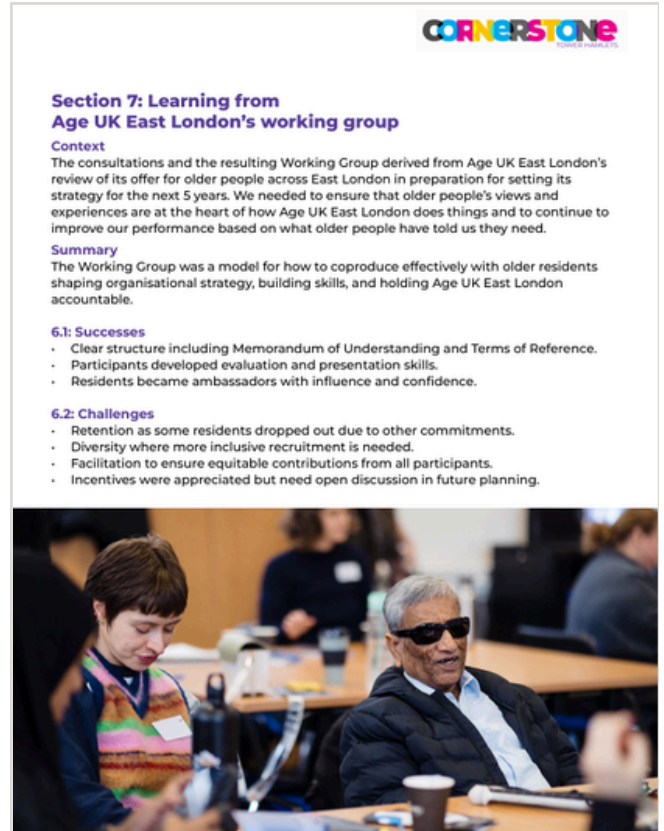
One of the most important developments supported through LinkAge Plus has been the Older People's Reference Group (OPRG), coordinated by Age UK East London.

The OPRG provides a platform to influence services, shape local decision-making, and ensure that the voices of older people are heard across health, social care, transport, housing, and community services.

As the borough changes, older residents risk becoming less visible in policy and planning. The OPRG ensures their lived experience informs services and strategy.

Through quarterly meetings, consultations, and engagement with the council and other partners, older residents have influenced local issues ranging from digital exclusion to transport accessibility.

Importantly, the OPRG reflects one of the original core principles of the LinkAge Plus approach: that older people should not simply receive services but actively shape them.



CORNERSTONE
EAST LONDON

Section 7: Learning from Age UK East London's working group

Context
The consultations and the resulting Working Group derived from Age UK East London's review of its offer for older people across East London in preparation for setting its strategy for the next 5 years. We needed to ensure that older people's views and experiences are at the heart of how Age UK East London does things and to continue to improve our performance based on what older people have told us they need.


Summary
The Working Group was a model for how to coproduce effectively with older residents shaping organisational strategy, building skills, and holding Age UK East London accountable.

6.1: Successes

- Clear structure including Memorandum of Understanding and Terms of Reference.
- Participants developed evaluation and presentation skills.
- Residents became ambassadors with influence and confidence.

6.2: Challenges

- Retention as some residents dropped out due to other commitments.
- Diversity where more inclusive recruitment is needed.
- Facilitation to ensure equitable contributions from all participants.
- Incentives were appreciated but need open discussion in future planning.



180+
OPRG
Members

Angela Hancock, OPRG Chair

“The OPRG plays an important role in a borough where older people are in the minority, and their voices need to be heard. The active, diverse group of over-50's work to influence policy by advising national and local decision makers, both the Council and Social Care, to ensure older peoples' needs are considered and met. The group has led a number of successful campaigns over the years on issues such as a ‘Dignity Code’, parking permit/scratch cards, disability transport, hospital discharge and ‘Living Well’.”

Why LinkAge Plus matters in Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is a borough of contrasts - one of the youngest and fastest-growing local authority areas in England, yet also a place where older residents experience some of the sharpest health and social inequalities in London.

The borough has experienced rapid population growth, increasing by more than 22% between 2011 and 2021, the fastest rate in England and Wales. This growth has reshaped neighbourhoods, communities, and support networks over time.

For older residents, this means ageing in a context of constant change, where long-established social ties can be harder to maintain, and where community identity is continually evolving. Alongside this, there are persistent inequalities in later life, as healthy life expectancy in Tower Hamlets remains below both London and national averages.

This picture sits within a richly diverse borough - home to long-established communities alongside newer arrivals, with significant Bangladeshi, White British and other global communities living side by side. This diversity is reflected in later life, where older residents bring different languages, cultures, experiences, and expectations of ageing.

In this context, LinkAge Plus has provided something vital and enduring over the past twenty years - continuity in a place defined by change.



It has created trusted local spaces where older people can build relationships, access support, and stay connected to their communities. Crucially, it has enabled older residents not only to receive support, but also to contribute as volunteers, community leaders, and peer supporters.

LinkAge Plus in Tower Hamlets is therefore more than a programme of activities - it is part of the borough's social infrastructure, strengthening connection, belonging, and wellbeing in a place where rapid change and persistent inequality make these increasingly important.

Learning across 20 years

Looking across two decades, lasting lessons stand out:



Building trust takes time, but it is the foundation of impact



Community organisations are central, not secondary, to success



Older people are active contributors, not passive recipients



Flexibility & local knowledge matter more than rigid design



Small interventions can have large cumulative effects over time



Prevention is most effective when it is enjoyable & relationship-based



Lasting legacy and future need

LinkAge Plus represents what can be achieved when communities are given time, trust, and space to grow relationships.

The case for LinkAge Plus is not only historical, but also increasingly present. While the programme has been part of Tower Hamlets' community landscape for 20 years, the conditions affecting older people today mean that its core purpose is arguably more relevant now than ever.

Nationally, the number of people aged 65 and over continues to grow, with the UK population aged 85+ projected to more than double over the coming decades.

At the same time, there is strong and consistent evidence that loneliness and social isolation remain widespread among older people. The Office for National Statistics has repeatedly identified that older age groups, particularly those living alone, widowed, or in poor health, are among the most likely to experience chronic loneliness, which is associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes.

Alongside this, patterns of service demand are changing. Health and social care systems are increasingly focused on supporting people to remain well in the community for longer. In this context, there is growing recognition, reflected in national policy that social connection is a determinant of health, not an optional extra.

In a period where services are under pressure, communities are changing rapidly, and loneliness is increasingly recognised as a public health issue, LinkAge Plus offers something both simple and essential: a consistent infrastructure for human connection in later life. That is why it is needed now more than ever.



“LinkAge Plus has worked wonders for me...staff helped with financial issues and reduced my stress. I've made a good group of friends and I'd recommend to others.”

LinkAge Plus Participant

Thank you's

This report celebrates 20 years of LinkAge Plus and the people and partnerships behind its success.

We thank the thousands of older residents who have taken part and helped shape the programme. We also recognise the dedication of staff, volunteers, and facilitators.

Special thanks go to longstanding delivery partners Toynbee Hall, Age UK East London, Sonali Gardens, Sundial Centre, and Neighbours in Poplar.

We are equally grateful to colleagues across Tower Hamlets Council, NHS partners, public health teams, advice teams, commissioners, and funders for supporting the programme.

Above all, this report recognises the strength of partnership working across Tower Hamlets. The story of LinkAge Plus is one of collaboration, trust, and a shared commitment to ensuring older people remain connected, valued, and supported within their communities.

Photo credits

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Toynbee Hall & Toynbee Hall Archive

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North East London



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in Poplar 
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