

Neighbourhood Networks

LEARNING SUMMARY

March–May 2026

Produced by Care City in partnership with BD Collective – June 2026

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PART ONE

01

What is this about?

Context, approach and how this summary was created.



Background: a growing set of hyper-local networks

September 2025 marked the launch of the first three Neighbourhood Networks in Barking & Dagenham. By May 2026, that number had [grown to five](#), each co-convened by Voluntary, Community, Faith or Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations working alongside residents to shape what happens in their neighbourhood.

Each neighbourhood network brings together at least three local VCFSEs around a dedicated **£28,800 funding pot**, working alongside residents to address their “hyperlocal” priorities, and to strengthen connection, skills and leadership in their neighbourhoods. The broader ambition of the Neighbourhood Networks programme is to support preventative approaches to health and wellbeing across the borough, by releasing community strengths and building capacity from the ground up, and intersecting with broader initiatives to support health in a place.

This document summarises what’s been happening and what we’ve been learning, between March to May 2026. The content here has been compiled by learning partner Care City.

5
networks now live

- Heath Park
- Neighbourhood Heart
- Parsloes Potential
- John Smith House
- Thrive by Thames



How this summary was created

Learning in the Neighbourhood Networks programme is treated as a sustained **way of working**, not an add-on. This summary draws on two main sources of evidence - themselves spaces for organisations and residents to reflect on what they've been learning by *testing things out* in their neighbourhoods

01 Monthly network learning meetings

Each network holds a regular monthly conversation in which organisations reflect on what they have been doing in their network, what they are learning, and what they want to test next. Notes from these meetings across all five networks have been drawn on here.

02 Quarterly place learning session

In May 2026, all five networks came together for their latest whole programme learning gathering, which focused on two themes: residents taking the lead, and activating neighbourhood potential. Notes and observations from this session are woven throughout.

Networks in quarterly learning discussions



Mixed-group discussion



Heath Park network



Cross-network group



Thrive by Thames network



John Smith House network



Ideas captured on the day

PART TWO

02

What's been happening?

Activity across the networks



Encouraging residents to take ownership

A defining feature of this quarter has been networks grappling with how they can create the right conditions for residents to move into more active and participatory roles to build a sense of true “ownership” over network activity and, by extension, the neighbourhood itself. This is showing up differently across the five networks, across a range of thoughtfully designed events and empowering 1:1 conversations.

For instance, **Neighbourhood Heart** network came up with the idea to run a community litter pick in local green spaces, as a way of making their network more visible. They encouraged residents to play different roles in bringing this to life, from in sourcing materials to organising timings.

As the group moved through the park in high-visibility vests, other residents then stopped to ask what was happening and some joined in. Network members noted how people started to feel more connected to, and invested in the space, with some commenting on the (annoying) return of litter in the days following the activity, showing a growing sense of being custodians of their neighbourhood.

“People quickly started to feel ownership of the space.”

Network reflection



Community Litter Pick - Neighbourhood Heart

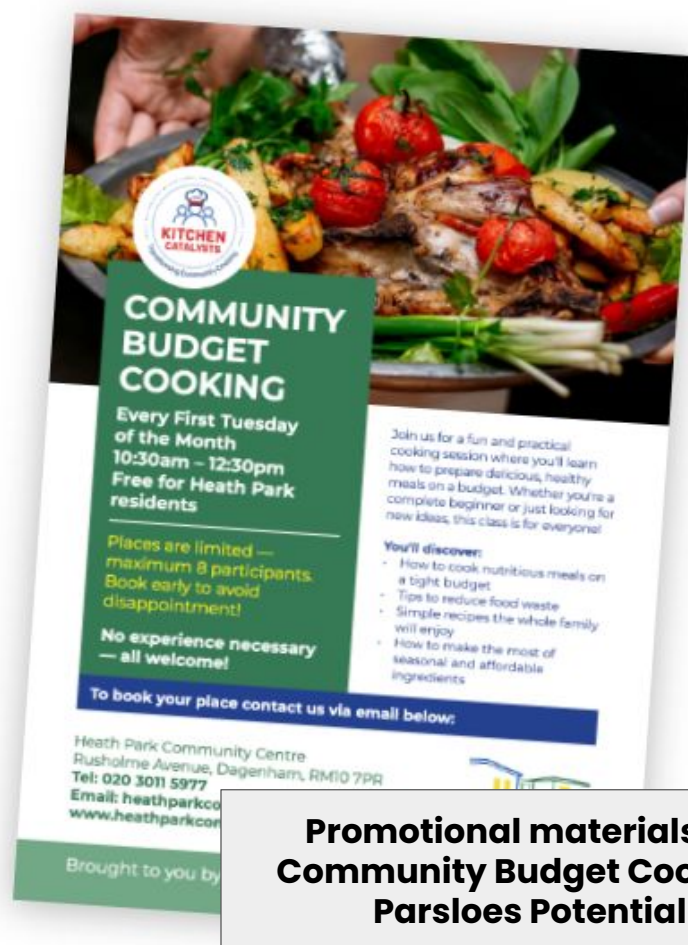


02 · WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING?

Elsewhere, **John Smith House** has carefully supported a local resident to setup and lead a mums and toddlers group – the “Babyccino Club” – borne out of the felt lack of space for mums to come together and build supportive relationships in ways that weren’t intentionally designed only for their children. The group has since explored how they might invite fathers to join to, with the view this might build empathy across genders and fill a gap that exists for male parents. The role of VCFSEs here has been to proactively have 1:1 conversations with residents to find things they are passionate about and to supportively encourage them to take ownership of specific activities, rather than driving the agenda themselves.



John Smith House residents reflecting on being “resident led” in quarterly learning session



Promotional materials for Community Budget Cooking, Parsloes Potential

Similar approaches have been taken in other networks. For instance, **Heath Park** are supporting a local resident to lead classes for the community in cooking on a budget. Meanwhile, **Parsloes Potential** have been exploring how they might encourage individual residents to take forwards more informal and manageable versions of the bigger Community Disco and Karaoke events they have been holding, so these can begin to exist independent of the large pool of organisational volunteers needed to host larger events. In each of these, it’s been important to pay close attention to what residents have interest and enthusiasm for, and then taking steps to move beyond a network of organisations *delivering to residents*, into a neighbourhood in which residents themselves are supported to developed activities they themselves drive forwards, with organisational support and space provided where it’s needed.

Promotion and feedback for the Babyccino Club - John Smith House

N&N Babyccino Club

Balancing Home & Work

10th
June 2026



10:45am - 12:30pm
John Smith House, Barking IG11 9LL

Free coffee morning & play for mums and toddlers — dads are welcome too!

A space for toddlers to play whilst parents relax with a coffee/tea chat and make new friends.

nn_babyccinoclub



N&N BABYCCINO CLUB

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL FAMILIES & PARENT NEEDS

WHO ARE THE MUMS?

AGE OF MOTHERS

- 25-34 years: 55%
- 35-44 years: 45%

MOTHER TYPES

- First-time mums: 55%
- Mums with multiple children: 45%

CHILDREN'S AGES

- 0-6 months: 33%
- 6-12 months: 22%
- 1-2 years: 33%
- 2-4 years: 12%

WHERE FAMILIES LIVE

POSTCODES REPRESENTED

- RM8: 25%
- RM9: 25%
- RM10: 25%
- IG11: 25%

BIGGEST CHALLENGES

- Mental wellbeing / stress: 88%
- Financial pressures: 77%
- Returning to work: 66%
- Childcare difficulties: 66%
- Isolation / loneliness: 55%
- Lack of local activities: 55%
- Housing issues: 33%
- Relationship / family pressures: 33%
- Physical health / recovery: 25%

CONNECTION & COMMUNITY

DO MOTHERS FEEL CONNECTED?

- Yes: 25%
- Sometimes: 55%
- No: 25%

WHAT PARENTS TOLD US

- "We want more opportunities to meet other parents."
- "Community-building activities are important."
- "Parenting across different cultures matters."

MOST REQUESTED SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

- Mental wellbeing support: 77%
- Creative activities: 77%
- Parenting workshops: 77%
- Fitness / wellbeing classes: 66%
- Coffee mornings / social meetups: 66%
- Baby sensory: 55%
- Guest speakers / information talks: 45%
- Cultural / community events: 45%
- Stay-and-play: 33%
- Advice sessions: 33%

PREFERRED SESSION TIMES

- Weekday mornings: 88%
- Weekday afternoons: 77%
- Evenings: 45%
- Weekends: 45%

BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

- Timing / sessions don't fit schedule: 66%
- Accessibility / transport issues: 55%
- Childcare needed for older children: 55%
- Not knowing anyone / anxiety: 45%
- Busy life / work / school runs: 45%
- Cost: 25%
- Location: 11%

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

- Sessions without bringing child: 22%
- Want more community-building: 22%
- Parenting across cultures: 11%
- Budget for parent-led groups: 11%

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Parents are looking for CONNECTION
- WELLBEING SUPPORT
- CREATIVE ACTIVITIES
- FRIENDLY COMMUNITY SPACES
- FAMILY-FRIENDLY EXPERIENCES

N&N BABYCCINO CLUB - SUPPORTING FAMILIES

MAY 2026

"N&N Babyccino Club was inspired by my children, with 'N&N' standing for the first letters of their names. The brand was created to celebrate family-friendly experiences and the special moments my partner and I share with our children, creating lasting memories together."



We're trying to build a culture where residents feel *it is theirs to run*, not just ours to offer. But getting there takes a lot of patient, one-to-one time. You can't rush it.

Network reflection · Quarterly learning session, May 2026

02 · WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING

Exploring what “resident led” means

A recurring focus within networks is on exploring how they might move beyond *offering* things based on resident ideas (being resident-led in the generation of ideas) and into a more participatory approach in which residents become essential to the onwards life of those ideas – perhaps even able to sustain them with minimal organisational support. For instance, an activity can surface from resident ideas, be funded by the network and even be partly delivered by residents, yet still feel as though it depends fundamentally on organisations within a network being present and holding things together, which can stretch resources and emotions. Generating ideas has felt easier, while moving to bring those to life in sustainable ways has been harder, and something that networks are keen to learn from one another about.

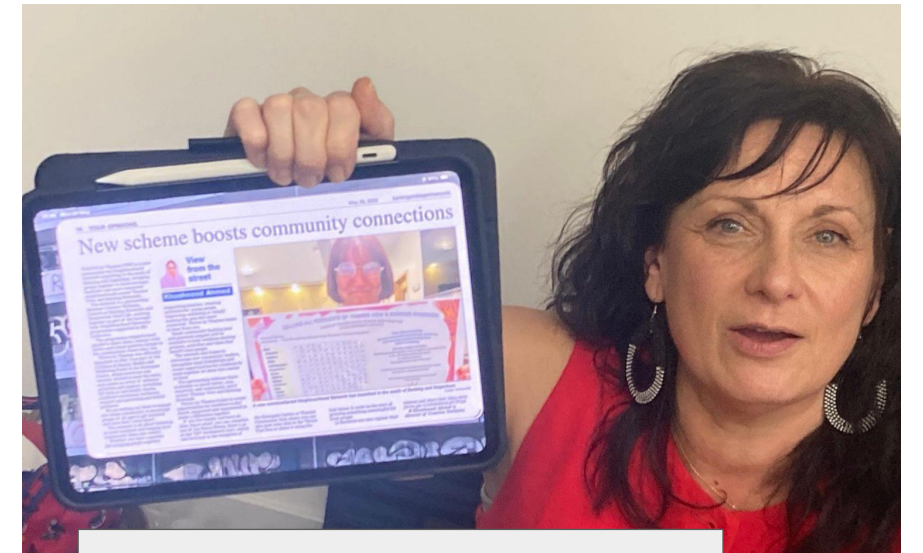
Reaching new residents: Creativity and word of mouth

A shared preoccupation this quarter has been the challenge of reaching beyond those already connected to network organisations. Most VCFSEs involved in the programme are well-practiced at drawing out the people they already know. The harder question is how to engage people who have no prior relationship with the social sector, are often left out of decisions about what happens locally, with “untapped” ambition, passion and potential. This is becoming especially important as part of the broader explorations of what it takes to be resident-led. For instance, some networks are seeing a need to reach beyond residents that they’re already connected to, and those interested only in *attending* events, to find people with energy for driving ideas forwards. This requires leaning into what individual residents are passionate about, and taking more creative approaches to promoting the network and how to get involved.

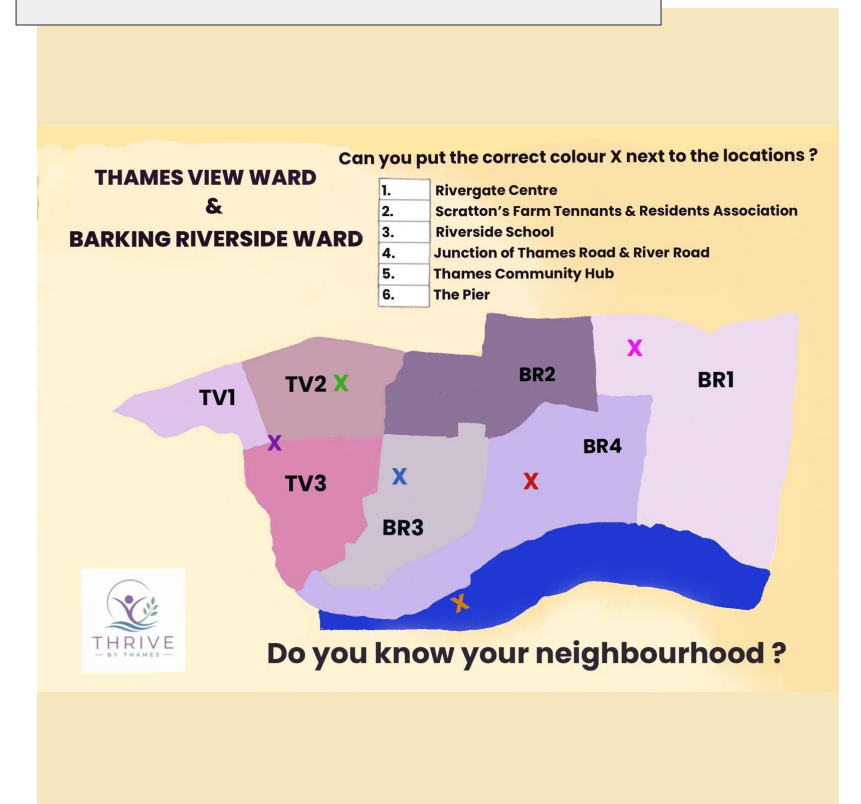
Find things close to their heart. That’s when you stop pulling teeth and start seeing people step up of their own accord.

Network reflection

Recently formed network **Thrive by Thames** has been experimenting with creative approaches to reach residents and source ideas. They have distributed word-search and quiz materials in community spaces that prompt people to stop and share their views into locally placed network “post boxes” – engaging residents in innovative ways whilst simultaneously building knowledge and interest about the local area.

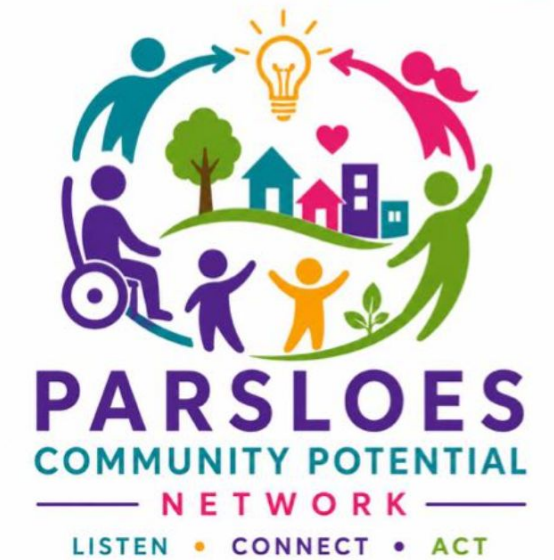


**Creative Engagement in the news
- Thrive by Thames**



02 · WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING?

Elsewhere, networks have been designing new network logos, to give their network an identity independent of their individual organisations and to help create a buzz around something new. At the same time, networks are being honest about limitations they are experiencing. In some cases, the it's been hard to grow beyond the established group of residents turning up to network activities, and there is a recognised risk of becoming a closed circle. This has prompted several networks to intentionally invite residents to bring a friend, or partner with other local organisations that have different audiences.



Network logos designed alongside residents

Creative outreach and network promotion - Thrive by Thames

PART THREE

03

What are we learning?

Ideas with energy; stepping back well; emerging challenges; value of the networks



Microgrants generate ideas with energy around them

To bring structure our learning and help focus on things to test, we've explored the below resident journey to concentrate on key stages residents move through as they engage with networks. While creative approaches to resident outreach and engagement are helping residents become aware of, and join in with, networks (Steps 1 and 2), we're also seen wide enthusiasm for **microgrants** to support residents to take the lead (Step 3).

1

Awareness

I discover the network.

2

Joining in

I start to participate in activities or events.

3

Taking the lead

I develop skills, find a role and am supported to take ownership over some activities

4

The network lives on

I help to drive a network that needs less "scaffolding" from organisations. I link into broader opportunities in the borough.

£100

resident giveaway

"Pitching" to build ownership, energy & detail

A number of networks are sourcing ideas by asking residents to submit their own ideas for small sums of money. For **Neighbourhood Heart**, this has been framed as a "£100 Giveaway", where residents are asked to pitch their idea to the community, including how they'd help bring that idea to life. Asking residents for a practical plan, which they have a role in, is not only building accountability and ownership, it's also encouraging helpful detail that fleshes out what things might look like. What's more, a pitching environment, in which people are asked to share things they really care or are excited about, is helping align network activities around people's passions, and building real excitement around emerging ideas.

Anchoring grants to local assets

Thrive by Thames is exploring tying micro grants to specific local spaces, so funded activities are spread geographically across the neighbourhood rather than clustering around those already most connected. This also helps ideas to sit within an environment able to provide some of the "scaffolding" needed to bring ideas to life, and grows connections between residents and organisations.

“Stepping back” well as an organisation takes as much, if not more planning, than stepping in.

Programme discussions recently have focused a lot on how organisations can step back in a way that’s truly supportive, as residents are encouraged to take ownership of network activities. We’ve been exploring how it never a case of simply “handing over” power in an abrupt way, but of gradually building resident ownership by creating **the right enabling conditions** - making a network feel like a place where residents can build confidence in playing more active roles, while help remains visible and available to them.

Consistent places to go for help

Some networks are finding it helps to build a regular rhythm of activity, so residents know where they can turn to for support as they take on more responsibility. One network has discussed how a *predictable calendar* of core network events, which people can attend if they need advice or something practical, makes their stepping back feel less like disappearing. The point is to make help easy to find, rather than expecting residents to reach out for it directly.

Clarifying who’s doing what

Our recent learning session revealed a growing sense that residents stepping into leadership roles benefit from real clarity on what they are responsible for and what is still being held by organisation, and how to avoid the latter getting in the way of taking things forwards. For instance, what will happen when a resident’s point of contact in a local organisation is away on holiday? Who will open up a building for them if they need it? How will they get the word out to other residents involved in activities? These things need working through in advance.

Pay first, or give first?

Networks have been progressing discussions about how to fairly recognise the time of residents who take on more involved roles. In one network, a concern was raised that expecting residents to step into greater responsibility - maintaining a network website, in this case - might be unrealistic without offering some financial recognition for their time. A second view then emerged, proposing that it might be better to be cautious about leading with payment - that letting people choose to contribute first could be a better foundation for trust than starting with a financial arrangement. This was put as wanting **“to test whether they can give first, before they receive.”**

Where networks are finding things hard

Alongside the positive learning, networks have been honest about where they are struggling. This reveals the topics around which is especially helpful to support continual conversation and inspiration between networks.

01 Having the bandwidth to keep things regular

The most consistently cited challenge is time. Many network members are working professionals with full diaries. This limits their ability to host informal but consistent activities like regular coffee mornings, which are often the kinds of gatherings that build genuine social rhythms and momentum. Networks have reflected that the activities most likely to generate organic connection are precisely the ones that require someone to be present for a long time.

02 Reaching beyond the already-engaged

Some networks are finding it difficult to extend their reach beyond the people already in their orbit. There is a recognised risk that, without deliberate effort, the same groups of engaged residents will circulate within networks while less connected residents remain unaware or uninterested.

03 Finding the “right sized” events to stay sustainable

Networks that have run large community events, such as cinema nights and discos have found them very effective at generating excitement and visibility. But they are also resource-intensive, often requiring significant support from organisational staff and volunteers. There is a growing recognition that the sustainability of networks cannot rest on a regular programme of large events, however popular those events may be.

04 Dissolving resident shyness around funding

Some networks are finding that residents are still very cautious about coming forward with ideas about how to use network funding. One described still feeling like they were waiting for residents to come to them, rather than the other way around. This suggests that building awareness and confidence around how funding for ideas works might be helpful, alongside seeking out residents with more “ready to go” energy and ideas to build momentum around.

The value networks are creating

Connection and belonging

Connection is being recognised as fundamental to the wellbeing of local neighborhoods and a real focus of network activity, with sustained opportunities being created for people to connect across artificial divides. The Babyccino Club is offering space for parents of different cultures to connect. Cooking classes are building friendships between people who'd never spoken. Litter picks are giving neighbours a shared project to coordinate their efforts around.

Civic confidence and skills

Residents who have pitched for funding, organised events, led groups and made decisions about neighbourhood activities are building a form of civic "muscle". Networks are beginning to see residents take initiative in small but significant ways: posting notes from meetings that no one asked them to take, designing promotional materials unprompted, suggesting new ideas rather than waiting to be consulted.

A changing relationship with place

We've seen evidence of residents developing a different relationship with their physical environment. The shift observed during a network-organised community litter pick encapsulates this well, where residents who joined spontaneously began talking about the park as "theirs" in a way they had not before. This sense of ownership over local space is one of the harder things to create through deliberate programme design, and its emergence through relatively low-cost, informal activity feels promising.

More shared knowledge and inspiration between VCFSEs

The quarterly learning session in May gave clear evidence that networks are beginning to learn from one another in substantive ways. The resident panel model, the micro-grant approach and the karaoke concept have all generated genuine interest and intent to adapt and test among other networks. This cross-pollination of ideas is one of a central ambition of the programme and something we're still finding the best way to accomplish.

PART FOUR

04

What's next?

Priorities, open questions and focus for the coming quarter.



What's next and why

BUILDING ON RECENT ACTIVITY AND LEARNING

- **Expanding resident leadership pools**

Several networks have shared their intentions to identify and encourage specific residents to play more significant roles in the network, seeing these as potential champions of resident leadership.

- **Developing the micro-grant model**

Interested networks plan to adapt the microgrant pitching model for their context. Seeing how differences in approach around this lead to different outcomes will be useful learning for everyone.

- **Designing networks for sustainability (from the start)**

Networks will continue to reflecting explicitly on their mix of activities and how they might “step back” in the right ways over time. We'll be exploring how new networks joining the programme might embed some of this thinking from the start.

- **Strengthening cross-network learning**

Building on the above point, we want to explore lighter-touch ways to keep inter-network conversation alive between whole programme learning sessions

NEW FOCUS · NEXT QUARTER

How can networks work more effectively with wider place partners?

We are especially interested in the coming months of deepening connections between Neighbourhood Networks and Broader “Neighbourhood Health” initiatives in the borough, including the new Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs) and Health Connectors roles. We'll ask: How can we help networks feed into testing of local health priorities? And how can those priorities themselves be better shaped by the local intelligence of neighbourhood networks?

OTHER QUESTIONS WE WANT TO EXPLORE

- How do we **measure the ripple effect** of networks on residents who are not direct participants?
- How do we build up a **more rigorous evidence base** of the value of the Neighbourhood Networks, that effectively demonstrates its value to broader stakeholders across the borough and beyond?