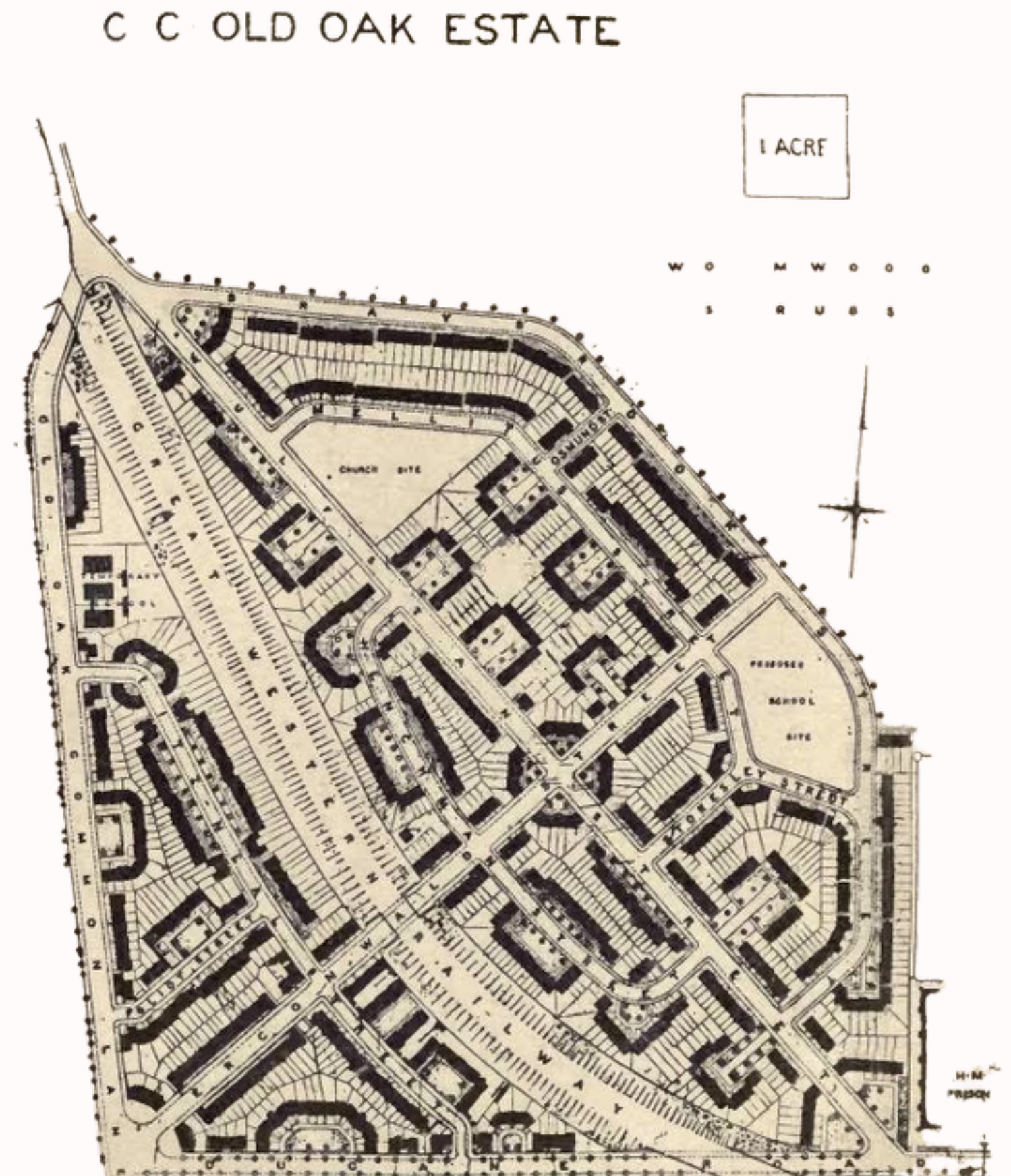




Listening to Old Oak: Community Engagement & Connector Project

Learning from a community-led approach to strengthening relationships, participation and future investment in Old Oak.

By H&F Giving, 2026



London County Council: Old Oak Estate.

W. E. RILEY, Architect.

Overview

This year, H&F Giving delivered the Old Oak Community Engagement and Connector Project in partnership with Peabody Community Foundation, joined by SORTIE CIC, LBHF Family Champions and SOBUS.

The project was designed to better understand lived experience in Old Oak, strengthen relationships across the local community ecosystem, identify gaps in provision, and gather learning that can help shape what happens next.

Old Oak is an area with strong community activity, local leadership and trusted organisations. It is also an area where residents and groups described challenges around fragmentation, visibility, poverty, access to support, safety, and routes into decision-making.

This project used a relationship-led, place-based approach. Rather than relying only on traditional consultation, it worked through trusted local connectors, community organisations, small engagement grants and community events to hear from residents in ways that felt natural, accessible and grounded in local life.



Photo by Ewan Munro, via Wikimedia Commons

The connector model

The project was delivered through three connected strands:

Community Connectors

Trusted local connectors gathered insight through outreach, informal conversations, community activity, events and existing relationships.

Microgrants for community engagement

Small, flexible grants supported local organisations to engage residents, bring people together, host conversations and strengthen local relationships.

Community events and reflection

The project supported community-facing activity, including International Women's Day events, Easter activity, the Old Oak Social Enterprise launch, and a final guided walk and reflection session.



A different way to listen

Community Connector Model

We have recruited and supported a small group of paid connectors working directly in Old Oak over a six-week period. These roles are intentionally flexible, enabling individuals already embedded in the community to carry out engagement in ways that feel natural, trusted and responsive.

Connectors have been:

- speaking directly with residents through outreach and informal conversations
- hosting, attending and supporting local activities and events
- identifying patterns, repeated issues and gaps in provision
- connecting residents to services, opportunities and each other
- surfacing local leaders and individuals interested in future roles
- sharing regular insight through voice notes, written updates and discussions



Building on what's already here

None of this work started with this project, and it won't end with it either. Old Oak is home to a strong, active network of organisations who have been showing up for residents for years - often with limited funding and less recognition. This project has been a chance to listen to some of that work and learn from it.

We want to acknowledge and celebrate the brilliant work already happening across Old Oak, led by organisations like SORTIE CIC, LBHF Family Champions, SOBUS, Mama Haven, For Brian CIC, Old Oak Social Enterprise, Choose to Reuse Project and Doorstep Library, alongside the wider organisations and services who partnered on activity throughout this project, including Wormwood Scrubs Charitable Trust, The Family Hub, Old Oak Youth Club, Bubble and Squeak, and the partners who supported the Hop & Hunt Animal Trail.

We recognise that there is valuable research, insight and learning from other organisations, groups and residents that is not captured within this report. This work should be seen as one piece of a wider picture. The next step is to continue bringing together learning from across Old Oak, creating opportunities to share knowledge, strengthen collaboration and build collectively on the foundations that already exist.

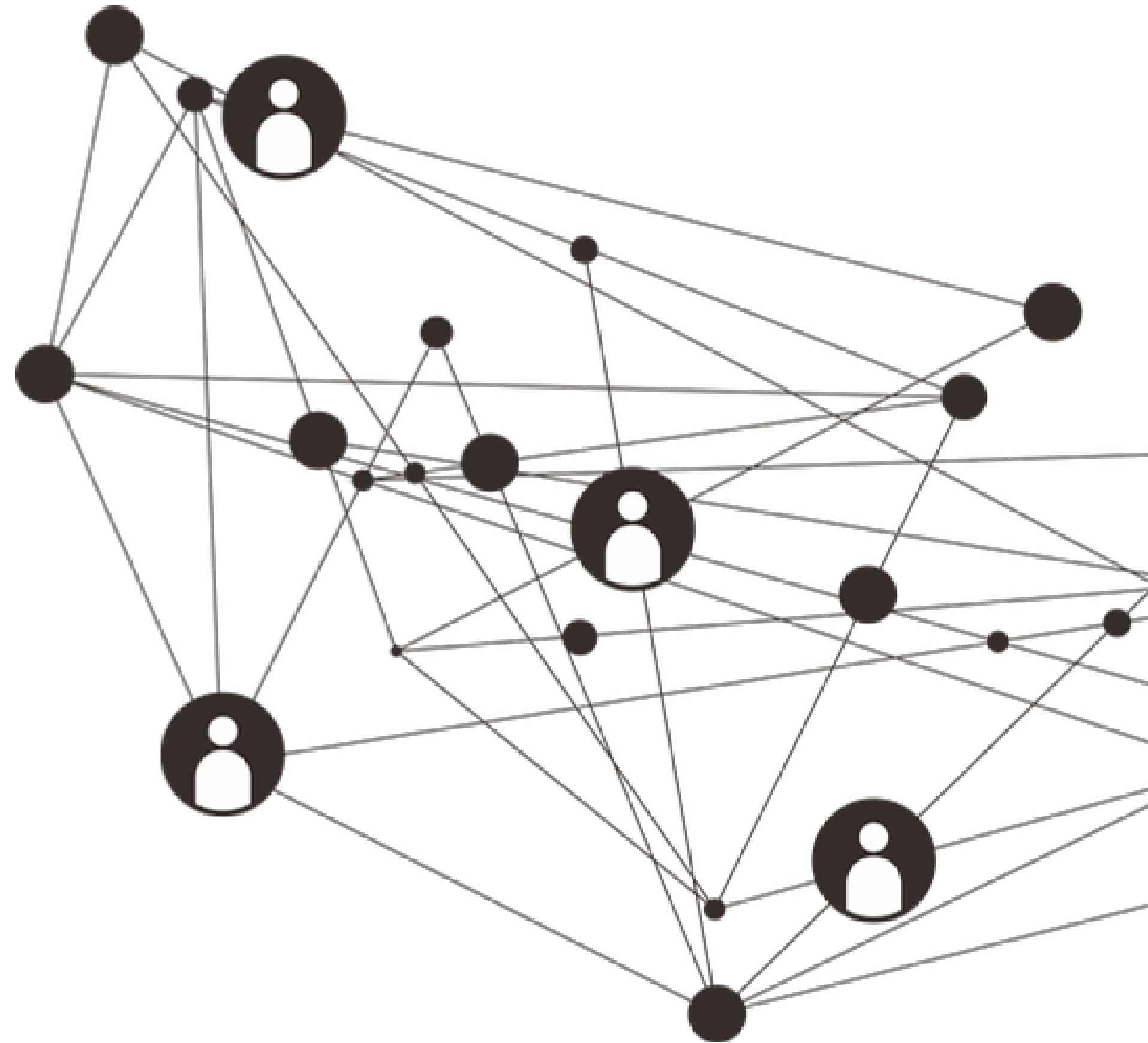
This isn't a story about starting from scratch. It's about recognising what's already strong in Old Oak, and building on it together.

The connector model

- Family Champions brought a public health and outreach lens, engaging multilingual communities and supporting survey delivery at scale
- SOBUS has contributed a co-production and infrastructure perspective, identifying gaps between organisations and supporting better coordination
- Jo (Sortie/FOOO) has provided deeply embedded, place-based engagement, building trust through consistent presence, food-based activity and creative work

Together, these approaches have enabled us to:

- reach residents who are often excluded from engagement
- understand both individual experiences and system-level gaps
- test different models of participation and connection



Key outcomes

The project delivered more than 250 hours of community engagement across Old Oak through connectors, microgrants and community events.

This enabled us to engage a diverse mix of residents, community leaders, local groups and partners, gathering vital insight into local needs, assets and opportunities for future investment.



Early photographs of the Old Oak Estate, taken from Academy Architecture and Architectural Review, vol 51, 1920.

200+

Residents of Old Oak engaged

50+

Structured conversations and insight gathered

35

Residents of Old Oak complete our survey

1+

Engaged at least one person (living or working in) Old Oak in the process of joining our board.

Our connectors

Family Champions

The Family Champions brought a public health and outreach lens. They used door-knocking, multilingual outreach, wellbeing activity and a structured community survey to hear from residents who may not usually take part in formal consultation.

Their work captured the lived experiences of 35 residents through a mixed-method, community-led approach including face-to-face engagement, informal conversations and a mindfulness watercolour session.

Jo / SORTIE CIC

Jo brought deeply embedded local knowledge and consistent presence in Old Oak. Through SORTIE CIC and links with For Brian CIC, engagement happened through food, creativity, workshops, cost-of-living support, community sessions and trusted relationships. Jo's findings show the value of engagement that happens over time, through real relationships rather than one-off conversations.

Sharon / SOBUS

Sharon brought a wider systems and community infrastructure lens. Her work helped identify how residents, organisations, local spaces, history and partnership dynamics shape Old Oak. Sharon's engagement included structured and unstructured conversations with residents, attendance at International Women's Day, the guided walk and reflection session, and the Old Oak Social Enterprise launch.

Microgrants



Photo from London Architecture Diary

We have distributed small, flexible grants to trusted local organisations to support engagement activity on the ground.

These include:

- Mama Haven
- For Brian CIC
- Old Oak Social Enterprise
- Choose to Reuse
- Doorstep Library

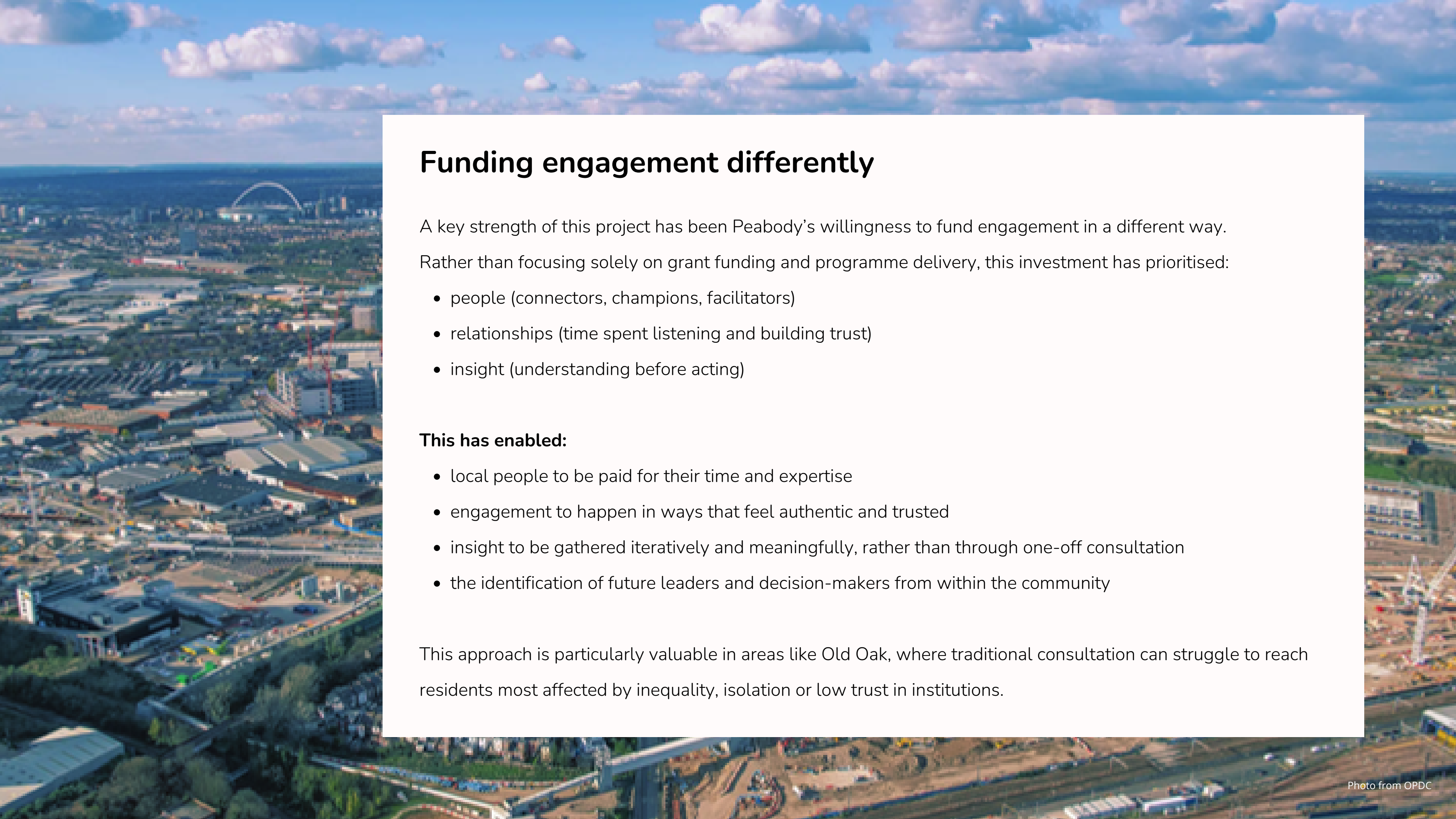
These grants supported:

- outreach and relationship-building
- facilitation time and community conversations
- creative and intergenerational engagement activity
- events and informal community gatherings

The microgrants showed that small, flexible funding can unlock meaningful engagement when it goes through organisations residents already know and trust.



SORTIE CIC

An aerial photograph of a city, likely St. Louis, with the Gateway Arch visible in the background. The city is densely packed with buildings and green spaces. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

Funding engagement differently

A key strength of this project has been Peabody's willingness to fund engagement in a different way.

Rather than focusing solely on grant funding and programme delivery, this investment has prioritised:

- people (connectors, champions, facilitators)
- relationships (time spent listening and building trust)
- insight (understanding before acting)

This has enabled:

- local people to be paid for their time and expertise
- engagement to happen in ways that feel authentic and trusted
- insight to be gathered iteratively and meaningfully, rather than through one-off consultation
- the identification of future leaders and decision-makers from within the community

This approach is particularly valuable in areas like Old Oak, where traditional consultation can struggle to reach residents most affected by inequality, isolation or low trust in institutions.

How we did it

The project used a mixed, relationship-led approach to hear from residents, community organisations and local partners in different ways. The Family Champions used structured outreach, including door-knocking, multilingual engagement, resident surveys, informal conversations and wellbeing activity. This helped gather direct resident insight, including from people who may not usually take part in formal consultation.

Jo / SORTIE CIC gathered insight through consistent, embedded community presence. Conversations took place through existing activity including food-based sessions, creative workshops, cost-of-living support and informal community spaces. This allowed learning to emerge over time through trust and repeated contact.. Sharon / SOBUS brought a wider community infrastructure and systems lens, speaking with residents and local operators, attending community events, and exploring how organisations, spaces, relationships and local history shape participation in Old Oak.

Across the project, insight was gathered through surveys, structured and unstructured conversations, community events, voice notes, written reflections, local observations and group discussion. This helped us understand not only what residents said they needed, but also how people connect, where trust exists, which spaces matter, and where gaps or tensions sit within the local ecosystem.



The Family Champions Team - Structured outreach, public health and resident voice

The Family Champions strand provides the clearest structured resident dataset. Through 35 completed surveys, the team captured views from residents across different household types, including families, older residents, people living alone, couples and shared households. Some residents used the community centre regularly, while others did not, giving useful insight into both engaged and less-engaged residents.

The strongest finding from the Family Champions work is that safety and anti-social behaviour are persistent and serious concerns. Residents raised drug use, knife crime, gang activity, alcohol misuse, unsafe public spaces, underpasses, parks, tunnels, lack of visible policing, insufficient CCTV and poor street lighting. These concerns affect daily behaviour. They shape whether people feel able to go outside, whether parents feel comfortable letting children use local spaces, and whether residents feel proud or anxious about where they live.

Environmental issues were also highly visible in the survey responses. Dog fouling, fly tipping, littering, poor waste management and lack of bins were repeatedly raised. The Family Champions report frames these as issues affecting physical health, children's safety, community morale and pride in place. When residents repeatedly see their environment neglected, it reinforces a feeling that the area itself is not being cared for.

A third major finding is that residents often do not know what is available locally. The Family Champions found that awareness and communication gaps are a major barrier to engagement. Residents rely heavily on word of mouth and informal networks, but there is a lack of visible signage, noticeboards, central communication channels or consistent promotion. The finding is important because it suggests that low engagement does not necessarily mean lack of interest. In many cases, people would attend activities or use services if they knew they existed.



The survey also shows that Old Oak has valued assets.

Residents spoke positively about local green space, especially Wormwood Scrubs, transport links, shops, the Family Hub, existing community events and the area's friendly or welcoming feel. This matters because the final learning is not that Old Oak needs to be "fixed" from outside. It has assets, relationships and trusted spaces already. The challenge is how to connect, resource and communicate them better.

There is strong demand for more inclusive activity. Residents asked for youth provision, especially for teenagers; evening and weekend activities; mental health support; parenting programmes; ESOL with childcare; older people's activities; men's engagement; cooking and healthy eating sessions; fitness and exercise; and community socials. This shows that future investment should not only focus on family provision. The Family Hub is valued, but residents without young children, older people, working adults and men are not always reached by current offers.

The public health implications are clear. Residents are asking for preventative, community-based health support, including regular health checks, mental health support, healthy eating education, physical activity and better access to GP services. The Family Champions also identified emerging needs around men's mental health, chronic illness prevention, family health education and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on wellbeing.

Overall, the Family Champions work shows that residents are willing to engage when approached in accessible, trusted and culturally appropriate ways. Door-knocking, multilingual outreach, incentives, wellbeing activities and informal conversation helped reach people who may not have responded to a standard consultation. For Peabody, this demonstrates the value of investing in local outreach capacity rather than relying only on formal meetings, surveys or digital channels.

Jo / SORTIE CIC - Embedded insight, trust and the realities of delivery

Jo's methodology shows what community engagement looks like when it is not treated as a one-off exercise, but as a **series of relationships that develops through repeated contact, activity and local trust**.

A central theme from Jo's findings is **partnership working**. There are many partners and organisations locally, and many have strong ideas and genuine commitment. However, Jo identifies that there is no central forum or regular meeting where partners can come together to share updates, exchange ideas and collaborate effectively. Without this, communication remains fragmented, duplication can happen, and opportunities for joint working are missed. Jo notes that Peabody has already taken positive steps by increasing communication, including developing a newsletter and guidance on how organisations can submit and promote upcoming events. This is a welcome step and should continue. However, the findings suggest that communication needs to go further than event promotion. There is a need for a regular partnership forum or network, clearer roles and responsibilities, and a mechanism for managing sensitive or challenging relationships between CICs, partners and local groups.

Jo also highlights the importance of **recognising community leaders and CICs**. Much of the work carried out by grassroots groups is unpaid or underpaid, even when it is essential to engagement and delivery. She suggests a regular mixer or social event for community leaders and CICs, both to connect people and to recognise work that often goes unseen. Recognition, connection and relationship-building are part of the infrastructure that helps local organisations keep going.

A second key theme is the **lack of provision for men and adults**. Jo's findings show that much of the current offer is family-focused, with less available for adults without children and very little targeted specifically at men. This is particularly important in relation to mental health, loneliness, identity and employability. SORTIE is developing a six-week pilot men's group designed to create a safe space for men to explore identity, mental and physical health, male loneliness, and routes into support, employment and services.

Jo's findings also identify the Peabody office joined by Old Oak Social Enterprise as an important local asset. It offers a familiar, smaller-scale venue that can host more intimate gatherings. This matters because residents do not always engage in large, formal or institutional spaces. Smaller trusted venues can be especially important for people who feel anxious, isolated, neurodiverse, digitally excluded or uncertain about services.

On **Wormwood Scrubs and outdoor spaces**, Jo notes positive developments. Wormwood Scrubs Charitable Trust has been engaging with residents and families around Phase 2 developments, and the new play areas, including the pirate ship, have been very well received. This is already drawing more families and is expected to be even more used in summer. At the same time, Jo identifies scope to expand community-led activity on the Scrubs, recognising it as a biodiverse, valuable and emotionally important space for residents.

Community safety remains a major concern in Jo's findings. She notes recent serious incidents and highlights the need to prioritise safety, including CCTV coverage around places such as the Scrubs. The point is not only that crime happens, but that safety concerns limit how residents use public space and whether they feel able to take part in community life. A park or tunnel can be an asset, but if people do not feel safe, that asset becomes less accessible.

Jo also gives important insight into youth provision. New provision for children aged 11+ has started at the centre, including activities such as boxing, arts, self-defence and gymnastics. This is positive, especially as summer demand increases. However, she identifies a gap for children aged 5–11, particularly given increasing additional needs in schools and wider SEND pressures. Young people continue to report that there is not enough to do. For future investment, this suggests organisations monitor attendance as well as age gaps, SEND inclusion, and whether provision is consistent enough to build trust.

Cost-of-living support and funding are another strong theme. SORTIE delivered a cost-of-living project with NatWest and The Family Hub, which was engaging and well received. Jo suggests this could be delivered quarterly as part of a wider financial inclusion approach. However, she also warns that when CICs and grassroots organisations partner with corporate organisations, their engagement work must be properly funded. Without fair remuneration, large amounts of unpaid work fall onto the third sector. This strains organisations, damages trust when projects end suddenly, and limits the ability of CICs to build capacity for larger, longer-term funding.

Jo's findings around **mentoring, training and accessibility are especially important.** She notes that participants often want information broken down more clearly and that some individuals struggle to follow key concepts during sessions. She links this to broader awareness of neurodiversity, language, delivery style and even visual factors such as colour. Tasks like budgeting, CV writing or asking for help can feel overwhelming without the right support. This suggests future programmes must be designed with accessibility from the start, rather than assuming that one format works for everyone.

Training and accreditation for community leaders is also highlighted. Jo identifies demand for Safeguarding Level 3, Mental Health Level 3, Autism Awareness Level 2 and refresher training for those delivering sessions or wraparound support. This is a practical investment opportunity. If local leaders are already supporting residents with complex needs, they need access to the same quality of training and support as more formal organisations.

Jo's findings also emphasise the need to **support volunteers**. Volunteers and community leaders play a crucial role in local services, but often lack recognition, supervision, training and development pathways. Without investment, goodwill becomes overused and fragile. With the right support, volunteers could become stronger connectors, peer supporters, community organisers and future leaders.

Finally, Jo identifies a **gap around older people and intergenerational work**. There are currently limited opportunities for older adults to engage in physical or social activity at the centre, yet there is willingness among older residents to contribute. Intergenerational activity could be powerful: younger people supporting older residents with digital skills, and older people sharing sewing, practical knowledge and life skills. This would support both connection and confidence, while reducing isolation.

Overall, Jo's work shows that Old Oak is evolving and has many positive developments. But growth will only be inclusive if investment supports the people and structures that make participation possible: **community leaders, volunteers, accessible delivery, trusted spaces, partnership coordination and fair payment for grassroots work**.



SOBUS - Community infrastructure, identity and local systems

Sharon's work provides a wider view of Old Oak as a local system. Her engagement included structured and unstructured conversations with 15 residents and one local operator, alongside attendance at International Women's Day, the Old Oak guided walk and reflection session, and the Old Oak Social Enterprise soft launch.

Sharon's findings highlight both local pride and long-standing frustration. Residents spoke positively about the beauty, flora and fauna of Wormwood Scrubs, describing it as a local asset. They also valued the newly designed play area in the Scrubs, bingo at Old Oak Community Centre, holiday provision, and the opening of the new Old Oak Social Enterprise office. In particular, working residents appreciated having a space to meet locally.

At the same time, Sharon's notes show that residents are concerned about issues that are not always openly discussed. One example is the impact of HS2 and industrial activity. **Residents raised concerns about dust particles affecting homes and gardens**, with one resident reporting that they were unable to plant vegetables in their garden and another describing black dust gathering in the bathroom. These concerns are practical, environmental and emotional. They affect how residents experience their homes, their gardens and their sense of control over the place they live.

SOBUS

Sharon's work also provides historical and cultural depth to this. Residents described Old Oak as carrying a "social brand issue" linked to deprivation, the nearby prison, racism in the 1980s and 1990s, and long-term institutional tensions. HS2 activity, particularly the visibility of mostly male workers who are perceived as not integrated into the community, can reopen older wounds around institutions acting on or around the area without being meaningfully connected to residents.

This shows that residents' reactions to development are not only about present-day inconvenience. They sit within a deeper history of deprivation, stigma and mistrust. Community investment therefore needs to address identity, pride and repair, not only service delivery.

Sharon's findings also show clear practical needs. Residents raised the issue of gardening support. Some Peabody residents and private homeowners cannot afford gardening services, and without a residents' association or intermediary, it can be difficult to organise collective solutions. Sharon notes that Peabody does have a contractor, Ginkgo, but residents may need an intermediary or creative structure to make this accessible and coordinated.



SOBUS

Residents also miss previously valued provision, such as the Harrow Club activity that used to run during holiday periods. There is frustration that when Old Oak Community Centre is unavailable during holidays, residents lose a major local asset and cannot easily identify another space where people can simply come together. This links back to the wider point about spaces: physical infrastructure matters, but so does the consistency and accessibility of that space.

Sharon's notes also capture the potential of trusted local spaces for public services. The NHS "in-reach" model was discussed, where communities identify trusted locations that feel suitable to residents.

There is a clear desire for activities that lift spirits, create joy and change the story of Old Oak. Sharon notes ideas around co-designing and co-creating activities that bring creativity and positivity into the area, including reinstating valued activity such as "Singing for Health" led by Teresa. This is not separate from community investment. Pride, joy and positive identity are part of how areas recover from stigma and build belonging.

SOBUS/Sharon's work therefore shows that future investment should not only ask, "What services are missing?" It should also ask, "What has this place inherited? What has been lost? What stories do residents want to change? What practical support would help people feel more ownership and pride?"

Microgrants: What Was Done

Mama Haven

Mama Haven used their grant to support the Women in Work Conference 2026, themed Beauty, Peace, and Mind. Funding covered wellbeing facilitators, including massage and make-up services. Around 30–40 people attended, predominantly global majority women and mothers, with on-site childcare provided so parents could participate fully. The event connected attendees with employers, charities and service providers, led to an ongoing partnership with Citizens Advice delivering sessions in Old Oak, and resulted in at least one attendee securing a job interview.

Old Oak Social Enterprise

Old Oak Social Enterprise (OOSE) used its grant to fund volunteer DBS checks and contribute to staff costs for ongoing leaflet distribution. The funding reassured six prospective volunteers that DBS checks would be covered. It also supported outreach which had already begun before the grant was awarded, that helped registrations reach 37. OOSE described the grant as a lifeline and highlighted the need for consistent core funding to sustain its volunteer-led service.

Choose to Reuse

Choose to Reuse used its grant to support staff costs to run a Front Garden Challenge, distributing over 200 seed packets, and to pilot Carpentry for Change, an intergenerational woodworking project with Old Oak Youth Club that produced planters for the Family Hub garden. The project reached a broad mix of residents, and led to a new partnership with Mama Haven, including a workshop at its Women in Business conference.

Microgrants: What Was Done

Doorstep Library

Doorstep Library used its grant towards the salary of its part-time Old Oak Project Leader, supporting weekly home reading sessions. The funding directly benefited 14 children and six parents or carers, while also enabling outreach to new families and exploration of school partnerships for children without stable housing. The organisation welcomed the light-touch reporting process, which allowed funding to focus on frontline delivery.

For Brian CIC

For Brian CIC works in Old Oak to create a dementia-inclusive community, supporting people living with dementia, their families and older residents to stay connected, active and engaged. The grant was used to support the ongoing delivery of For Brian's work, which designs inclusive, co-produced activities that promote brain health, wellbeing and community connection. They also highlighted the need for more inclusive and intergenerational community spaces and activities that enable everyone to participate, and that future investment in the area should also ask: what would enable community resilience in the midst of the huge regeneration happening around Old Oak?



1. Establish a Regular, Coordinated Community Partnership Forum

There is a clear need for consistent, structured coordination between partners. While many organisations are active, they are often working in silos.

Initial Ideas:

- *A quarterly partnership forum bringing together CICs, residents, Peabody, and local stakeholders*
- *A regular informal “community mixer” to build trust and relationships between grassroots leaders*



Key Recommendations

2. Invest in Community Connectors and Resident-Led Roles

This project has demonstrated the value of placing resource directly into communities through people, not just projects.

Initial Ideas:

- *Continued investment in paid community connector roles*
- *Creating pathways for volunteers to move into paid or accredited roles*
- *Recognising and resourcing trusted local individuals already doing informal community work*

3. Improve Communication and Visibility of Local Services

A major barrier is not the absence of provision, but the lack of awareness and fragmented communication.

Initial Ideas:

- *A centralised and regularly updated community newsletter (digital and printed)*
- *Investment in visible, well-placed community noticeboards*
- *A shared annual calendar of events and services*

Key Recommendations

4. Expand Inclusive and Targeted Provision

There are clear gaps in provision for specific groups

Initial Ideas:

We recommend targeted investment in -

- *Men's mental health and wellbeing spaces*
- *Activities for older adults, including social and physical opportunities*
- *Intergenerational programmes that bring different age groups together*

5. Strengthen Access to Training, Mentoring and Accreditation

Community leaders and residents are motivated to do more but lack access to structured support and development opportunities.

Initial Ideas:

- *Providing accredited training (e.g. Safeguarding Level 3, Mental Health, Autism Awareness)*
- *Offering mentoring and one-to-one support for grassroots leaders*
- *Ensuring training is accessible, inclusive and tailored to different learning needs*

Key Recommendations

6. Improve Accessibility of Support (Digital and In-Person)

Barriers to accessing support remain significant, particularly for those experiencing digital exclusion or additional needs.

Initial Ideas:

- *Continued investment in digital inclusion programmes (devices, training, follow-up support)*
- *Providing in-person, trusted access points for support (e.g. hubs, community spaces)*
- *Adapting delivery to reflect neurodiversity and different communication needs*

7. Invest in Sustainable, Long-Term Funding for Grassroots Organisations

There is a consistent risk of short-term, underfunded engagement damaging trust and continuity.

Initial Ideas:

- *Providing multi-year and flexible funding where possible*
- *Ensuring fair remuneration for community engagement work, particularly in partnerships with corporates*
- *Supporting CICs to build capacity for long-term sustainability and growth*

Key Recommendations

8. Support Community-Led Use of Local Assets and Spaces

Old Oak has valuable assets (e.g. Wormwood Scrubs, community centres), but they are not always fully utilised or accessible.

Initial Ideas:

- *Expanding community-led programming in outdoor spaces, particularly Wormwood Scrubs*
- *Identifying and supporting accessible local community spaces, including free-to-use local venues*
- *Exploring trusted “in-reach” models, where services are delivered in spaces residents already use*
- *Creating and protecting inclusive, intergenerational spaces that bring together people of all ages*

9. Prioritise Community Safety and Wellbeing

Safety concerns continue to impact residents’ sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Initial Ideas:

- *Exploring practical safety measures (e.g. improved lighting, CCTV where appropriate)*
 - *Supporting community-led approaches to safety and wellbeing*
 - *Investing in holistic mental health support within community settings*
-

Key Recommendations

10. Continue to Embed Co-Production and Listening Approaches

A key success of this project has been its community-led, listening-first approach.

Initial Ideas:

- *Continuing to embed co-production in future investment decisions*
- *Creating ongoing opportunities for residents to shape priorities and funding*
- *Ensuring insight gathered is fed back into decision-making and shared transparently*



Call to action

Old Oak has told us what matters: connection, safety, communication, trusted spaces, fair support for grassroots groups, and more say over what happens locally.

The opportunity now is to work collectively. Success will depend on our ability to listen, learn, share and act together.

We are inviting funders, councillors, housing providers, developers, public sector partners, businesses and community organisations to build on this learning and take action with us.



Special thanks to:

- The Family Champions Team
- Jo / SORTIE CIC
- Sharon / SOBUS
- Mama Haven
- For Brian CIC
- Old Oak Social Enterprise
- Choose to Reuse
- Doorstep Library
- Peabody Community Foundation
- The Family Hub

All residents and community partners who contributed.

If you have any questions or comments about the report, please reach out to team@hfgiving.org.uk.