

<b>Committees:</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Culture, Heritage and Libraries – For Information Community and Children’s Services – For Information	13/12/2021 17/12/2021
<b>Subject:</b> Bumping Spaces project at Barbican & Community Libraries	<b>Public</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b>	<b>2, 3 and 4</b>
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>If so, how much?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Andrew Carter, Director of Community and Children’s Services	<b>For Information</b>
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### Summary

In 2019, Barbican & Community Libraries successfully applied to the Engaging Libraries programme, a partnership with Carnegie UK, Wellcome Trust and the Wolfson Foundation. Funding was used to create the Bumping Spaces project at Barbican Library, with the aim of developing ways to encourage informal community interactions to address the issue of social isolation. In 2021, a pilot for the project, in partnership with local residents and library members, involved a series of engagement activities to raise awareness and encourage ideas on how to alleviate social isolation. Playful methods were used to break through the barriers to engagement. The project capitalised on the library’s unique role as a trusted and valued community asset.

This engagement work extended reach and connection to Barbican Library’s local community. A group of local volunteers helped deliver the project and this network will be developed in future. As part of the project, the idea of Community Champions was explored; one local resident has already volunteered to act as a champion and is also offering free mindfulness sessions in the library. Following on from the pilot, staff will now create a ‘bumping space’ in the library, using playful ways to encourage people to chat. We are also exploring co-producing projects with the local community – for example, a repair or hobby café.

## Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

## Main Report

### Background

1. In 2019 Barbican Library was one of 12 libraries from across the UK to win a place on the Engaging Libraries programme (a partnership with Carnegie UK, Wellcome Trust and the Wolfson Foundation) which supported public libraries to develop and deliver engagement projects on research in health, society and culture, in partnership with others.
2. Our project prioritised social isolation, a significant problem across society in general and within the City of London, and one which impacts negatively on physical and mental health. The project also supports the Corporate Strategy's aim of contributing "to a flourishing society", the Social Wellbeing Strategy, the Department of Community and Children's Services (DCCS) strategic priority of "community" and Barbican & Community Libraries' strategic aim of "supporting people to live their best lives".
3. The initial basis of the project was the 2015 commissioned research on social isolation in the City of London, conducted by Dr Green of Goldsmiths University. Dr Green highlighted the need for more 'bumping spaces' in our communities – sites that encourage the chance of informal interaction. Another source of inspiration was an *Evening Standard* article written by a young journalist about her love of the Barbican Library and its value as a community resource that uniquely facilitates interaction and connection across demographic divides.
4. Our excellent partner, MadeByPlay, is very experienced and passionate about using play to engage communities. We began working with them to develop the project in September 2019 with the intention of making Barbican Library the focal point for engagement activities and the creation of sustainable bumping spaces. The initial launch of the interactive elements was planned for early 2020 but the outbreak of the pandemic meant that all work on the project had to be paused.
5. The relaunch took place in September 2020 and was adapted to engage people confined to their homes during lockdown. Staff were assisted in this by local community representatives and volunteers who were eager to help. A total of 2,000 booklets were hand delivered to residents on the Barbican and Golden Lane estates, explaining the project and inviting them to participate by Zoom or email, and also offering participation by telephone and letter to include those who were not online.

6. Data sets from the correspondence, a survey and Zoom workshops were gathered and used to create playful installations which were displayed locally in Fortune Street Park and on the Barbican Estate. These installations gave some brief information about Dr Green's social isolation study and bumping spaces, and invited people to reflect on their own experience of community connection. Fun, interactive elements such as saying hello by using a polaroid camera to take a picture and fix it to the installation, drawing or commenting on what people noticed around them rather than staring at their phones, marking how long people have lived in the area on a timeline or taking a postcard to post through a neighbour's door to check in on them.
7. More than 500 people interacted with the installations over a period of two days. People told us that they thought this was an important topic and they were glad the library was encouraging awareness and reflection on it:

*"I love that the library is doing this – it's really badly needed."* – local resident

*"This has motivated me to be bolder in my community and be more observant of spaces to connect."* – local resident

## Current Position

8. In their summary report (Appendix 1), MadeByPlay made seven recommendations on how the library service can build on the Bumping Spaces pilot:
  - i. **Focus on the positive** – talk about building "community connections" rather than tackling "loneliness and isolation"
  - ii. **Bring the library to the community** – library staff should go out into the local community and "build bridges back to the library"
  - iii. **Lean into the library's voice** – people trust and feel goodwill towards the library 'brand', giving the library "licence to do powerful and surprising things that no one else can"
  - iv. **Build a long-term library 'bumping space'** – for more long-lasting change, something permanent is required
  - v. **Find ways to challenge people's perceptions of the library being a place for quiet** – giving people the confidence to talk to each other in some areas of the library
  - vi. **Give people casual invitations to share** – providing people with casual ways to share, rather than forced interactions (for example, 'chatting benches')
  - vii. **Partner with Community Champions** – engage with enthusiastic residents who are keen to help lead and shape projects like 'bumping spaces' in their local area or support related activities in the library.
9. Library staff are currently working through these recommendations to explore ways of creating informal connections between people at Barbican Library.

## Options

**10. Develop a Bumping Space within Barbican Library**

A suitable seating area has been identified within Barbican Library where small playful invitations can be placed to interact with other people sitting nearby. Staff are currently working on the design of these interactions, bearing in mind that people do not want them to feel forced.

**11. Build on existing services that already promote social connection**

Barbican Library staff already run several groups that help to connect people within the local community: games clubs, crafts groups and reading groups. We will concentrate on increasing people's awareness of these activities while building their connections within the local community.

**12. Develop a Community Champions offer**

A local resident who took part in the project is already engaged as a Community Champion and is running free mindfulness sessions in Barbican Library for the local community. We shall build on this and recruit other Community Champions who can offer their skills to build stronger connections within the local community to help combat isolation.

**13. Explore new opportunities for informal social interaction hosted by the library**

During the project, MadeByPlay discovered that one of the ways Barbican residents develop informal community connections is through sharing DIY tips. We will explore the option of offering a hobbies or repair café in the library, which would promote social cohesion and also ensure skill sharing and development across the community.

**14. Expand the project to include the community libraries**

Although the communities around Shoe Lane Library and Artizan Street Library & Community Centre differ from those close to Barbican Library, we know that social isolation affects people across all communities. We will therefore explore ways we can adapt the learning from this project to encourage more informal social interactions within our smaller community libraries.

**Proposals**

15. There are three proposals:

- i. We intend to focus our work initially on the first three options listed above i.e.
  - Develop a "Bumping Space" within Barbican Library;
  - Build on existing services that already promote social connection
  - Develop a Community Champions offer
- ii. These will have the best initial impact, building directly on the project outcomes and ensuring that we maintain the profile of the library within the community that participate in the project.

- iii. Once these are embedded within our working practices, we will look for collaborations and funding that could enable us to create a hobbies or repair café within the library. We do not currently have the resources to deliver this option.
- iv. We have already begun sharing the outcomes of the Bumping Spaces project across all three libraries. We will ensure that there is support for staff in the two community libraries to develop ways of recreating the project that are appropriate to the engagement of their communities.

## **Key Data**

16. N/A

## **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

### **Strategic implications**

17. The Bumping Spaces project is a direct response to the City's focus on tackling social isolation and loneliness. It is aligned to the City's commitment in the Corporate Plan to "a flourishing society", covering all four points under this heading. It is also aligned to the Social Wellbeing Strategy, the DCCS strategic priority "Community" and Barbican & Community Libraries' strategic aim of "supporting people to live their best lives".

18. Financial implications – N/A

19. Resource implications – N/A

20. Legal implications – N/A

21. Risk implications – N/A

22. Equalities implications – N/A

23. Climate implications – N/A

24. Security implications – N/A

## **Conclusion**

25. Although the launch of the project was hampered by the pandemic and ensuing restrictions on the type of activity we were trying to encourage, staff were successfully able to develop different ways of engaging the local community with the project. Many local residents were grateful that we continued with the project in an adapted form during lockdown, and it provided an uplifting and hopeful focus on the value of community and connection.

26. Engagement extended the library's reach and connection to the community. A group of local volunteers supported the project and helped staff to reach out to

many people within the estates they would not otherwise have been able to access.

27. A strong desire was discovered within the local communities around Barbican Library to find ways to connect to their neighbours: *“I would like to socialise more with people at the Barbican – it's trying to work out how. How do you connect with the others?”* The project showed that, as a safe, neutral, space within the community, the library is the perfect organisation to support people in being able to start making connections.

28. Playful interactions were used to highlight Dr Green's research into the issue of social isolation in the City of London. Local people were given the opportunity to explore their own feelings of isolation and were empowered to feel more connected to their neighbours and others.

29. Bumping Spaces is an effective model for increasing community interactions in the library space and the local communities around it. It is simple, low cost and can be used to develop future activities and services in Barbican & Community Libraries.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Bumping Spaces summary report

## **Background Papers**

Improving Social Wellbeing in the City of London

<https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/assets/Services-DCCS/social-wellbeing-report.pdf>

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