

Devon Community Foundation

October 2023

Nicola Frost



**Devon
Community
Foundation**
Giving more locally

**WELLBEING
EXETER**

**Knitting it All Together:
Wellbeing Exeter's Community
Builders through the eyes of residents**



Introduction

Community builders have been working in neighbourhoods across Exeter as part of the Wellbeing Exeter partnership since 2016. There is now a community builder in every ward in the city (as well as in Cranbrook), organised into area clusters, and employed and managed by key Wellbeing Exeter partner, Exeter Community Initiatives.

The builders' role is to engage with residents, and enable them to take action in their communities to make them better, more inclusive, and more connected places to live. This strand of the Wellbeing Exeter programme sits alongside its social prescribing and physical activity elements to support their work with individuals, and help develop the community assets needed to enable everyone in Exeter to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Over the years since they began work, the Wellbeing Exeter team has worked closely with the community builders to understand how they go about their work, and where this has supported community change at neighbourhood level. We have also closely monitored the types of activities undertaken by community builders. Through this, we have built a detailed understanding of the distinctive character of community building in Exeter, as a truly place-based response to local conditions (separate reports describe this).

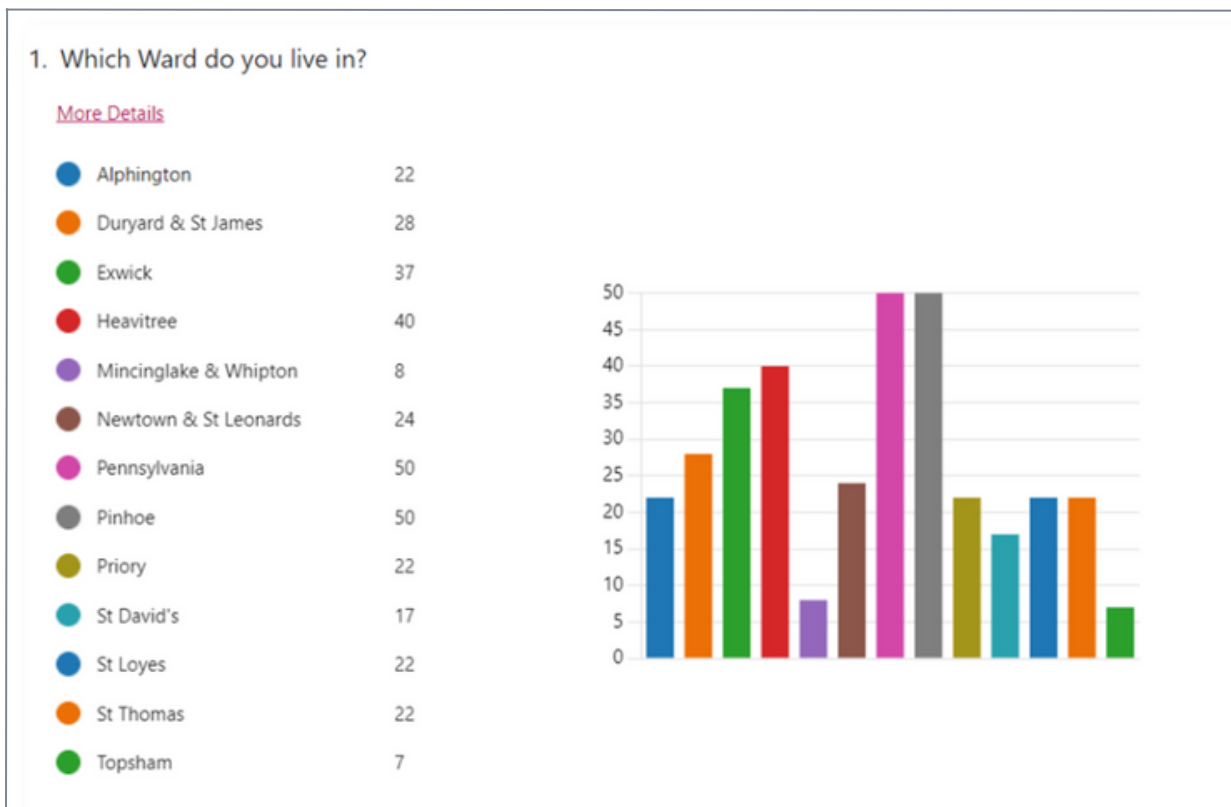
Although we have plentiful indirect evidence of the impact of community builders' work, until now, we have not undertaken any systematic evaluation with residents themselves. As the work of community builders is based around informal connection and enabling, it does not lend itself well to formal evaluation through the usual mechanisms, such as feedback forms. And counting the number of meetings held or attended, or the number of doors knocked on (although we do some of this), tells us little about the difference those activities make to a neighbourhood and its residents. Obviously, it is difficult to attribute a particular local initiative or change exclusively to the work of an individual, and we have not attempted to do this. But we can say something about what is valued by local residents in the work of the community builders, and point to areas where this value has contributed to either collective or individual change.

This report summarises the feedback from residents collected in the summer of 2023 (see below for details of the methods used). It draws out some of the key themes identified by residents as important to them and their communities, and considers how community builder activity has contributed to positive change, both for individuals and neighbourhoods. It also draws on the depth of experience of the community builder team, developed over six years of walking alongside them, to reflect on what this cumulative insight can tell us about community building in general, and the challenges for the Exeter team going forward in particular.



About the research

Our survey of Exeter residents had 354 responses, from all wards in the city. The survey was conducted mostly online, with a limited number of hard copies available. It was distributed largely through the networks and connections held by the community builders themselves, using their encyclopedic knowledge of Exeter's community communication channels. The number of responses, collected within a short space of time, and in midsummer, is a testament to the extent of that knowledge, and to the sense of community builders being a trusted source.



We were pleased to hear both from those who have had contact with their community builder, and those who haven't. Our aim was to gain a broad view of the 'reach' of community builders, and to understand (again in general terms) what residents see as the value of their work in supporting them to address some of the challenges they perceive in their neighbourhoods.

Alongside this 'broad and shallow' insight, we ran a series of informal conversations and focus groups with residents who have had closer connections with community builders. In these discussions we asked residents to reflect in more detail on the nature of the support they had received from the community builders, how it changed over time, and what they saw as particularly useful. Together, the responses from these sources, along with our detailed understanding of the nature of this work over several years, form the basis for this impact report.

How do people link with ‘their’ community builder?

We asked residents about their knowledge of, or contact with, their local community builder.

Over 80% of survey respondents said they had had some kind of contact. Although the community builders are well-established in most neighbourhoods, this highlights the importance of seeing the process of introducing, explaining and reaching out to new people as an ongoing one. A single individual will of course never be able to have in-depth relationships with all residents and in all areas of a neighbourhood the size of a ward at any one time.

These results also show that the range of ways in which community builders and residents interact is broad. Sometimes the approach is pro-active (such as doorknocking), whereas at others it will be more passive (attending an event). One focus group participant commented that encountering their community builder in more than one context was important, as they built up a level of familiarity over time which is conducive to building a trusting relationship.



Rather than calling meetings and setting agendas, community builders go where people are, and work with what they find. A resident pointed out that they knew of the existence of their community builder, who attended some local meetings, before they had ‘need’ of their support (when an issue emerged with a group they are part of). This made it much easier to reach out when the need arose, partly because the builder was personally familiar, but also because the resident had confidence the builder would understand the context she was concerned about.

‘she goes and finds people where they’re doing their thing’

The research showed that community builders are successful at combining in-person and online means of communication and information-sharing. This ‘hybrid approach’ derived largely from the pandemic, when ‘traditional’ forms of community building were almost impossible. The research suggests this is effective at reaching a range of people.

How have community builders supported individuals and communities?

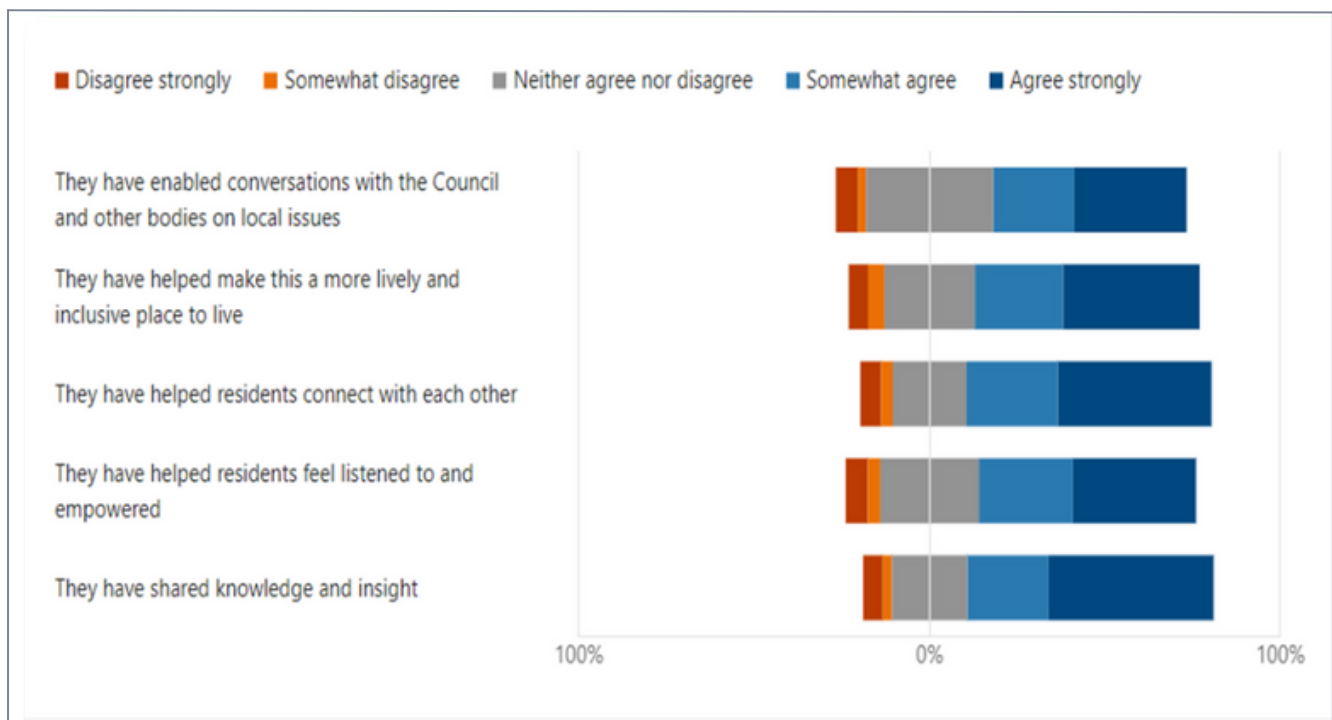
We asked survey respondents both about their personal contact with the builder, and about their views on the overall impact on the neighbourhood.

How has your link with your community builder benefitted you?

- 58% of survey respondents agreed that 'They have listened to my views about the neighbourhood and what I would like to change'
- 73% agreed that 'They have helped me learn more about what is going on locally'
- 53% say that 'They have shown me that it is possible for me to make a difference in my neighbourhood'
- 50% state that 'They have helped me link with local people with shared interests'

So information and linking is important to people, but so is listening and encouragement – how the community builders go about their work is significant to residents.

How has your link with your community builder benefitted you?



'She makes a massive, positive difference to this community'

We have grouped primary emergent themes from the survey and the focus groups under the following headings:

Active listening: many residents value the community builders' listening role, which links closely with the person-centred ethos of the Wellbeing Exeter programme as a whole. Because community builders work with residents to support them to take action on the things that matter to them, this is an essential step. The process of explaining to someone else what they value and what they would like to work to change can itself help residents shape their own ideas and priorities. Once community action is underway, it is also helpful to have a sympathetic sounding board to talk through challenges and new ideas.

A trusted source of information: builders produce and share newsletters within their neighbourhoods, as well as passing on others' information. 'She's a walking encyclopedia', says one resident. But community builders are much more than excellent local 'directories' – we have apps for that. They actively manage and use that knowledge, to everyone's benefit. One resident described how their community builder could provide excellent advice on suitable community spaces, as she knew about the size of the rooms, quality of the kitchen, and the state of local parking, but also of the 'reputation' of the venue, and other less tangible elements that might affect who would attend an event there. Because they are known and respected, one resident observed that a builder's involvement in a new initiative can act as a tacit endorsement: we all need to 'locate' new ideas or people in relation to what we know already – a link with a community builder can provide this familiarity.

'The newsletter is just one aspect of how the community builder shares information on what is going on in the locality'

A means to link with others: one of the most impactful ways in which community builders can support local action is by linking people with complementary ideas and aspirations together. No one can change the world, or even their neighbourhood, on their own, but connecting with others can make those aims more realistic.

'I have lived on this road for six years and had never really met my neighbours. With [the community builder's] help, I have met neighbours I had never spoken to and we often get together for a chat while our children play together. It has made living here so much better for us all'

As community builders are also linked with each other, they have access to citywide examples and experience – someone, somewhere, has probably already faced the same challenges, and might have some ideas to share. Community builders can avoid residents having to reinvent the wheel, and give them access to a network of civic solidarity and wisdom. One resident explained how a community builder helped connect their fledgling organisation with a more established community group, which gave them practical help while they recruited a treasurer, as well as reassurance and advice.

‘A lot more people have met each other as a result of her endeavours’

Several residents noted how the sheer variety of connections community builders holds means they can introduce people to ideas and activities beyond their immediate range of experience.

Rather than a narrow ‘matching service’ that links someone’s professed interests with an opportunity to explore them, community builders can make less obvious links (for example, between a community shop and pre-school), which expand horizons, and encourage new ‘bridging’ bonds to flourish between as well as within groups of people. This is a central means by which community builders can encourage inclusivity and openness in Exeter’s neighbourhoods.

‘It is a complex community and they have worked to make a diverse network of relationships’

A maintainer of momentum and smoother of paths: community-based action can be difficult work, and it invariably ebbs and flows as other life priorities come along. Residents told us the community builders have an important role to play, not in instigating, but in ‘holding’ projects, and helping maintain their momentum through those more challenging moments. One active community member explained how ‘his’ community builder ‘smoothed the path’ for his project, booking rooms, sending invitations, writing minutes, and generally making it easier to keep the project on-track. The fact that the community builders have been present in several Exeter wards since late 2016, while other initiatives come and go, was mentioned as making a huge difference in terms of lasting relationships and continuity.

‘she is good at being the glue or the gap filler’

An encourager and enabler: community builders walk alongside residents to support their action to make their communities better places. Sometimes this will be just the encouragement someone needs to take that first step. Many people told us that they felt the community builder helped them understand they have ‘permission’ to take action to change things where they live, and that this was very empowering.

‘Our community builder has encouraged us to become a community’

This might sound like a gentle and very straightforward aspect of a builder's role, but stepping into a community space is often challenging, and requires residents to decide to leave their comfort zone. A community builder's combination of persistence and support is often what can give them the confidence to act.

'I'm not terribly community minded...without her I wouldn't have done it. It's been good for me'

A neutral person, who knows when not to act: several residents told us that having a neutral person within community contexts was invaluable. People become involved with community activity because they care passionately about it, and this can mean there is a lot at stake for them personally. As one resident put it, there are a lot of 'doers' in this area. Builders can help residents take a step back, and remember their ultimate goals, when they encounter the inevitable setbacks along the way. Importantly, they understand when something isn't working, and when it might be best to try a different approach. Just as importantly, they are good at judging when not to intervene – when a community does not need external involvement.

Case study: Exwick Community Association

This long-established association had been dormant for some time, when a small group of Exwick residents decided it would be useful to revive it, so it could act as an umbrella under which smaller ideas and projects could flourish. This was easier said than done, and the plan progressed slowly. It would have been easy for the residents to lose heart as they met challenges, but the community builder was with them at every step, helping organise and publicise meetings, taking minutes, even sourcing free food to attract more people to attend. Her support, says one association member, helped them maintain the momentum needed to wade through all the paperwork, and get the association up and running again. Since then, she has been an invaluable sounding board – knowledgeable, but neutral. He recalls a moment when the association was in discussion with a potential activity leader, and they were getting sidetracked and bogged down. The community builder was able to see the bigger picture, and remind everyone what their original goal had been, getting the conversation helpfully back on track.

A channel into and between organisations: Although much of the activity community builders support involves groups of residents coming together, very often there will be a need to link with organisations. These might be charities or other community organisations, or private sector bodies such as developers. Or it might be important to make links with public sector agencies, including local councils or health services. Residents say that community builders make a valuable contribution in this area, perhaps by making introductions, or acting as mediators, or by simply signposting residents to the right person.

'She knits it all together'

A flexible source of support – with an exit plan: several residents noted how the support from their community builder changes over time, ranging from intensive engagement at points where a project needs it, to a more light-touch 'strategic' link as something becomes more established. One resident commented that she was impressed with how the community builder knew when to 'withdraw' from a context that no longer needed their involvement.

Case study: Sylvania Stores

In 2020 A group of individuals in the Pennsylvania area of the city formed a WhatsApp group to discuss the idea of opening a community shop and meeting space locally. The community builder engaged with them online, and walked alongside an energetic and enthusiastic group of residents, coming together for the first time to bring some much-needed community space to their neighbourhood. Sylvania Stores opened in the summer of 2021 and is a bustling and well-loved local asset. A committee member explained how the community builder provided practical help as they established the organisational structure, and recruited postholders, linking them with another local organisation for support. Over time, he explains, her involvement has become less hands-on, and more strategic, suggesting connections, and providing advice, but not needing to be present at every meeting.

A champion of the community, from behind: what many of these aspects add up to is the fact that community builders are trusted, well-connected advocates for the communities within which they work. They recognise and help make visible much community activity that could otherwise be largely 'under the radar'. Their positivity is noted and valued by residents. Much of what is really valuable about community building is barely noticeable from the outside. One resident described this, beautifully, as being the 'scrum master', a servant-leader whose role within a team is facilitation.

'She is not an influencer, but she certainly has influence'

It's personal: overwhelmingly, residents commented on the personal qualities of the community builders. Because this role is built on direct relationships, how it is done is as important as what. Builders are all different people, of course, but there is a lot of common ground in the way they were described: friendly and approachable, lively, encouraging, full of humility, inclusive, empathetic, pro-active, energetic, positive, supportive, responsive, and accessible. Some residents have contrasted this informal, personable approach with the image of the impersonal bureaucracy which can dominate some people's lives.

'She is a powerhouse of enthusiasm and care'

Conclusions and future considerations

It is clear that community building means different things to different people. The range of ways in which builders engage with residents is wide, and the forms of value derived from that engagement is also very broad. Builders' flexibility and responsiveness to local contexts is appreciated and effective.

Several residents explained to us that they crossed boundaries all the time in their daily lives, living in one ward, working in another, and engaging in community activity in a third. The value of a flexible, citywide, holistic approach to community building in Exeter is self-evident to these residents. This model is challenged by the emergence of numerous new developments that straddle the city limits and include areas under district councils beyond Exeter. New developments have significant need of support in establishing the kinds of structures and assets that will support the emergence of a thriving community over time. The way in which they relate to and integrate with existing communities is also a pressing concern for many. Wellbeing Exeter community builders have valuable experience of working with residents in both these contexts, and are well-placed to provide support and guidance.

The nature of community building changes over time as an individual postholder becomes more familiar with their 'patch', and as projects develop and require changing forms of support. In areas with longstanding community builders, resident-led local action is habituated, in a way that can make new initiatives easier to get going. But this research has also reminded us that many residents do not yet have a relationship with their builder; the process of reaching out, looking beyond the most visible groups and individuals, and listening to a wide range of people, is an important and ongoing one.

Acknowledgements

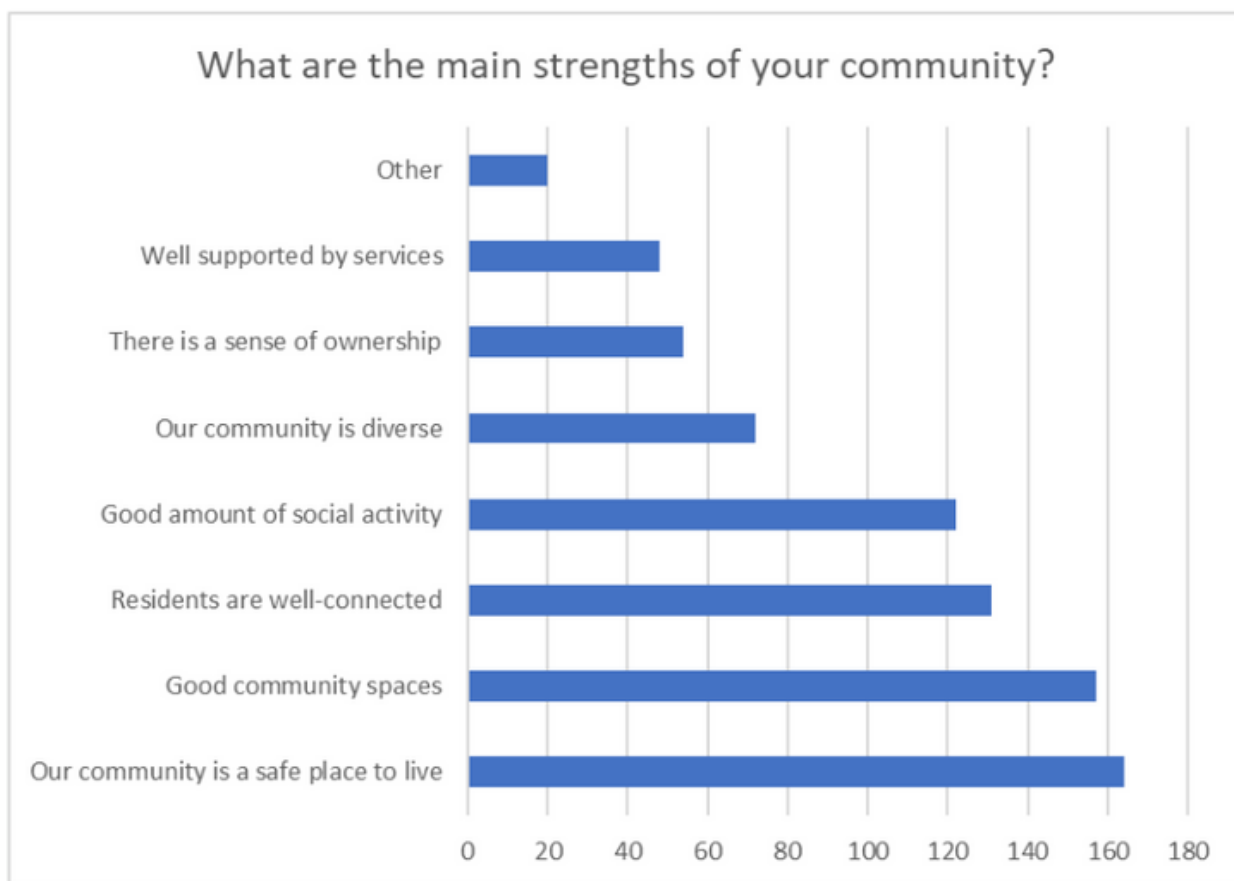
Many thanks to all respondents to our survey, and especially to participants in interviews and focus groups contributing to this research. Special thanks to Ben Smith at Devon Community Foundation for his work on the survey and its analysis, and to Laura Robinson from Exeter Community Initiatives, for logistical support, and for many years of thoughtful conversations on the nature of community building.

thank you

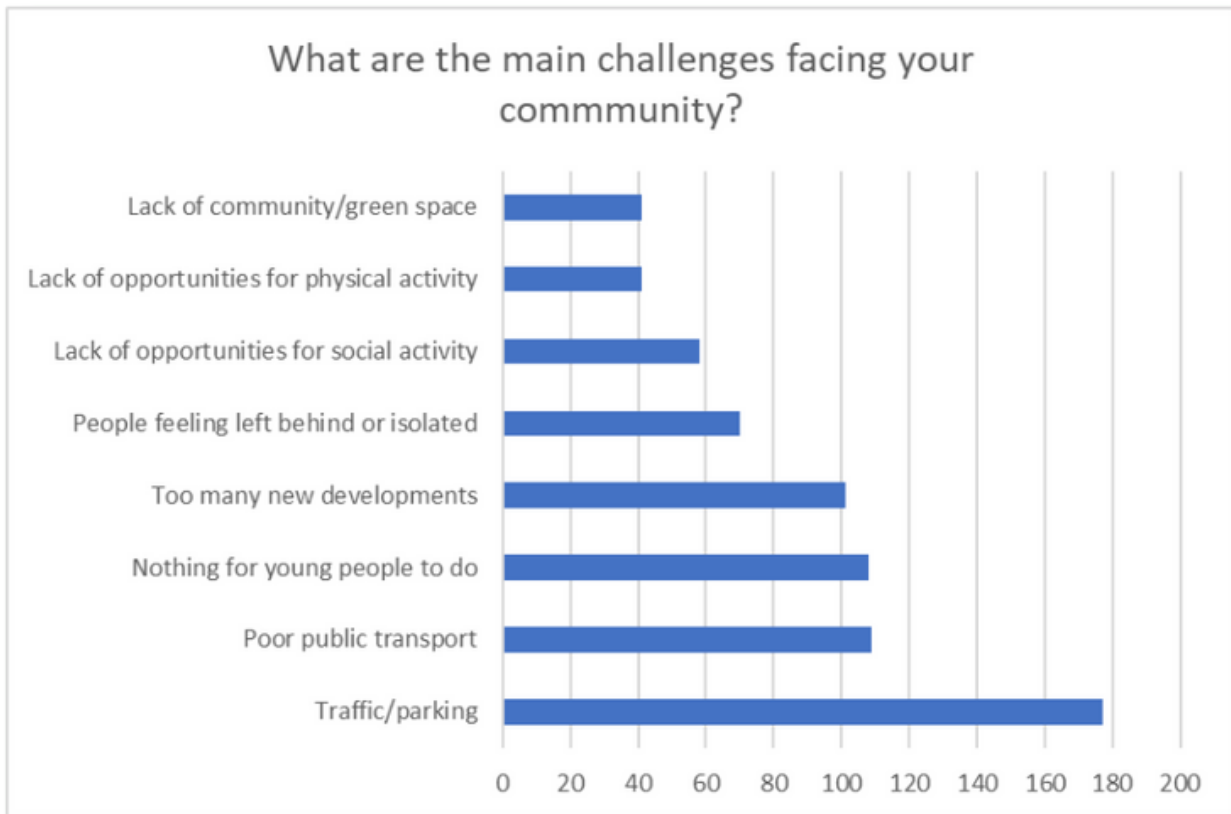
Appendix: What are residents' priorities for their communities?

As part of this research, we asked residents what they felt were the greatest strengths in their community. We were interested to learn how much of what is important in community life is potentially within the scope of community builders to influence. Top of the list came feeling safe, and the availability of community spaces (both indoor venues and green spaces) where local people can come together. Also important were strong connections between residents and having access to a range of community activity. Many of these areas of value and strength are central community builder territory:

‘Several local groups were started up with the help of [the community builder]. Residents have a growing choice of activities in the area.’



Of course, not everything at community level works perfectly. Challenges in many local neighbourhoods included issues related to getting around: traffic, parking and public transport. These link with one of the things residents say they value, which is safe and pleasant pedestrian routes round their neighbourhood, but these elements are at times in tension – the introduction of low-traffic neighbourhoods might improve the pedestrian experience, but those with disabilities, or for whom car-based access is important for work, could feel overlooked.



Another common challenge raised in many areas is the social consequences of the dominance of student housing. Houses let on short leases to students can be poorly maintained, and some students can be less well-connected to their neighbourhood as they know they will be moving on shortly. Longer-term residents felt it was a shame that students are not closely involved in neighbourhood life. There was also concern that student accommodation was displacing homes for families and other residents, forcing some people to leave the area. Community builders cannot of course influence who lives where, but they have done some interesting work engaging with student residents in neighbourhoods across the city, and enabling them to participate in community life alongside their non-student neighbours.