

From Grants to Growth:

Evaluating the Reach and
Impact of Southwark Charities



An independent evaluation conducted by:
Sharp Raiser Limited, commissioned by Southwark Charities



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1. Executive Summary

Southwark Charities commissioned this evaluation to review the impact of its grants programme for organisations supporting older residents (55+) in the London Borough of Southwark from 2022 to 2024. The evaluation also informs the charity's forward strategy, ahead of a planned expansion of the grants budget from £500,000 in 2025 to £1 million annually by 2028.

Drawing on a feminist, culturally-focused, and participatory approach, the evaluation combined a survey of funded organisations (with a 56% response rate), six in-depth case studies with over 50 participants, and analysis of three years of monitoring data. This ensured both breadth across organisational sizes and service models, and depth through first-hand stories, observations, and lived experience.

The findings confirm that Southwark Charities plays a distinctive and valued role as a place-based funder. Grants enable small, grassroots and culturally-specific organisations to sustain vital local services, often reaching people and communities underserved by other provision. Organisations describe the funding process as flexible, proportionate, and relationship-driven, with Southwark Charities seen as a trusted partner that understands local realities.

Key findings at a glance:

- 15,390 older residents benefited from funded activities between 2022–2024.
- 47% of beneficiaries were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
- 55% of services were delivered by older people themselves, creating strong peer-to-peer support models.
- 81.2% of delivery teams were women.
- 91% of survey respondents observed improved mental well-being or confidence among a majority of service users. In addition, 60% of grantees reported that over half of their participants gained new skills or knowledge.
- 62% of organisations reported that the Southwark Charities grant helped them leverage additional funding between 2022–2024.
- Volunteers, many of them older, reported increased confidence, purpose, and mental well-being through their roles.

Challenges remain. Rising costs, growing demand, and workforce pressures threaten the sustainability of delivery. Some groups and individuals with limited digital skills face barriers to applying for funding, and gaps remain in representation for certain communities and intersectional needs. The local context is marked by significant deprivation among older residents, persistent health inequalities, and rapidly changing policy and cost-of-living pressures.

The strategic recommendations in this report build on these findings, calling for continued flexible and equitable funding, targeted capacity-building, stronger outreach to underrepresented groups, and further development of Southwark Charities' convening role in the borough. By maintaining its distinctive relationship-based model and adapting to emerging needs, the charity can strengthen its role as a catalyst for meaningful, equitable impact for older people in Southwark.

2. Introduction & Background

2.1 About Southwark Charities

Southwark Charities is one of the oldest philanthropic institutions in London, with origins dating back to 1603. In its current form, it was constituted in 2010 through the merger of five historic local charities under a Charity Commission scheme, enabling a more strategic and unified approach to supporting older people in the London Borough of Southwark.

Today, the charity delivers its mission through four core service areas:

- **Grant-making** – Providing funding to community organisations that promote the well-being of older residents (aged 55+), with an annual grants budget of £500,000 in 2025 and ambitions to expand to £1 million by 2028.
- **Alms house accommodation** – Offering affordable, secure housing for older people with housing needs, currently across 41 flats at St Mary Newington Close in Walworth, with a major redevelopment of Edward Edwards House in Bankside to deliver 62 new flats by 2028.
- **Membership programme** – Offering eligible older residents social activities, trips, and quarterly cash gifts to reduce isolation and enhance quality of life.
- **Administrative services** – Managing grants and finances for other local charities, such as Rotherhithe Consolidated Charities, under service-level agreements.

This integrated model reflects a long-standing commitment to both direct service provision and capacity-building within Southwark's voluntary sector. By combining housing, community support, and targeted funding, the charity provides stability, dignity, and a sense of belonging for older residents, while strengthening the organisations that serve them.

The current evaluation focuses on the impact and learning from Southwark Charities' grants to organisations over the past three years (2022-2024), with particular attention to strategic outcomes, equity and inclusion, and the experiences of funded organisations.

2.2 Local context

Older adults (55+) in Southwark face layered structural inequalities, including social, economic, and health-related inequalities that create a compelling case for sustained and targeted funding.

Structural Deprivation and Income Insecurity

- Southwark ranks among the **50 most deprived boroughs in England** (Southwark Council, 2021c), and **72nd out of 317** on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD 2019) (MHCLG, 2019).
- According to the **Income Deprivation Affecting Older People Index (IDAOPI)**, **31.2% of residents aged 60+** in Southwark are income-deprived, making the borough the **6th most deprived nationally for older people's income** (MHCLG, 2019).
- Many older adults, especially those in social housing or from ethnic minority backgrounds, struggle with **heating, food, and basic necessities** (Trust for London, 2021b).

Housing, Health, and Isolation

- Poor housing conditions, including **damp, overcrowding, and lack of heating**, contribute to respiratory illness, infections, and poor mental health in older adults (Denotti, 2023).
- An estimated **7% of households** consist of older adults (66+) living alone, rising to **18%** in wards like Dulwich Wood (Southwark Council, 2023). This increases risks of loneliness, especially for those without family or community ties.
- **Falls-related hospital admissions** among older adults in Southwark are **higher than both national and London averages** (Southwark JSNA, 2024). Nearly **half of adults over 80** experience at least one fall annually, often leading to fear, withdrawal, and loss of confidence (Age UK, 2023).

Cultural and Structural Barriers

- Southwark's population is **diverse overall**, with **51.5% identifying as White**. Updated ethnicity data specifically for older adults (65+) is not yet available. The most recent published figures (Southwark Public Health, 2012) indicate that **81% of the older population identify as White, with 13% identifying as Black/Black British**.

- **Language barriers, cultural stigma, and unfamiliarity with services** continue to prevent older adults from global majority backgrounds, especially **women and migrants**, from seeking help (Local Digital, 2019).
- The need for **bilingual and culturally grounded provision** is growing, particularly as future cohorts of older people will be more ethnically and linguistically diverse (Southwark JSNA, 2024).

Older adults in Southwark experience **compounding deprivation**. The combination of **income insecurity, poor housing, isolation, health inequalities, and cultural exclusion** heightens the urgency for investment.

2.3 Purpose of the Evaluation

The evaluation will provide an evidence-based review of Southwark Charities' grants to organisations supporting the well-being of older residents (55+) over the past three years (2022-2024). Its purposes are to:

- **Demonstrate impact** – Highlight the difference made to funded organisations, their service delivery, and the lives of older residents.
- **Showcase learning** – Identify effective service models, funding approaches, and partnership practices that have worked well, and capture lessons that can inform the charity's strategy, including the planned grants expansion in 2028.
- **Assess equity and inclusion** – Examine the reach of grants into marginalised and underrepresented communities, and assess the inclusivity and accessibility of funded services.
- **Strengthen Southwark Charities' role as a place-based funder** – Gather beneficiary and organisational feedback on the charity's funding processes, profile, and responsiveness, to build on its recognised good practice.
- **Inform future priorities** – Provide insights on unmet needs, delivery challenges, and emerging opportunities, supporting trustees' decision-making and long-term planning for an expanded grants programme.

By combining quantitative outcomes data with qualitative insights and compelling case studies, the evaluation aims to produce a comprehensive and credible account of the programme's achievements and areas for growth.

3. Methodology

This evaluation draws on **feminist, culturally-focused, and participatory research approaches**, with a focus on centring community voices and lived experience. It combines mixed methods across survey, qualitative fieldwork, and existing grant monitoring data to understand what works, for whom, and why, and to offer grounded recommendations for Southwark Charities' future strategy.

Methods Used

1. Online Survey

An online survey was sent to all 80 organisations funded by Southwark Charities between 2022 and 2024.

- Response rate: 45 organisations responded, representing a strong participation rate (56%).
- Size representation: The respondents were evenly distributed: 33.3% identified as Micro organisations (0–2 staff), 28.9% as Small (3–6 staff), 26.7% as Medium (7–20 staff), and 11.1% as Large (21+ staff). This diverse representation of organisational sizes strengthens the credibility and breadth of the findings, offering insights from community-led groups as well as more established organisations.

2. Six Case Studies

Six organisations were selected with support from the grant manager to reflect diversity in:

- Ethnic communities served
- Funding size and type (core vs project grants)
- Delivery models and service areas
- Geographical areas within Southwark

Each case study included:

- In-depth interviews with staff, volunteers, and service users (older adults)
- Participatory observation during service activities
- Informal conversations and fieldnotes

In total, over 50 individuals contributed across the six studies.

3. Review of Monitoring Data

Evaluation data submitted by funded organisations from 2022 to 2024, including output, was reviewed and thematically analysed. This enabled triangulation across methods and strengthened the validity of key findings.

Ethical Considerations

- Participation was entirely voluntary.
- All participants were informed about the evaluation and gave verbal or written consent.
- Safeguarding policies were followed throughout, especially during group discussions and one-on-one interviews. In settings where older adults were living with dementia or cognitive impairment, the research team took extra care to ensure ethical participation. Staff and carers were consulted to assess individuals' comfort and capacity to engage. Conversations were conducted at a slow pace, using accessible language and non-verbal cues.
- Anonymity was offered, and pseudonyms were used where appropriate.
- Interviews and fieldwork took place in familiar, community-based settings, ensuring accessibility and psychological comfort.

Strengths of the Approach

- **Cultural and Age Alignment (Positionality):** The research team comprised 4 women from the global majority, including 3 local women and an older researcher (aged 60+) with lived experience as both a provider and recipient of community services. This positionality enabled empathetic engagement with both older adults and grassroots service teams. It helped build rapport, inform the framing of questions, and bring nuance to data interpretation. The researchers' shared experience of race, gender, age, and locality made conversations more open and grounded in mutual recognition.
- **Feminist, Decolonial, and Participatory Approaches:**
The evaluation was designed to flatten power hierarchies between 'researcher' and 'participant.' Many older people and grassroots volunteer-led groups are unfamiliar with formal evaluation or research processes, and may feel intimidated or scrutinised. In response, the team approached every interaction as a dialogue and an opportunity for mutual learning.
 - Rather than approaching participants as subjects to extract answers from, the research team explicitly framed older adults and community leaders as teachers and experts in their own lives. This was communicated during conversations

- The tone of interviews and conversations was deliberately warm, informal, and curious, which was designed to encourage storytelling, not test knowledge.
- Researchers took active care to ensure that non-English speakers or those with different communication styles had a voice in the process and that the approach was culturally-focused and inclusive.
- Cultural attunement, such as asking about participants' traditions, health beliefs, or food preferences, helped build trust and show genuine interest in communities' strengths, not just their needs.

These principles reflect a decolonial ethos: valuing diverse ways of knowing, avoiding extractive dynamics, and ensuring participants are not made to feel judged, marginalised, or studied.

- **Relationship Building:** Informal pre-interview visits to meet staff and participants were arranged. These early engagements allowed for trust to form organically. It also gave space for participants to guide what they wanted to share, and on what terms.
- **Participatory Ethnography:** Researchers were active participants in services, joining creative workshops, tea-making, sport and movement sessions, and lunch clubs. By being with rather than observing from outside, the team gained richer insight into the quality of care, intergenerational dynamics, and emotional tone of service delivery. This also helped service users feel more relaxed and respected.
- **Inclusive Sampling:** The six case study organisations were selected in partnership with Southwark Charities to reflect diversity across ethnic background, funding size, location, delivery model, and type of activity. This ensured that findings were relevant to a wide range of services and communities across the borough.
- **Mixed Methods for Breadth and Depth:** By combining survey data (from 45 organisations), qualitative insights from six case studies (involving over 50 people), and outcome data submitted by grantees, the evaluation brings together statistical coverage and narrative richness.



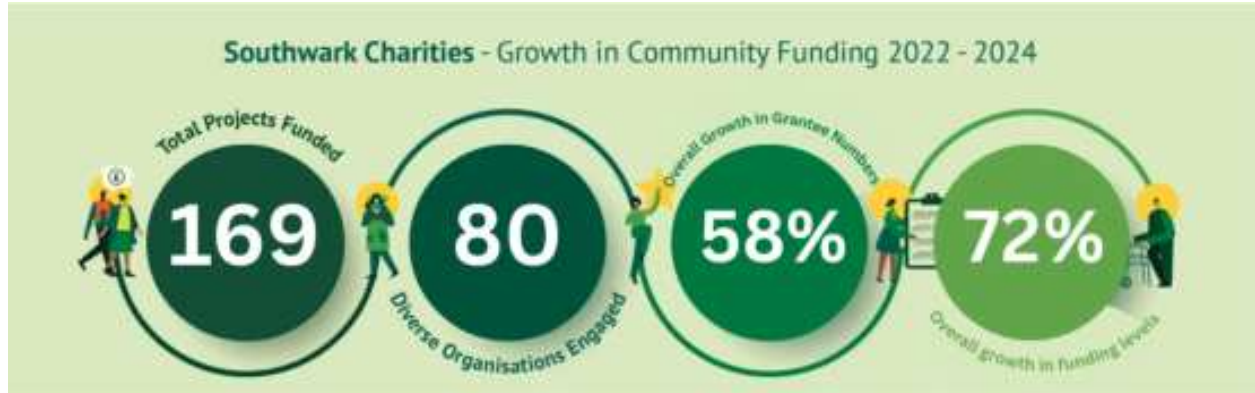
Selected photos from the research process show researchers joining volunteers to cook for service users, taking part in sports sessions, and chatting with the delivery team and service users. Consent obtained.

Limitations

- Case studies were conducted over short site visits, which limits longitudinal insight into change over time.
- Non-response bias in the survey: While the 56% response rate is very strong for a voluntary organisational survey, the perspectives of the 44% of organisations that did not respond may differ in important ways (e.g., capacity, satisfaction, or challenges).

4. Key Findings

4.1 Outputs: What was delivered



Rapid programme growth reflects strategic expansion

Southwark Charities funded **169 projects** delivered by **80 unique organisations** between 2022 and 2024, marking a period of significant growth and diversification. The number of organisations funded each year increased sharply, rising from **36 in 2022** to **49 in 2023** and **57 in 2024**, an overall increase of **58%**. Funding levels also grew substantially, from **£282,385.50 in 2022** to **£395,304.50 in 2023**, and reaching **£485,669.00 in 2024**, an overall increase of **72%**. (Data source: Grant programme dataset provided by Southwark Charities' Grants Manager, April 2025.)

This rapid scaling reflects the Charity's strategic ambition to broaden local reach. The strong uptake also suggests high demand for local delivery and the presence of trusted grassroots infrastructure ready to absorb and activate funding.

A flexible, high-volume programme portfolio

While the Charity supported a few longer-term interventions, most funded programmes were short in duration:

- **62% projects** ran for less than one year
- **28% projects** ran for exactly one year
- **10%** spanned two to three years

(Data source: Grant programme dataset provided by Southwark Charities' Grants Manager, April 2025.)

This suggests that the funder's current model favours short-term (less than one year) delivery, which may enable fast response to urgent community needs and support testing or supplementing existing programmes. As shown in the survey (n=45, July

2025), 64% of organisations described Southwark Charities' grants as crucial for enabling 'agile, grassroots projects.' On the other hand, it may also be valuable to explore the potential benefits of funding more long-term projects to complement this flexible approach.

Projects reached a significant number of older people, including those from global majority backgrounds

Funded organisations collectively reached **15,390 older people aged 55+, of whom 7,158 (47%) were from global majority backgrounds**. These figures highlight the fund's important role in supporting culturally diverse older communities across Southwark. (Data source: Grant programme dataset provided by Southwark Charities' Grants Manager, April 2025.)

Over half of service users primarily or solely rely on funded services, and over half of grantees are the main or only provider locally

A significant portion of older beneficiaries depend heavily on the services delivered by grantees:

- **33.3%** of respondents said that **over 70%** of their older clients mainly or only rely on their services
- A further **24.4%** estimated that **40–70%** of their older clients were similarly reliant
- **24.4%** reported lower dependency (**less than 40%**), while **17.8%** were unsure

Data source: Grantee survey responses (June–July 2025, n=45)

Based on a weighted average, approximately **57%** of older people supported by grantees heavily or solely rely on these services. This high reliance indicates that many older people do not have comparable alternatives. The services supported by Southwark Charities are essential, helping older residents avoid isolation, maintain regular social contact, and access trusted support in familiar, culturally appropriate settings.

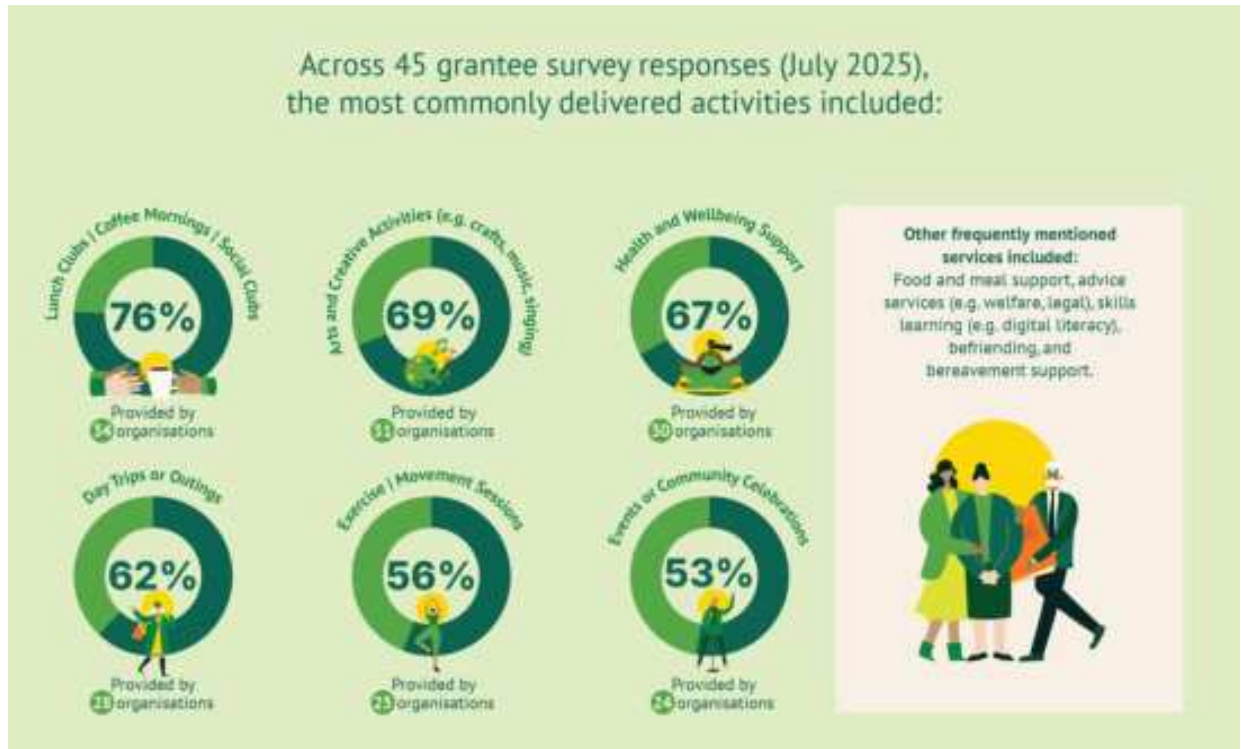
Similarly, when asked about their role in the local service landscape:

- **51.1%** of grantees said they were the **main or only provider** of this kind of service in their area
- Another **35.6%** reported they were **one of few providers**
- Just **8.9%** said they were **not the main provider**, while **4.4%** were unsure

Data source: Grantee survey responses (June–July 2025, n=45)

This reflects a landscape of sparse provision, where grantee organisations act as community anchors. In many neighbourhoods, they are the only trusted or culturally appropriate offer available. These findings demonstrate the fund’s place-based impact, sustaining vital, local-level infrastructure for older people.

Funding supported a wide range of holistic, relationship-centred activities, with a strong emphasis on cultural, social, and wellbeing interventions.



Across 45 grantee survey responses (July 2025), the most commonly delivered activities included:

- Lunch clubs/coffee mornings / social clubs – provided by 34 organisations (76%)
- Arts and creative activities (e.g. crafts, music, singing) – 31 organisations (69%)
- Health and wellbeing support – 30 organisations (67%)
- Day trips or outings – 28 organisations (62%)
- Exercise/movement sessions – 25 organisations (56%)
- Events or community celebrations – 24 organisations (53%)
- Other frequently mentioned services included food and meal support, advice services (e.g. welfare, legal), skills learning (e.g. digital literacy), befriending, and bereavement support.

These activities reflect a strong emphasis on relational, preventive, and culturally engaging support for older people, often blending practical, emotional, and creative

dimensions. The range of services demonstrates the diversity and responsiveness of funded programmes, meeting older people's social, physical, emotional, and developmental needs across changing life situations. Many grantees delivered social connection activities (e.g. clubs, outings, celebrations), often positioned as a cornerstone of their work. Others focused on physical activity, nutritional support, skills development, and mental wellbeing, addressing both immediate post-pandemic isolation and longer-term health inequalities.

Delivery approaches were diverse across format, access, and engagement model, rooted in trust and local knowledge

Survey responses and case studies showed a wide range of delivery approaches, varying by format, facilitation/access design, and engagement model, underpinned by trust, local knowledge, and cultural responsiveness.

- Formats – Drop-in sessions; regular programmes (weekly/fortnightly); pop-ups and seasonal festivals; mobile sessions in community venues/estates; online/hybrid sessions.
- Facilitation & access design – Peer-led; volunteer-led; women-only groups; one-to-one check-ins; mobile outreach/home visits.
- Engagement models – Cultural and language-specific; skills-learning (e.g., digital, ESOL, financial); advice/navigation-focused; hobby/creative and health/activity-based (e.g., exercise, movement, gardening); social connection/befriending/community meals.

This diversity across formats, facilitation/access, and engagement models enabled organisations to meet the varied needs of older people with different levels of confidence, mobility, language, and health. Drop-ins provided low-pressure social spaces, while structured, skills-focused programmes supported personal development. One-to-one check-ins, volunteer-led initiatives, and mobile outreach reached those unable to travel, and seasonal or cultural events helped reconnect isolated older people during holidays or periods of heightened need. Flexible, culturally responsive delivery also allowed timely responses to emerging issues, from bereavement and mental health struggles to confusion about new pension rules, while blending practical and emotional support.

Using trusted spaces and facilitators, organisations were able to share vital information, encourage leadership, and build long-term resilience. This variety is a core strength of the grants programme, showing the value of locally rooted approaches that respond to both everyday needs and moments of acute vulnerability.

Funding size and dependency patterns show varied but strategic use of Southwark Charities grants

Southwark Charities' grants were used flexibly across a wide range of organisational contexts, supporting everything from pilot projects and events to ongoing services and infrastructure. While funding amounts varied, survey data shows that the types and dependency levels on the grant also varied, highlighting a blend of short-term support and deeper investment. (*Data sources: Grantee survey, June–July 2025, n=45; Case studies, n=6*)

Dependency levels:

- **55.6%** of grantees said the Charity's funding made up **less than 10%** of their total grant income.
- **11.1%** received **10–25%**,
- **11.1%** received **26–50%**,
- **22.2%** relied on Southwark Charities for **more than 50%** of their grant income.

This demonstrates that while most grantees integrated the funding within broader financial models, for a significant minority, it formed a core funding stream, especially for smaller or grassroots groups. These patterns underscore Southwark Charities' dual role as a service enabler and ecosystem builder, supporting both immediate needs and longer-term growth, diversity of organisations, and resilience in the borough's voluntary sector.

4.2 Outcomes: What changed

4.2.1 For older people

- **Reduction in Isolation and Relational Healing**



93% of respondents (42 out of 45) reported that over half of their older participants experienced reduced isolation as a direct result of the funded services. (Source: Grantee survey responses, June–July 2025, n=45)

Older people told the researchers during field visits that the programmes served as lifelines and deeply relational spaces:

'It's so expensive in this area. Everything takes money. If you want to join a group, it costs. If you have no money, then you are isolated. But this is free, and the support is so good. The check-ins, the welcome, the group activities. It's magic.'

'I came here 20 years ago when my parents passed away. This is my family, and the social group members are my brothers and sisters. This is the only social space I go to every week.'

The free, consistent, and welcoming nature of these funded programmes played a vital role in reducing isolation, particularly for older people living alone, those who had lost

previous social circles, or those in flats with limited access to shared spaces. Amid a cost-of-living crisis where affordability often determines participation, these services offered a rare and essential point of connection. Participating in a social group not only eased loneliness but also created the foundation for improved mental and physical well-being.

- **Improved Emotional Wellbeing, Confidence, Skills and Growth**

Funded projects significantly improved the mental well-being, confidence, and personal development of older participants. According to the grantee survey, **91% of respondents (41 out of 45)** observed improved mental well-being or confidence among a majority of service users. In addition, **60% of grantees (27 out of 45)** reported that over half of their participants gained new skills or knowledge.

Older people described a sense of renewed hope, identity, and visibility:

'Thanks to this programme for the opportunity to grow and enjoy a new experience. ... A toast to hope and happiness. For me, it is community, solidarity, unity.' (Translated from: 'Gracias a [este programa] por la oportunidad de crecer y disfrutar de una nueva experiencia. Un brindis de esperanza y alegría. Para mí es comunidad, solidaridad, unidad.')

'As a Black, visually impaired older woman, I was scared to come at first. But now I come every week. I've learned to knit, I've met good people. It's like a family. This is my 14th year coming here.'

As highlighted earlier in this report, older adults in Southwark face overlapping challenges, from isolation and cultural barriers to health decline and housing displacement. These projects provided consistent, trusted opportunities to stay connected, learn new things, and engage in meaningful, affirming activities.

Over time, such engagement helped older people feel more confident, emotionally resilient, and socially valued. Skill-building programmes empowered older people to rediscover or express their identity. In this way, the projects represent an investment in both personal recovery and the collective life quality of Southwark's ageing population.

- **Improved Physical Health and Health Awareness**



73% of grantees (33 out of 45) reported that **the majority of their older participants experienced improved physical wellbeing.**

Regular group activities such as art workshops and social outings supported physical health through reduced isolation and mood improvement. Some funded services provided more direct interventions, such as nutritious food, physical movement, health checks, and health workshops.

Older people confirmed these positive outcomes:

'I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes. They helped me recognise the window of opportunity to change. With regular support, I started changing my habits.'

'I have diabetes and was confused by NHS dietary advice. By their standards, I cannot eat anything. Here, they gave me culturally relevant guidance that respected my African diet. It's the first time I felt heard.'

'It has been ten years. Friday is sports day. I work hard with my peers, exercising my muscles. Really good for my health.'

Funded projects played a vital role in local ageing populations' physical health management. They helped bridge the gap between mainstream services and marginalised communities, offering non-judgmental, culturally appropriate support.

These outcomes hold significant community value: not only reducing health inequalities but also potentially lowering long-term pressure on public health systems.

- **Civic Participation and Purpose**

47% of grantees (21 out of 45) reported that **over half of their older participants gained volunteer roles or a renewed sense of purpose**, which is an exceptionally high figure, particularly given that older people are often perceived as passive recipients of support.

The funded projects offered meaningful opportunities for local older residents to contribute to their communities, generating multiple positive outcomes for those navigating significant life transitions. One participant shared: *'This organisation is a lifesaver. I was depressed before. Moving to a flat made it so difficult to make friends, and I felt so isolated. Now I come four times a week, both as a service user and a volunteer. I love listening to people's stories, supporting them, and learning new things. My mental health is in a much better place now.'*

This reciprocal model of care reinforced wellbeing and social value, especially for those experiencing loneliness, housing transitions, or cultural marginalisation, by affirming that older people are also vital contributors to community life.

4.2.2 For grantee organisations and the local voluntary sector

Southwark Charities' funding created lasting value for local organisations, not only by supporting delivery but by strengthening infrastructure, enabling innovation, and opening up future opportunities. These outcomes underpin the wider social impact described earlier.

- **Maintained Core Infrastructure and Staff/Volunteer Stability**

69% of grantees (31 out of 45) reported that the funding helped **maintain core services and daily operations**. This was crucial for organisations with limited income diversity. As mentioned in 4.1, 22.2% of respondents relied on Southwark Charities for more than 50% of their grant income. Among the six case study organisations, half depended entirely on the funding to deliver their services. Without it, no activities would have been possible.

53% (24 out of 45) also noted **improvements in staffing or volunteer retention**. In the context of a challenging funding climate, this stability helped grantees remain responsive and consistent in delivery.

- **Expanded Services and Improved Quality**

87% of grantees (39 out of 45) said the grant enabled them to **expand services and reach more older people**. **80%** (36 out of 45) observed **improved service quality**. These improvements were particularly meaningful for marginalised groups and contributed to long-term service development.

Some grantees shared their experiences, *'This project has been amazing and invaluable. The support enabled us to put on a heartfelt, dignified, and joyful wellness programme for seniors around Southwark.'* ... *'Having services that bring people together and give them shared experiences and creative opportunities vastly improves older people's quality of life.'*

- **Strengthened Collaboration and Innovation**

49% of grantees said the funding **helped them collaborate more with other groups**, while **42% piloted new ideas or delivery approaches**. This positioned organisations to respond more creatively to emerging community needs, which is an asset to the local voluntary field.

Grantees' words confirmed how the funding enabled them to explore better service models and generate first-hand knowledge. *'Southwark Charities is a very supportive and understanding local funder with visits to local organisations to see what they do. This is highly commendable.'* ... *'The funding have helped us realise that provision of end-of-life services and care for people with dementia needs to be approached with insight and thought.'*

- **Unlocked New Funding Locally**

62% of organisations (28 out of 45) reported that the Southwark Charities grant helped them **leverage additional funding** between 2022–2024. This included:

- **11.1%** (5 organisations) securing **£10,000–£24,999**
- **13.3%** (6 organisations) securing **£25,000–£49,999**
- **6.7%** (3 organisations) securing **£50,000 or more**

Based on midpoint estimates, the total additional funding unlocked by grantees is conservatively estimated at **£350,000–£400,000**. This figure reflects both the credibility and leverage provided by Southwark Charities' support, particularly important for smaller, community-rooted organisations with limited fundraising capacity.

This outcome highlights Southwark Charities' strategic role in strengthening Southwark's voluntary sector. The fund multiplies public benefit by unlocking further investment into community wellbeing, older people's services, and place-based support.

4.3 Equity & Inclusion

The data reveals a strong overall picture of equity and inclusion across funded services, especially in terms of empowerment, representation, and responsiveness to diverse community needs. Most services were intentionally designed to be disability-inclusive (89%) and culturally sensitive (84%), reflecting a deep commitment to accessible, relevant provision. Gender equity was also a consistent feature, with women making up the majority of service users (75%) as well as delivery and volunteer teams. Representation from global majority backgrounds was similarly high: 52.4% among service users, 68% among delivery teams, and 58% among volunteers. This signals a model of inclusion that values participation and peer-led care. Overall, the picture is one of embedded inclusive practice, community empowerment, and frontline diversity.

- **Inclusive Service Delivery**

Funded services are designed with inclusion in mind. Most grantees demonstrated explicit attention to cultural, disability, gender, and LGBTQ+ inclusion, reflecting a maturing awareness of intersectionality.

Across 44 usable responses:

- **89%** described their service as *disability-inclusive*, showing widespread adaptation of activities and environments.
- **84%** identified as *culturally sensitive*, indicating intentional engagement with diverse traditions, languages, and community norms.
- **48%** offered *dementia-friendly* programming; a few noted this as a work in progress.
- **48%** were *LGBTQ+ inclusive*, suggesting potential for future training and targeted outreach.
- **32%** focused on *women's empowerment*, particularly in faith-based and culturally specific settings.

A small number also referenced mental health support, spiritual grounding, and lifelong learning, though these were less consistently defined.

- **Highly marginalised older populations were reached.**

Services reached highly marginalised older populations, especially women, disabled individuals, and those living alone or in financial precarity.

From the survey data:

- **Age:** The majority of users were between **65–74 (40.9%)** and **75+ (35.8%)**, highlighting the importance of supporting ageing-in-place and later-life transitions.

- **Ethnicity** (36 entries): The average proportion of users from global majority backgrounds was **52.4%**. While most responses fell in the 30–60% range, 5 services reported over 85%.
- **Living Alone** (25 entries): An average of **60.2%** of users lived alone. This was concentrated in the 60–80% band, reflecting serious isolation risks.
- **Disability / Long-Term Health** (31 entries): The average proportion of users with disabilities or long-term conditions was **69.1%**, with most services reporting between 60–100%.
- **Financial Difficulty** (22 entries): An average of **66.1%** of users faced financial hardship. The range was wide (27%–100%), but most services reported more than half in difficulty.
- **Gender** (35 entries): An average of **75.1%** of users were women, with most responses in the 65–95% range.
- **LGBTQ+ Identity** (15 entries): On average, **5.8%** of users identified as LGBTQ+, consistent with UK national estimates for older cohorts. Most entries clustered between 5–10%, with some underreporting.

These findings are of particular significance for funded organisations, as they provide robust evidence of the intersecting needs faced by older people in Southwark, particularly in relation to social isolation and poverty. The data presented in this report can support organisations in demonstrating the relevance and impact of their services to current and potential funders. Moreover, the research offers a valuable resource for the participating organisations and highlights the importance of continued data sharing and collaboration across the sector to better understand and respond to complex and overlapping needs.

• **Delivery Team Equity**

Delivery teams reflect the communities they serve, especially in terms of race, age, and gender. This embedded representation likely strengthens trust, relevance, and outcomes. Many services are women-led and age-relevant, allowing for peer-informed delivery and trusted relationships.

From 32–34 usable entries:

- **Global Majority / BAME**: Staff from racially diverse backgrounds made up an average of **68.4%** of delivery teams. The range was wide (0–100%), but more than half reported over 70%, with **100%** being the most frequent response.
- **Aged 55+**: An average of **55.6%** of delivery teams were aged 55 or over. Most services reported 30–100%, with **50%** as the most common figure.
- **Women**: Women comprised an average of **81.2%** of delivery teams. Most teams were over 75% female; **100%** was reported in 10 services.

The finding that 55% of services are delivered by older people has important implications for the long-term sustainability of service provision in the borough. While this reflects

strong community engagement and the valuable contribution of older volunteers and staff, **it also raises questions about workforce resilience**. As this group may be more likely to experience health-related absences or retirement in the near term, there is a potential risk of high turnover or loss of institutional knowledge. Future planning should consider strategies to support succession planning, intergenerational volunteering or staffing models, and mechanisms to retain and support older workers in ways that are responsive to their needs and capacities.

- **Volunteer Team Equity**

Volunteer teams show broad alignment with delivery teams, though some variation exists. Volunteer engagement is strong among women and older adults. Diversity in ethnicity is evident in many services but not universal, suggesting some organisations may benefit from inclusive volunteer recruitment strategies to broaden participation, such as culturally-prescribed volunteer training and supervision programmes.

From 25–26 usable entries:

- **Global Majority / BAME:** Volunteers from diverse backgrounds made up an average of **58.1%** of teams. One-third reported 75% or more. However, a few reported very low diversity (0–25%).
- **Aged 55+:** Volunteers aged 55 or over made up an average of **54.5%** of teams. The range was large (1%–100%), with some services strongly age-skewed.
- **Women:** Female volunteers averaged **79.4%** across services. Ten organisations reported 100% women volunteers.

4.4 What Worked Well: Insights from In-Depth Case Studies

Drawing on six in-depth case studies, including field visits, interviews, and ethnographic observation, this section highlights key ingredients that make services effective for older people in Southwark. These case studies, covering a range of service types and communities, reveal shared practices that support wellbeing, inclusion, and empowerment.

Key features of what worked well:

- **Culturally Safe, Welcoming Environments**
Services tailored to specific communities fostered emotional safety, trust, and belonging, especially where staff and activities reflected participants' culture, language, or identity.
- **Regular, Structured Activities**
Weekly sessions provided routine, stability, and something to look forward to. This was especially valuable for those experiencing isolation, bereavement, or memory loss.

- **Peer Support and Shared Experience**

Group-based formats enabled participants to connect, reflect, and support each other, building confidence and resilience through collective care.

- **Low Barriers to Participation**

Inclusive design, such as gentle movement, bilingual facilitation, or transport provided by volunteers, helped reach people with health, mobility, or language barriers.

- **Sense of Purpose and Contribution**

Many services encouraged older people to volunteer, co-create, or take small leadership roles, restoring confidence, dignity, and identity.

- **Holistic Health Support**

Community-based health checks and culturally tailored advice improved trust and engagement, while also reducing anxiety and supporting self-care.

- **Venues as Community Anchors**

A consistent space acted as both a social hub and a gateway to wider support. It also created openings for small partnerships that added value without overstressing core teams.

- **Valuing and Empowering Volunteers**

Volunteers played a vital role in sustaining services and contributing to community cohesion. For older people, particularly those experiencing significant life transitions such as bereavement or social isolation, volunteering provided a renewed sense of purpose and meaningful engagement. It supported their wellbeing by offering structure, routine, and opportunities for social connection.

For younger volunteers, including those facing unemployment or uncertainty, volunteering opened up pathways to skills development, confidence, and career exploration. In some cases, these roles provided a sense of structure and belonging while they waited for more stable opportunities.

Volunteer involvement also strengthened organisational capacity, supporting more frequent sessions, improving quality, and ensuring more consistent delivery. It reinforced a shared sense of purpose and helped build a stronger, more responsive community.

To explore these insights in more depth, please see the full case studies later in this report.

4.5 Challenges & Priorities

- **Current Challenges: Most Grantees Face Barriers to Sustainability and Inclusive Delivery**

Grantees faced a consistent set of structural challenges, reflecting the broader pressures on local voluntary sector organisations. A combination of financial insecurity, limited staffing, and outreach barriers emerged as the top constraints to delivery and growth.



- **Fundraising (89%):** The most frequently cited challenge, reported by 40 of 45 services. Funding insecurity constrains service planning and expansion, and many organisations rely on a patchwork of short-term grants. Several described ‘funding cliffs’ where multiple streams end simultaneously, creating a risk to

continuity. (*'We face a funding cliff next year... Multi-year grants would give us breathing space to plan properly.'*, said one grantee.)

- **Staff Capacity (53%)**: Over half of services face challenges due to understaffing, often linked to over-reliance on part-time staff or volunteers. This affects organisational resilience and limits service delivery.
- **Communications and Outreach (38%)**: A major barrier to visibility and participation. Services reported struggling to engage new older people, particularly men, LGBTQ+ individuals, or digitally excluded groups.
- **Recruiting Volunteers (31%)**: Volunteer shortages are widespread, affecting consistency, sustainability, and safeguarding. Training and retention require significant investment.
- **Access to Premises (22%)**: Some groups cited challenges in accessing affordable, accessible, or stable venues for their activities.
- **Other Notable Challenges**:
 - Digital skills and infrastructure gaps
 - Monitoring and evaluation capacity
 - Difficulty recruiting specialised staff (e.g., nutritionists, therapists)

The data reflects a triple squeeze (funding, staffing, and outreach), which collectively undermines sustainability and reach. These pressures are particularly acute for small, community-led services that depend heavily on volunteer capacity and have limited back-office capabilities.

- **Forward Priorities: Isolation, Mental Health, and Affordable Food Top the List of Needs for Older People**

The data reveals a consistent picture of intersecting and compounding challenges affecting older residents in Southwark. Social isolation emerged as the most frequently cited concern, followed by mental health and affordability-related needs. These priorities suggest that older people require not only basic support but also holistic, meaningful engagement to age with dignity and agency.

- **Reducing isolation** was the most widely cited priority, mentioned by **89% (40/45)**. It is seen as a root issue that affects wellbeing, participation, and access to other services.
- **Mental health and wellbeing** was selected by **73% (33/45)**. Often linked to isolation, it reflects concerns around depression, anxiety, bereavement, and emotional resilience in later life.
- **Affordable activities or food** appeared in **44% (20/45)**. This points to the need for cost-accessible engagement.
- **Mobility and accessibility** was cited by **31% (14/45)**. Challenges include physical access to services, lack of step-free venues, and transport barriers, especially for those with long-term conditions.
- **Financial support** was identified by **24% (11/45)**, often related to housing, fuel costs, and low pension income. Services flagged concerns about older people

struggling to access entitlements and indicated the need for welfare benefits advice services in light of the financial insecurity experienced by older people.

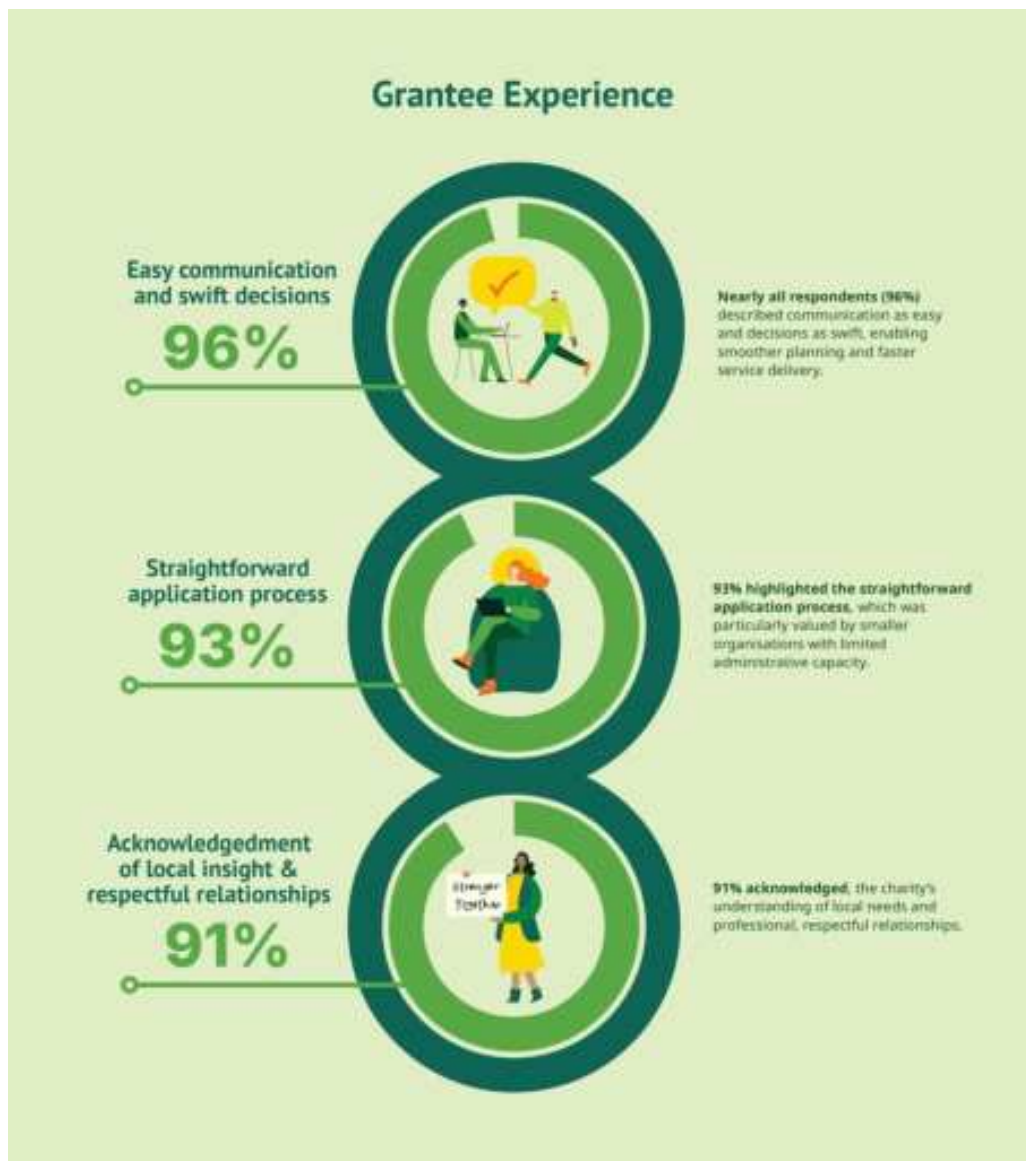
- **Digital access or support** was noted in ~20% of responses. This reflects ongoing digital exclusion from healthcare, benefits, and social connection.
- **Dementia support** was mentioned in ~25%. Needs include not only clinical care, but also inclusive, dementia-aware community activities.
- **Culturally relevant or language-specific support** appeared in ~13%. Services supporting older people from global majority backgrounds stressed the importance of bilingual staff, familiar food, and cultural understanding.

Isolation and mental health dominate the picture, followed by affordability, mobility, and access. The data points to the need for **integrated, inclusive, and culturally competent support** that addresses older people's practical and emotional needs together.

4.6 Southwark Charities' Role and Relationships with Grantees

Southwark Charities is seen by grantees as a **highly effective and trusted funder** operating locally. Its approach is described as **respectful, practical, and deeply grounded** in community understanding. The charity not only provides funding, but also is valued as a **relational partner**, particularly by smaller, volunteer-led organisations working with older people. Feedback suggests that Southwark Charities fills a critical space that national or more bureaucratic funders often miss.

- **Grantee Experience: A Clear, Respectful and Supportive Approach**



Grantees consistently praised their experience of working in partnership with Southwark Charities. In particular:

- **Nearly all respondents (96%)** described communication as **easy** and decisions as **swift**, enabling smoother planning and faster service delivery.
- **93%** highlighted the **straightforward application process**, which was particularly valued by smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity.
- **91%** acknowledged the charity's **understanding of local needs** and **professional, respectful relationships**.

Grantees' qualitative feedback aligns with these features

'We appreciate being able to have honest conversations. It never feels like we're being judged.'

'Their quick turnaround meant we could get our winter project up and running without delays.'

'It's the only grant we apply for that doesn't feel like a mountain to climb.'

'They treat us like partners, not just applicants.'

'Having a funder that actually checks in, listens, and remembers us. It makes a big difference.'

In terms of the **Flexi-Grant Platform**, the majority of respondents (78%) described the **Flexi-Grant system** as 'very easy to use'.

- **Local Strengths: Responsiveness, Trust and Deep Community Roots**

In addition to positive process experiences, grantees emphasised the unique benefits of working with a **local, community-rooted funder**:

- **93%** agreed Southwark Charities has a **better understanding of local needs** and is **known and trusted** by community organisations.
- **89%** found the charity **easier to access or communicate with**, compared to larger funders.
- **84%** praised their **flexibility and responsiveness**, especially when projects needed to adapt or respond to changing community needs.

Grantees' words reveal more details about their experience:

'They're embedded here. You don't need to explain the basics of what's going on in Southwark.'

'It's rare to be able to email a funder and get a helpful reply the same day.'

'When we had to tweak our activities for safeguarding reasons, they were understanding and helpful.'

5. Case Studies

Flashy Wings Ministry: A Sanctuary of Sisterhood and Strength

Flashy Wings Ministry, led by Queen Ekuerhare, is a small but highly impactful grassroots organisation that has been providing a safe, empowering, and culturally affirming space for Black women in Southwark since 2018.

Within the organisation, the Golden Age project specifically supports around 40–50 women aged 55+ each year and is run by a dedicated team of four core volunteers. Flashy Wings Ministry as a whole has a wider network of nine key volunteers and over 80 members. Southwark Charities' grant is the main source of financial support for the Golden Age project.

Participants of the project often face multiple and intersecting challenges: isolation, domestic abuse, immigration stress, economic hardship, and health inequalities. Flashy Wings Ministry is particularly vital for women who cannot access other services. As one woman put it:

'It's so expensive in this area. Everything takes money. If you have no money, then you are isolated. But this is free, and the support is so good. The check-ins, the welcome. It's magic!'



Who They Support and Why It Matters

Monthly gatherings usually begin with an inspirational talk and move into a facilitated group conversation. These discussions frequently expand to life experiences, moments of joy, and mutual support, creating a strong peer-to-peer network. Women share solicitor contacts, health advice, and emotional encouragement alongside stories of resilience.

According to the service users, who had experienced long-term isolation, there is no other free, culturally safe space for Black women in the area, which makes Flashy Wings a critical lifeline. The group also offers emotional and cultural safety, providing a respectful, non-judgmental environment where every voice matters.

One participant shared her empowerment journey in detail,

'After several group meetings, I found the courage to call the police about my abusive husband. Before this, I didn't think I had the right to speak.'

Another reflected:

'I worked for 15 years and never once spoke publicly. But here, I've spoken every single month. I finally believe I have something to say.'



Photos from the monthly service: shared lunch and facilitated discussion. Consent obtained from individuals in the photo.



Group photo of service users and key volunteers. Consent obtained from all individuals in the photo.

Outcomes

Southwark Charities' funding ensures the group remains free, local, and consistent, essential for building trust and community stability. The outcomes are significant:

- **Confidence and voice** – Many women report speaking up in public for the first time.
- **Safety and empowerment** – Participants have taken steps to leave abusive relationships.
- **Reduced isolation** – Members build new friendships and support networks.
- **Improved well-being** – Women describe feeling uplifted, motivated, and valued.

Testimonials capture the transformation:

'I came to this country and felt like I had no one. This circle became my family. Every friend I have now, every bit of confidence I have, started here.'

'Here, I forget my pain. I forgot my illness. I feel good in my body and in my soul.'

'A husband once emailed the director asking her to stop his wife from attending. "She's started talking and I don't like it."'

These changes are not temporary. Women consistently return, often for years, sustaining relationships that extend far beyond the monthly meetings.



Organisational Strengths

Flashy Wings' impact is rooted in:

- **Deep trust and community bonds** – Members feel safe to share their challenges and celebrate successes.
- **Cost-efficiency** – The group achieves high impact with minimal resources. As Director Queen notes: *'Our team, which is all women, has experience managing small budgets across different areas, and we are very careful with money.'*
- **Mutual-aid network** – Women help each other beyond the group, offering practical and emotional support.
- **Non-hierarchical approach** – Every woman's voice is valued equally, promoting shared leadership.



Founder and Chief Executive, Queen, her leadership encompasses not only strategic oversight but also the substantial physical and emotional labour inherent in establishing and sustaining a community organisation.

As shared by the members:

'This space gives me a reason to get out of bed.'

'When I'm here, I don't just talk. I grow. I reflect. I listen. I lead.'

Challenges and Capacity Gaps

Despite its strong track record, Flashy Wings faces ongoing challenges:

- Heavy reliance on Southwark Charities as its main funder.
- No dedicated fundraising staff or long-term strategy.
- Limited resources for administration and venue security.
- Structural underfunding of BAME women's organisations despite proven impact.

Key Insights

Flashy Wings demonstrates how a relatively modest grant can generate significant, multi-layered benefits, especially when funding is flexible and relationship-based. For many attendees, this is the only place they feel culturally safe, respected, and heard. Sustaining and scaling such work would require stable, multi-year investment, capacity-building support, and recognition of the value that small, grassroots groups bring to tackling inequality.

Latin Ageing UK: Empowering Older Latin American People in Southwark

Latin Ageing UK is a grassroots organisation dedicated to supporting older Latin American residents (55+) in Southwark who face isolation, health inequalities, the loss of cultural connection and, for some, the lasting impacts of refugee trauma. The group was founded and is led by Patricia, a woman from the global majority, whose personal experience of migration, health and community work underpins the project's ethos.

The group has a membership of around 38 people, with 15–20 attending weekly sessions. These are run with remarkable continuity, with members even arranging personal commitments and holidays to avoid missing them. Sessions are entirely free to access, removing a key barrier for older people on low incomes. Activities include bilingual health talks, gentle physical activities such as stretching, music and singing, culturally relevant herbal and tea workshops, and shared social time with Latin food. Patricia and the volunteer team make sure the space is warm and inclusive, reflecting Latin cultural traditions of hospitality and mutual care.

Latin Ageing UK operates with 4–5 active volunteers, all of them have Latin American heritages and half of them are older themselves. The organisation is entirely funded by Southwark Charities, making this relationship pivotal to its sustainability.





One of the weekly workshops on the theme of gardening and tea tasting. Service users made their own tea. Consent obtained.



One of the social media posts showcasing the diversity of activities. Consent was obtained from all individuals pictured.

Impacts and Outcomes

Latin Ageing UK plays a vital role in improving the mental, physical, and social well-being of older Latin American residents. Members describe the group as very important, a place where they feel seen, valued, and able to thrive.

- **Improved Mental Wellbeing & Confidence**

Regular participation fosters belonging, reduces loneliness, and builds self-esteem. As one member said:

'This group gives me a reason to get out of my flat. When I'm here, I feel alive.'

Others highlight how the group has helped them speak up and participate more actively in community life:

'Before, I stayed at home with no one to talk to. Now, I have friends, I laugh, I dance, I feel part of something again.'

- **Physical Health & Active Living**

Weekly gentle activities help maintain mobility, reduce stress, and encourage healthier lifestyles. Bilingual health workshops demystify NHS processes and empower members to seek timely medical care.

'I didn't know where to go for help with my diabetes. Here, I learned who to speak to, and they even helped me make the appointment.'

- **Cultural Belonging & Emotional Safety**

Members feel the space reflects and respects their cultural identities. The mix of music, food, and the Latin American Spanish language creates an environment of trust where people can open up about challenges.

'I can be myself here. I speak my language, share my culture, and no one judges me.'

- **Peer Support & Mutual Aid**

The group functions as an informal mutual aid network, where members share knowledge, signpost each other to services, and offer emotional support.

- **Advocacy Success**

Members take pride in their role in influencing local decision-making. Through advocacy, they successfully secured the inclusion of Latin American ethnicity in local Healthwatch surveys. This was a significant moment of recognition for the community.

As said by the director Patricia, *'We Latin American groups made contributions to the UK society. We should be seen.'*

Micro & Volunteer-Run

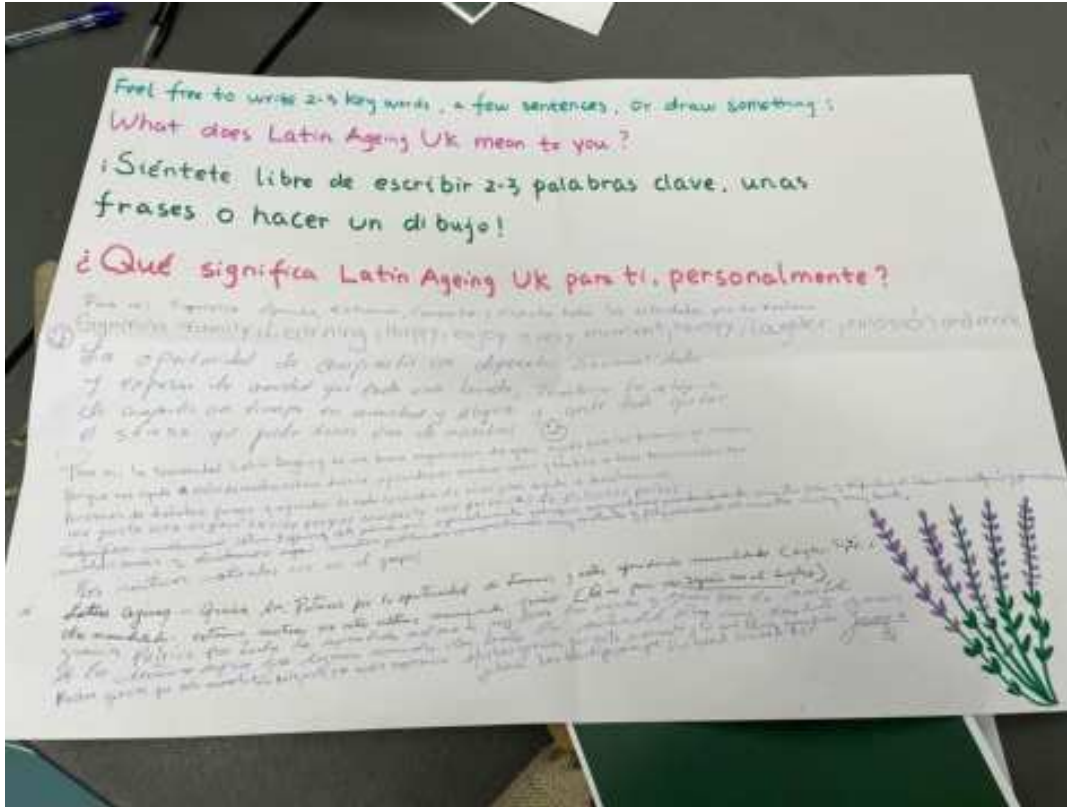
A small-scale initiative led entirely by volunteers (including the founder). Operates on a shoestring budget but with high dedication.

Culturally Specific

Created **by and for** the Latin American community. Activities, language, and food are all rooted in Latin American culture, ensuring participants feel at home.

Holistic & Consistent

Offers a non-clinical, holistic approach to healthy ageing – addressing mind, body, and community. Sessions run **weekly without fail**, providing stability and continuity.



Feedback written by service users.

Organisational Strengths

- **Cultural Relevance** – Sessions are grounded in Latin American traditions, music, and food, creating familiarity and comfort for participants.
- **Continuity & Commitment** – Weekly sessions run reliably, with members prioritising attendance.
- **Volunteer-led Energy** – Older volunteers bring empathy, lived experience, and leadership.
- **Free, Accessible Service** – No financial barrier to participation, which is rare in the local area.
- **Trusted Relationships** – Patricia's leadership and deep cultural understanding build strong bonds of trust.



Challenges and Forward Priorities

While Latin Ageing UK delivers a strong, consistent impact, it faces significant sustainability risks:

- **Funding Dependence** – Future sustainability would benefit from capacity-building support in fundraising and diversification.
- **Representation & Outreach** – There is scope to engage more isolated Latin American residents who are not yet aware of the group's existence.

Key Insights

Latin Ageing UK demonstrates how culturally specific, grassroots services can deliver disproportionate value for small investments. With a sole grant from Southwark Charities, it sustains a consistent, high-quality programme that addresses multiple intersecting needs: isolation, health, cultural belonging, and confidence-building. The model is cost-efficient, trusted, and adaptable but its dependence on a single funder leaves it vulnerable.

Its success rests on the trust and relevance it has built within its community, an asset that, with strategic investment, could be further leveraged to reach more of Southwark's diverse older residents.

Blackfriars Settlement: Friendship, Purpose, and Practical Support

Blackfriars Settlement is a long-standing community anchor in Southwark, providing life-changing support for older residents. These services aim to improve mental and physical wellbeing, reduce loneliness, and create meaningful opportunities for connection, creativity, and personal growth.

From 2023–24, **441 members** were supported through Positive Ageing activities, including **51 new club members**. Of these, **293 people** regularly attended sessions, resulting in an impressive **10,419 attendances** across the year. The organisation also supported **80 befriended members**. In terms of service users, Blackfriars Settlement has a notably higher proportion of male members compared to the average among grantees, where women are typically the majority, thanks to targeted outreach efforts in recent years.

The programme is powered by a significant volunteer force : **82 volunteers** plus **452 corporate volunteers**, collectively contributing **7,032 volunteering hours**. This scale of engagement illustrates the deep community roots and capacity Blackfriars Settlement has cultivated over time.

Activities run weekly with strong continuity, providing a reliable and welcoming space for members. While many services are free, a small charge applies to some activities and community meals. This approach supports members' dignity and choice while contributing to the programme's financial sustainability. By offering a balance of free and paid activities, the charity maintains accessibility for all while securing its long-term future. Its flexible, relationship-based approach also enables it to adapt to members' evolving needs and respond to local changes, including health inequalities, rising living costs, regeneration, and the closure of community services.

Activities and Delivery

Blackfriars Settlement offers a **broad menu of activities**, ensuring there is something for everyone:

- **Creative sessions** – art, music, and drama, fostering self-expression and joy.
- **Health and wellbeing** – gentle exercise, dance, and strength and balance to support physical mobility.
- **Social and cultural activities** – day trips, themed celebrations, cultural sharing events, and communal meals.
- **Learning opportunities** – talks, IT skills sessions, and intergenerational exchanges with local schools and younger volunteers.
- **Befriending scheme** – trained volunteers provide one-to-one social contact for isolated members, often developing deep, lasting friendships.
- **Bespoke Peer Groups** – Frank's Men's Club and Crusoe Visually impaired group

Unlike other organisations that adopt a mobile service model or deliver activities across multiple venues, each with its own benefits, Blackfriars Settlement brings a wide range of services together under one roof. This integrated approach allows members to move freely between different sections and explore varied activities within the same space, making services more accessible and fostering a stronger sense of belonging and community.

Volunteers play a vital role, not just in delivery but also in **shaping the atmosphere** of welcome and belonging. Many volunteers are older people themselves, gaining purpose and improved wellbeing from their roles. As one volunteer reflected:

'This isn't just about helping others. I've gained confidence, friends, and it helped me to cope with some really difficult times.'

Behind these vibrant programmes and the well-coordinated volunteer system is a small, dedicated, women-led team whose care and commitment are at the heart of Blackfriars Settlement's achievements. Tina, Siggy, Andrea, Ale, and Crystal bring exceptional skill, warmth, and attention to detail to everything they do, creating an atmosphere of trust and belonging. Tina, Manager of Positive Ageing Services, has been with Blackfriars Settlement for over 30 years, celebrating countless Christmases and life milestones alongside members. The team takes time to listen to members' stories and adapt services to meet their changing needs. This culture of care and connection is central to sustaining high attendance and improving members' wellbeing, transforming the centre into a place that truly matters in people's lives.

Consistent Emotional Support

Regular activities with familiar faces provide stability, comfort, and a sense of belonging for seniors who might otherwise be isolated.

Creative & Inclusive Activities

Art, music, crafts, exercise and tech support are tailored to participants' interests and abilities – ensuring everyone can engage meaningfully.

Volunteer-Powered Community

Service users often become volunteers themselves. This peer-led approach empowers older adults to help run programmes (like cooking meals or leading clubs) and support each other.

Long-Term Impact

Many members have attended for years (some for over a decade), describing Blackfriars as "lifesaving" and "like family" – highlighting its life-changing role.



A member of the visually impaired group attending a knitting workshop. Consent obtained.



Festival celebration. Consent obtained.



Music performance by members of the visually impaired group at Blackfriars Settlement. Consent obtained.

Impacts and Outcomes

The impact of Blackfriars Settlement's Positive Ageing programme is wide-ranging and well-documented through surveys, monitoring, and participant stories.

- **Improved well-being and reduced loneliness**

91% of surveyed participants reported improved mental wellbeing or confidence (Survey conducted by Blackfriars Settlement 2023-24). Members emphasised the life-affirming impact of simply having a place to go where they are valued:

'Coming here changed my life. I was lonely and anxious, now I feel part of a family.'

- **Increased physical activity and mobility**

Health-focused sessions encourage regular, gentle movement in a safe, supportive setting. Members reported feeling fitter, more confident in their balance, and more motivated to stay active.

- **Skill development and personal growth**

From learning to use email to trying art for the first time, members build skills that increase independence and self-esteem.

'I'm doing things I never thought I could. It's not just the skills, it's believing in myself again.'

- **Strong volunteer engagement**

The scale of volunteer involvement demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the programme's impact. Volunteers report gains in confidence, purpose, and social connection.

- **A safe and inclusive environment**

The centre is widely regarded as a culturally respectful, non-judgemental space, welcoming people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Participants repeatedly described it as *'life-saving,' 'joyful,'* and *'a second home.'*



Volunteers serving lunch meals. Consent obtained.

Challenges and Forward Priorities

Despite its strengths, the Blackfriars Settlement faces challenges common to community organisations:

- **Sustainability of funding** – Currently heavily reliant on core funders, without dedicated fundraising staff.
- **Transport barriers** – Particularly for those with mobility issues; limited Dial-a-Ride availability remains a persistent obstacle.
- **Capacity for growth** — Demand for support continues to rise due to the cost of living crisis, local regeneration, and the closure of community services. However, the programme’s ability to grow requires additional resources.



One of the weekly art workshops. Consent obtained.

Key Insights

Blackfriars Settlement’s services offer a **high-impact, high-value model** for supporting older residents. The combination of a welcoming, culturally respectful environment, a diverse range of activities, a strong volunteer infrastructure, and a caring culture nurtured by a small, dedicated

team creates a powerful multiplier effect, improving wellbeing for both participants and volunteers while building a more connected, resilient community. Its targeted outreach efforts have successfully engaged a higher proportion of male members than the average among similar services. The organisation's one-building delivery model also makes activities more accessible for many members and fosters a stronger sense of belonging.

Flexible, multi-year funding paired with capacity-building support would enable Blackfriars Settlement to sustain and grow this proven approach, ensuring that more older Southwark residents can benefit from its life-changing activities, vibrant community culture, and volunteering opportunities.

Clinical Health Checks: Culturally Grounded, Life-Changing Community Health in Peckham

Clinical Health Checks is a small-scale, volunteer-led community health initiative in Peckham, South London, offering free weekly health checks every Saturday afternoon. It serves a predominantly Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) population aged 55 and over, many of whom face multiple, overlapping barriers to healthcare.

Led by nurse Temi, run by a qualified Black African-led volunteer team of just 4–8 members and hosted in a local church, the initiative welcomed **618 regular users in 2024–2025**. It offers culturally tailored preventative healthcare to digitally excluded and medically underserved residents. Many users may avoid formal healthcare spaces due to trauma, immigration or legal status concerns, lack of digital access, language barriers, or previous negative experiences with the NHS.

The local priest described the service as '*a lake in a desert*', recognising it as a rare, essential service meeting health needs not addressed elsewhere.



Photo of the core delivery team. Consent obtained.

The Model & Approach

Clinical Health Checks operates as a free, no-registration, walk-in service every Saturday afternoon in a trusted church setting. The location feels safe and familiar for local residents, encouraging participation from those who might not otherwise engage with healthcare.

Health checks and advice are adapted to participants' cultural dietary norms, and volunteers explain NHS terminology in clear, relatable terms. As one woman with diabetes shared:

'The NHS advice never seemed made for me. Here, they explain it with my food [African diet] in mind. I didn't have to give up the dishes I love. I just learned to make them healthier.'

The team creatively engages participants, helping to reduce psychological stress around managing their health. Many participants first come for tea and conversation before trying a health check. This gentle pathway helps them feel at ease, reducing anxiety about medical settings. A male participant noted:

'Men in my community don't talk about health, let alone get checked. Here, I could do it quietly, without feeling judged.'

The initiative also serves as a bridge to the NHS, helping people prepare for GP appointments, interpret test results, and connect with other services.

The service also proves to be empowering for the volunteers, creating opportunities for personal growth and long-term impact. Volunteers gain confidence, practical skills, and qualifications that can lead to paid employment. One recent migrant, with no previous health background, trained through the programme and now works in a pharmacy while continuing to volunteer weekly. Some volunteers who have since qualified and found jobs in other areas still travel back to Peckham to serve the community they care deeply about.



The delivery team offering health checks to local residents. Consent obtained.

Impact & Outcomes

- **Improved health monitoring & early detection**

Regular checks have led to early identification of conditions such as high blood pressure and pre-diabetes, allowing timely NHS intervention. One participant credited the team with helping her act early to reverse pre-diabetic indicators through personalised advice and ongoing encouragement.

- **Increased confidence & autonomy**

Participants feel more in control of their health. A woman with high blood sugar and blood clots said: *'This is the only place I can check my blood pressure every week. I get the records, the explanations, and I leave knowing I can handle my health.'*

- **Improved mental wellbeing & reduced isolation**

The culturally sensitive, welcoming approach fosters belonging. Several attendees described the emotional difference compared to NHS visits:

'There [NHS clinics], it's quick and cold. Here, they smile, make tea, and actually listen. I feel like part of a community.'

- **Volunteer skills & pathways to work**

The initiative supports not only participants but also its volunteers, who have gained qualifications, entered health-related careers, and strengthened community leadership.

- **Preventative value for the community**

By promoting early detection and consistent monitoring, Clinical Health Checks helps prevent serious illness and reduce future strain on NHS services. This benefits not just individual participants but the wider health system.

- **Tackling health inequalities and exclusion**

Clinical Health Checks plays a vital role in reaching residents who are often excluded from mainstream healthcare due to a variety of reasons mentioned above. By making healthcare accessible to those most likely to be left behind, the initiative actively reduces health inequalities in Peckham and surrounding areas.



Health check services are often paired with festival celebrations or social activities. Consent obtained.

Challenges & future needs

The initiative is entirely reliant on a single grant from Southwark Charities and in-kind support from the church (venue) and the small volunteer team. This funding model leaves it vulnerable to changes in donor priorities. The small volunteer team operates at capacity, and without resources for ongoing training, recruitment, and strategic planning, volunteer fatigue is a real risk. Rising health inequalities in the area are increasing demand, which could soon outpace capacity.

Key Insights

Clinical Health Checks delivers a considerably high return on a modest investment, combining measurable health improvements with reduced isolation and stronger community connections. Its culturally grounded, community-led approach effectively reaches residents the NHS struggles to engage, while also equipping local volunteers with skills and pathways into work. Additional funding would allow the initiative to train more volunteers, expand outreach, and strengthen NHS partnerships, scaling a proven, preventative model that eases pressure on mainstream services while empowering the community it serves.

Link Age Southwark: The Volunteer-Powered Model Bringing Joy and Connection to Southwark’s Oldest Residents

Link Age Southwark is a long-standing community charity, established in the mid-1990s, that helps older people stay socially connected and live well. It is now one of the largest local organisations of its kind, connecting communities to alleviate loneliness and support independent living.

In 2024-25, the charity supported **805 older people** with the help of **326 volunteers**, maintaining **186 befriending matches**, providing expert **information and support to 188 people** and delivering **170 practical tasks**. **Over half of its service users (53%) are aged 80+, with the average age being 83**, which is a demographic often excluded elsewhere.

Its varied programme includes befriending visits, group activities, exercise and wellbeing sessions, arts and crafts, lunches, seasonal events, practical support (such as gardening and IT help), an information and support service, and newsletters with local information. This variety ensures there is something for everyone, from highly social group settings to one-to-one companionship at home.



A storytelling photoshoot showcasing Link Age Southwark’s Befriending Services. Consent obtained. Photo credit: @Nick Dolding.

The Model & Approach

Link Age Southwark's model is **community-driven, volunteer-powered, and relationship-based**, built around several core features:

- **Volunteer-Led Delivery** – Volunteers provide befriending, practical help, and activity support, building trust and empathy through consistent contact.
- **Tailored Support for Older People** – Activities and services are designed to include those aged 80+, many with dementia or complex health needs.
- **Barrier-Aware Access** – A few volunteer drivers, dial-a-ride support, taxi card, and accessible venues ensure that physical geography and transport challenges do not exclude participants.
- **Dementia-Inclusive Programming** – Activities, from singing to craft, are structured to allow participation at multiple levels, whether verbal, non-verbal, mobile, or using mobility aids.

A typical dementia-inclusive session, such as the weekly singing group, begins with gentle warm-ups and progresses to familiar songs across genres, encouraging both movement and memory. Instruments are shared so everyone can contribute, and volunteers discreetly re-engage anyone who becomes distracted. The tone is warm, humorous, and inclusive. Participants leave visibly uplifted, chatting and smiling as they head home.

'I just think about this weekly activity every day. I really look forward to Thursday morning. I love it because it's so good.' – Participant in his 80s

Another sizable core service at Link Age Southwark is the Befriending Programme, which offers one-to-one, consistent companionship for older people in their own homes. Many of the intergenerational friendships formed through this service are deeply meaningful and transformative for both the older person and the volunteer. For example, one local older resident, who became housebound following a significant stroke, has been matched with a volunteer from the US for weekly visits over the past year. These visits have had a significant positive impact on the older person's wellbeing, offering emotional support, renewed joy, and a sense of connection. Their conversations flow from family life and local news to world events, creating a warm and supportive space where both feel heard and connected. As highlighted by the service user (*extracted from Link Age Southwark Impact Report 2024/25*):

'I have changed. I used to just sit and wait on Saturdays. Now I chat away [with my friend]. ... I so enjoy the visits. They give me a lift each time.'

In addition to the singing groups and befriending services, the charity's offer is broad: gentle exercise, yoga, seated dance, games hour, warm space, friends for lunch, meditation, reading group, peer social group, seasonal events, online carers' group, and one-to-one support. This variety helps sustain engagement for participants with different interests, abilities, and energy levels.



One of the social gaming sessions. Consent obtained. Photo credit: @coopuk.

Impact & Outcomes

- **Reduced Social Isolation**

Many members previously spent most days alone, some without meaningful contact for weeks. After joining, they develop friendships and look forward to regular engagement.

'A friend from church introduced me to the group after I lost my job. Even on difficult days, walking to the session reduces my pain from inactivity and gives me something to look forward to.' – Participant in her 70s

- **Restored Purpose & Routine**

Weekly activities provide structure, which participants say helps them get dressed, and look forward to their week.

- **Creative & Cognitive Stimulation**

Arts and singing sessions rekindle creativity, stimulate memory, and help those with dementia re-engage.

'He comes alive when singing the old songs. It's like his usual limitations fall away.' – Family member of a participant with dementia

- **Emotional Uplift**

Sessions are often described as the happiest time of the week. Participants leave feeling lighter, more positive, and more connected.

'I can't hear all the words, but I feel the warmth.' – Nearly 90-year-old participant who is almost deaf

- **Breaking Extreme Isolation**

For some living with dementia or visual impairment, TV and radio no longer provide comfort. The charity provides real human connection that changes the tone of their entire week. In addition, sustained participation among those aged 90, a group often excluded from community activities, demonstrates strong inclusion.



An active member who enjoys the atmosphere at Link Age Southwark. Consent obtained. Photo credit: @Nick Dolding.

Challenges & Future Needs

- **High Support Needs**

The concentration of very elderly participants means many require dementia-trained volunteers, mobility support, and careful activity adaptation. This demands ongoing training and additional support.

- **Hidden Isolation**

There remain 'unreached' older people in Southwark who are unaware of or hesitant to join services. Expanding referral networks and targeted outreach would be beneficial.

- **Transport & Accessibility**

Volunteer drivers are vital but limited. There are some alternatives, such as Dial-A-Ride; however, the timings do not always work for groups. Without transport, homebound seniors cannot participate in events and groups.

Key Insights

Link Age Southwark delivers high social impact with remarkable cost efficiency through its volunteer-powered model. Its rare ability to sustain engagement among those aged 80+, many with complex health needs, makes it a vital asset in the local health and wellbeing ecosystem. By reducing loneliness, fostering routine, stimulating creativity, and improving accessibility, the charity both transforms individual lives and eases pressure on statutory services. With targeted investment in transport, outreach, and specialist training, it could expand its reach, connect with 'hidden' seniors, and ensure that no older person in Southwark faces isolation without support.

The Dockland Settlements: A Community Anchor in a Changing Neighbourhood

The Dockland Settlements is a small but vital community organisation located in the Dockland area of Southwark, a geographically isolated part of the borough that has undergone rapid regeneration. While regeneration has brought new buildings and residents, it has also caused displacement, fractured long-standing social ties, and heightened isolation for older residents.

The centre serves intergenerational needs, with Thursday and Friday programmes dedicated to older adults (55+). Around **150 older people** take part each year, supported by a small team of staff and **10 active volunteers**. Its facilities, including a small meeting room, a dance studio, a large sports hall, a kitchen, a café (run by Bosco), and a 5-a-side astroturf football pitch, make it a unique local asset and a welcoming, fully accessible hub for people with varying physical and cognitive abilities.

Programmes for older people were almost entirely funded by Southwark Charities, whose support for the centre's space has unlocked opportunities for many other collaborations and services. These include partnerships with Ballers Academy, Citizens Advice, food bank providers, and digital literacy trainers.



One of the weekly gentle exercise classes. Consent obtained.

The Model & Approach

The Dockland Settlements provides **a stable weekly rhythm** in a community where change and uncertainty can be disorientating. Activities are designed to be inclusive, free, and adaptable to different needs and abilities.

Programme Highlights:

- **Thursdays – 'Constant Day':** Chair-based exercise, tea/coffee and conversation, digital training, lunch service, food bank (Delivered by Rotherhithe community kitchen), warm hub/lounge, and Citizens Advice drop-in. Volunteers provide one-to-one assistance.
- **Fridays – 'Sports Day'** (Delivered by Ballers Academy): Tea and newspaper social, followed by adapted walking sports such as walking football, skittles, bowling, and basketball.
- **Other weekly activities:** Adult art groups, intergenerational programmes, pensioner assistance, and a welcoming café employing people with special needs.

Delivery Model: Sessions are informal, friendly, and built around **participation at all levels**, whether that's actively taking part in a sport, chatting over tea, or helping set up equipment. Activities are designed to support:

- **Physical health** (gentle exercise, balance, coordination)
- **Cognitive stimulation** (learning game strategies, problem-solving, memory recall)
- **Social connection** (shared meals, group chats, peer encouragement)

Staff provide personalised encouragement and reminders for participants with dementia or memory loss, and volunteers help ensure no one is left out. One of the service users who have participated in the programme for more than 10 years, said

'It is very clear for us. Friday is sports day. We stick to it and we do exercises together.'

The café and lounge space double as social anchors where people swap recipes, share tips for staying active, and offer mutual support.



An art session. Consent obtained.

Impact & Outcomes

The Dockland Settlements has developed a **community care model** that meets people where they are and supports growth in confidence, autonomy, and wellbeing.

Key Outcomes:

- **Reduced isolation** – Many attendees previously stayed home most days; now they have a structured schedule to come out regularly.
- **Improved physical and mental health** – Gentle, regular exercise supports strength, balance, and mood.
- **Stronger local friendships** – Weekly contact nurtures trust, humour, and solidarity.
- **Enhanced cognitive stimulation** – Games involve strategy, coordination, and memory, keeping minds engaged.
- **Sense of pride and ownership** – Participants actively shape sessions and support one another.

Participant voices:

'Before discovering the Dockland Settlements, I rarely left the flat and struggled to meet people in the area. Now, I look forward to Thursdays and Fridays.'

'These games are actually fun. They're not too hard, but they get you moving, thinking, laughing. It's something I look forward to. This centre keeps me going.'

'At first, I didn't think I'd fit in... But the games, the jokes, the way we help each other. It's great. Even when I'm quiet, I still feel like I belong.'

The sports day group, now running for over 10 years, exemplifies this impact: members know each other's routines, notice absences, and share encouragement. For some, like the 93-year-old who continued attending after his wife's passing, it provides essential emotional support and a sense of continuity.



One of the weekly gentle exercise classes. Consent obtained.

Challenges & Future Needs

Despite its successes, the Dockland Settlements faces several structural challenges.

- **Funding insecurity**
Current older people's programmes rely almost entirely on Southwark Charities' support, which limits long-term planning and overall sustainability.
- **Volunteer dependency**
Delivery is heavily volunteer-led, and additional paid staff are needed to coordinate the growing kitchen and warm hub activities.
- **Team capacity and expertise**
The team is relatively new to older people's work and would benefit from shared learning with other organisations to strengthen programme quality.

- **Accessibility barriers**

- Scheduling conflicts — Some participants cannot attend certain events (e.g., sports day) due to Friday hospital appointments. Introducing an additional sports day or coordinating schedules with the local GP could be considered.
- Transport challenges — Limited transport options make it harder for older adults to reach the centre.

- **Local regeneration pressures**

Ongoing regeneration is reshaping local demographics, creating new layers of isolation for long-term residents. Strengthening outreach work will require additional resources.

Key Insights

The Dockland Settlements demonstrates how a small, well-rooted organisation can deliver big impact in a rapidly changing urban landscape. Its physical space is a catalyst for partnerships, a safe haven for vulnerable residents, and a hub of opportunity that brings together services ranging from sports and art to digital literacy and Citizens Advice. By investing in staffing capacity and securing long-term funding, funders can strengthen this anchor institution's ability to adapt and expand its reach.

Low-cost, high-impact activities like walking sports and shared meals have a measurable effect on physical health, mental wellbeing, and social cohesion, while fostering a sense of belonging and pride among participants. With modest additional resources for coordination, training, and peer learning, the Dockland Settlements could extend its proven model to benefit more residents, preserving community connection and resilience in the face of ongoing regeneration pressures.

6. Strategic Recommendations

These recommendations draw on the evaluation's findings, case studies, and learning from grantees' experiences. They aim to strengthen the sustainability, equity, and impact of Southwark Charities' grants programme while positioning the charity for the planned 2028 grants expansion.

A. Recommendations for Southwark Charities (2028 Grants Expansion)

1. Strengthen organisational capacity and secure continuity of essential services

Many funded organisations are key or sole providers in their area, yet many are small, locally rooted, and face significant pressures in sustaining services. To ensure continuity and sustainability, Southwark Charities could invest in targeted capacity-building support over the long term, strengthening fundraising, volunteer recruitment and coordination, digital systems, and monitoring tools. In the shorter term, supporting small organisations to manage practical challenges such as access to affordable venues and transport would ease operational pressures and improve service quality. Where essential services face a risk of disruption and no comparable alternatives exist, expanding multi-year funding or core grants for trusted anchor organisations would provide much-needed stability.

2. Prioritise funding for isolation, mental health, and affordable food

Isolation, mental health challenges, and food insecurity continue to have a significant impact on older residents in Southwark. While funding has already been invested in these areas, further strengthening and expanding support would enable services to tackle these issues more effectively, particularly through culturally relevant provision and targeted outreach to underserved groups.

3. Maintain Southwark Charities' relational and responsive funding approach

Grantees consistently value the charity's accessible application processes, fast decision-making, and respectful communication. Preserving these strengths, alongside regular site visits and check-ins, will help sustain trust and maintain local insight. Using evaluation evidence and emerging needs assessments to guide funding priorities will also position Southwark Charities as a leading place-based funder ahead of the 2028 expansion.

4. Support inclusive leadership and delivery

Over 80% of delivery teams and all six case study organisations are led by women, most from global majority backgrounds. While this reflects deep strengths in community care and trust, it also concentrates operational and emotional responsibilities within a small group, increasing risks of burnout. Recognising and valuing these contributions, alongside providing tailored

leadership development and exploring opportunities to diversify leadership pipelines, would strengthen organisational resilience and sustain community-led models.

B. Shared Learning from Older People's Organisations & Service Providers

5. Strengthen delivery models and workforce resilience

Flexible, locally rooted delivery formats, including language-specific sessions, mobile outreach, and seasonal events, have proved highly effective in meeting diverse needs. Sustaining this flexibility while promoting peer-led and community-owned approaches will help services remain responsive as priorities evolve. At the same time, investing in succession planning, knowledge transfer, and intergenerational volunteering models will strengthen workforce resilience and reduce dependency on individual leaders and older volunteers.

6. Enhance volunteer pathways and inclusive leadership

Volunteering delivers significant value, both for community outcomes and for volunteers' own confidence, purpose, and wellbeing. Supporting clear pathways from service user to peer leader, sharing effective volunteer training and recognition practices, and promoting inclusive leadership development for women, global majority leaders, and other underserved groups will strengthen sustainability and reinforce the benefits of community-led delivery.

C. Opportunities for Collaboration Across the Wider Southwark Voluntary & Community Sector

7. Foster cross-sector collaboration to tackle complex needs

There is significant potential to improve support for older residents by pooling resources and expertise across organisations. Developing joint initiatives to address isolation, mental health, and food insecurity, alongside creating peer-learning forums to share good practice, would strengthen collective impact. Collaborating on inclusive programming would also better engage underserved groups, including LGBTQ+ elders, linguistic minorities, older carers, and global majority communities.

8. Strengthen shared evidence and borough-wide strategies

Older people's needs in Southwark are evolving rapidly due to policy changes, cost-of-living pressures, and demographic shifts. Strengthening data-sharing partnerships between funders, providers, and statutory bodies would improve understanding of unmet needs, while using collective evaluation findings to influence borough-wide strategies would help ensure older residents' priorities remain central to local decision-making.

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About the Research and Delivery Team

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About Sharp Raiser Limited

Sharp Raiser Limited is a women-led, global majority-led consultancy specialising in participatory research, evaluation, and creative engagement. Founded and directed by Jacqueline Crooks FRSL, the company brings together sociological rigour and literary innovation to deliver research that is both methodologically robust and narratively compelling. Our social research is led by Dr Rong A, a social researcher with extensive impact evaluation experience, designing culturally responsive approaches that centre community voices, particularly those of marginalised groups. Sonia Sehmi, the third member of our team, specialises in project management and community engagement where they relate to research. We work across the charity and arts sectors to help organisations measure meaningful outcomes and tell powerful stories of change.

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Jacqueline and Rong
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