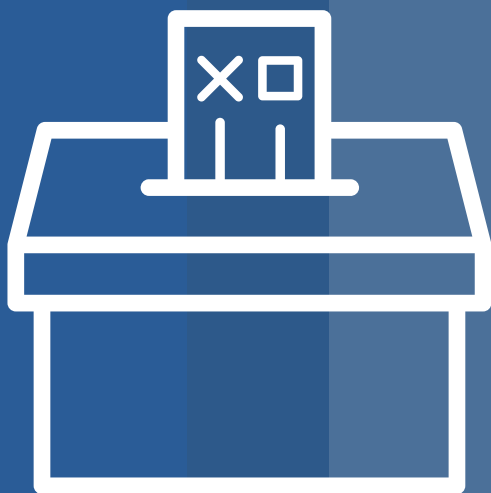


Public Interest News Foundation

Impact Fund Evaluation Final Report



PINF

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Executive Summary

Overview

The *Impact Fund* was developed by the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), with the support of the Neal and Dominique Gandhi Foundation, to assess whether local news publishing can influence democratic engagement. This programme reflects concerning and increasing levels of democratic disengagement in many parts of the UK, alongside a reduction in independent news publishing at the local level. Through providing financial support to projects led by local news publishers, the *Impact Fund* aimed to identify what effect these projects would have on residents' engagement with local elections in May 2022.

Structure of the Programme

Five publishers were selected to receive funding to deliver projects in wards with low levels of democratic engagement, two in Birmingham and three in Greater London, ahead of the scheduled local elections in May 2022. The projects delivered a range of activities between January and May 2022 to increase residents' knowledge,

understanding and engagement with local issues and the processes of the local elections. These activities included organising hustings for local candidates and residents; publishing special issues containing ward-specific information about the local elections; and inviting residents to engage in the production of local news, among other activities.

To evaluate the impact of these projects, five 'control' wards were selected as comparators to the project wards, against which any changes in voter registration and turnout between the 2018 and 2022 local elections could be interpreted. Additional data was collected to assess the impact of the projects on residents' and other stakeholders' views of, and levels of knowledge on, local democratic processes, and of the value and trustworthiness of local news publishing.

Key Findings

The evaluation indicated some small improvements in voter turnout in most project wards, compared with the control wards and / or the city or borough-wide

average for the local elections. However, these changes are not necessarily statistically significant, and in some cases, represent a decrease in voter turnout in project wards compared with the 2018 local elections, though the decrease was smaller than that of the control ward and / or city or borough-wider average. Given a range of possible confounding factors, such as changes to ward boundaries between 2018 and 2022, and the relatively short time frame of the programme, evidence of a positive impact of the projects on voter turnout is not conclusive.

Other findings from the evaluation suggest positive benefits of the projects in terms of facilitating residents' opportunities for engagement with local candidates and councillors; increasing knowledge of local issues; and increasing recognition of the news publications as credible and trustworthy sources of information about local elections and democratic processes. The publishers generally also reported increased engagement with their content and social media platforms, and valued the experience of delivering their projects for increasing their connections with residents and local stakeholders.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Impact Fund has not generated conclusive evidence of the impact of local news publishing activities on democratic engagement in terms of increasing turnout at local elections. However, it suggests a plausible relationship between local news publishing and increased knowledge among residents of local issues and democratic processes. It also indicates the important role of local news publishers in facilitating closer engagement between residents and political candidates and stakeholders. Finally, this programme suggests that local news publishers can be recognised as trustworthy sources of information about local issues and democratic processes, among residents and other stakeholders.

From the experience of delivering and evaluating the Impact Fund, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Considerable time is needed for developing relationships between local news publishers, residents and other stakeholders, perhaps particularly in areas with low existing levels of democratic engagement. This should be considered in planning future evaluations of the impact of local news publishing on democratic engagement.
2. Incorporating multiple media forms for local news publishing, including physical print as well as online and / or radio, appears important for increasing reach and establishing connections with local residents, to facilitate democratic engagement.

3. Local news publishers can play a valuable role in facilitating face-to-face engagement between residents and local political stakeholders, for example through hustings events (where a panel of candidates take questions from residents). Face-to-face interaction between publishers and residents increases connection with communities and appears likely to increase the perceived trustworthiness of local news.
4. Future work to assess the impact of local news publishing on democratic engagement should ensure appropriate resourcing of projects and evaluation activities, and should consider delivering projects across a wider geographical area than single wards, to enable use of more robust data to measure outcomes.
5. The Public Interest News Foundation looks forward to iterating and improving upon this first Impact Fund, whether in the same area of democratic engagement or in examining the impact of journalism in other fields of public benefit.

1. Introduction to the Impact Fund

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) and the Neal and Dominique Gandhi Foundation developed a programme, the *Impact Fund*, to test whether local news publishers could boost democratic engagement through new activities in specific electoral wards. This report presents the evaluation of this programme, to enable learning about the impact of local journalism on democratic engagement, to inform future activities and programmes to increase democratic engagement, and to learn about how best to test the impact of journalism.

1.1 Background

Levels of democratic engagement in the UK continue to be of concern, with wide and widening inequalities between different sectors of society and turnout at national and local elections. This democratic deficit is illustrated in the decrease in voter turnout across the UK at the 2019 General Election by 1.5% from 68.8% in 2017 to 67.3%; of the UK constituent countries, only Scotland saw an increase in turnout in 2019 (rising from 66.4% in 2017 to 68.1% in 2019)¹. For local elections, voter turnout rates are typically considerably lower; at the 2018 local

elections across the UK, only 34.6% of those registered actually voted². Recent research has identified that younger people, people from minority ethnic groups, unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed are less likely to register to vote and turn out to vote than other demographic groups³. This, along with a continuing trend of low trust in politicians⁴, presents a concerning picture of democratic disengagement in the UK.

Alongside this is the changing landscape of news media, which has seen considerable reduction in local news production in the UK and elsewhere, both in terms of quality and independence⁵. Research has shown that in 2019 the average daily print circulation of local newspapers reduced to 31% of the rate in 2007 in the UK⁶. Further, just six media companies account for nearly 84% of all local news titles⁷. The factors shaping this decline include the shift to consumption of news online, and increased availability of free news online, and the challenges presented by COVID-19, meaning there are fewer financial resources available to support local news production.

However, in recent years there has been increased interest in the rise and value of

independent news providers and 'hyperlocal' news media, the latter typically defined as community-oriented news within a small, geographically defined area⁸. Often provided digitally, these emerging forms of news media have been identified as potentially helping to 'fill the gaps' of the declining local and regional news sectors⁹. Turner and Harte theorise that hyperlocal media can provide spaces to "extend civic and political engagement", and thus help to address the democratic deficit¹⁰. Public Interest News Foundation's Index of Independent News Publishing 2022 found that independent news publishers themselves reported their greatest impact as 'increasing civic engagement'¹¹. As forms of 'grassroots' media, based in the places they report on, they may be more likely to build strong connections with local communities, and to inform and engage residents around local issues, as well as providing information about local democratic processes and structures¹².

There is also increasing evidence of the significant association between local news consumption and democratic engagement, particularly in the USA¹³. Evidence is lighter in the UK, but a recent analysis for the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport found a significant positive correlation between local newspaper circulation and local election turnout, and a positive correlation between the number of titles and voter turnout¹⁴. However, this study used local newspaper data provided by the Joint Industry Currency for Regional Media Research, whose list of titles includes very few independent or hyperlocal titles. The latter could be expected, given the theory outlined above, to have a greater impact on democratic engagement¹⁵.

Thus, while there was initial evidence to suggest that supporting local news production may be a valuable approach to helping address the issue of democratic disengagement in the UK, at least as measured in terms of electoral participation, the purpose of the Impact Fund would be to delve deeper into the subject.

1.2 Structure of the Impact Fund

The Impact Fund was launched in October 2021, designed to coincide with local council elections in London and Birmingham in May 2022. Local news publishers were invited to apply for funding for projects designed to influence local understanding, awareness and / or motivation to engage with local elections in single wards in these cities, particularly in areas with low turnout at elections. Applications were reviewed by PINF, based on criteria including the project's likely impact on local democratic engagement and its suitability for the planned evaluation of the Impact Fund. Five publishers were awarded funding (£8,000 per project), to be spent on activities between January and May 2022. Two projects focused on wards in Birmingham and three on wards in London. The projects were:

- Central Bylines in Allen's Cross ward, Birmingham
- Newham Voices in Canning Town South ward; Newham, London
- Switch Radio in Castle Vale ward, Birmingham
- Enfield Dispatch in Edmonton Green ward; Enfield, London
- Southwark News in Newington ward; Southwark, London.

Initially, Barnet Post in Colindale ward, Barnet, was selected as the fourth project. However, in January the publisher decided to make Barnet Post an online-only publication, which would affect their planned activities for

increasing democratic engagement. Instead, the Enfield Dispatch (published by the same organisation, Social Spider C.I.C.) was selected to replace Barnet Post, operating in Edmonton Green ward, Enfield.

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- 1 UK Parliament. (2020). "General Election 2019: Turnout". House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2019-turnout/>
 - 2 UK Parliament. (2021). "Turnout at Elections". House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8060/>
 - 3 Uberoi, E & Johnston, N. (2021). "Political Disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?". House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7501/>
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Williams, A; Harte, D & Turner, J. (2015). "The Value of UK Hyperlocal Community News", *Digital Journalism*, 3:5, 680-703, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.965932>
 - 6 Wilkinson, L. (2020). "A pressing issue: local newspaper performance & local election turnout". Plum Consulting. <https://plumconsulting.co.uk/a-pressing-issue-local-newspaper-performance-local-election-turnout/>
 - 7 Media Reform Coalition. (2021). "Who Owns the UK Media?". <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/media-ownership/who-owns-the-uk-media>
 - 8 Turner, J & Harte, D. (2020). "Hyperlocal media" in Baker, M et al (eds.). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media*. Routledge
 - 9 Tenor, C. (2018). "Hyperlocal News: After the Hype". LSE. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/Polis-Hyperlocal-News-report-Jul-2018.pdf>
 - 10 Turner, J & Harte, D. (2020).
 - 11 Public Interest News Foundation. (2022). Index of Independent News Publishing 2022. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/pinindex>
 - 12 Williams, A. (2016). "How hyperlocal journalists plug the democratic gap in regional elections". *The Conversation*, 31/05/16. <https://theconversation.com/how-hyperlocal-journalists-plug-the-democratic-gap-in-regional-elections-59542>
 - 13 See, e.g., Bartel, M; Holcomb, J et al. (2016). "Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits". Pew Research Centre. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2016/11/PJ_2016.11.02_Civic-Engagement_FINAL.pdf
 - 14 Lavender T. et al (2020). "Research into recent dynamics of the press sector in the UK and globally". Plum Consulting. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/924325/Plum_DCMS_press_sector_dynamics_-_Final_Report_v4.pdf
 - 15 To be included in JICREG data, "the titles must also appear on the Local Media Works database", which can be viewed here: <http://www.localmediauk.org>. The vast majority of titles are part of a small group of conglomerates, only a handful are independents. Separately, Press Gazette has estimated that there are approximately 400 independent titles in the UK: Press Gazette (2021), "Mapped: 400 UK independent local news publishers" <https://pressgazette.co.uk/uk-independent-community-news-sector>.

2. Overview of the Evaluation

2.1 Overall aim

The evaluation of the Impact Fund aimed to explore and understand the impacts of local news publishing activities on democratic engagement at the ward level. Specifically, it aimed to generate knowledge of:

- i. Whether local news publishing can influence resident participation in local elections in wards with low levels of democratic engagement;
- ii. How different types of local news publishing activities can influence resident knowledge of and confidence in local democratic processes; and
- iii. How local news publishing can shape understanding of local issues among residents and councillors/candidates.
- iv. Lessons learned for supporting local news publishing and measuring democratic engagement.

2.2 Overall guiding principles

The evaluation of the *Impact Fund* followed principles of realist evaluation, a theory-based approach to evaluation which seeks

to assess a programme's impact in line with theorised assumptions about how change happens within 'complex' and dynamic real-world systems¹⁶. For the evaluation of the *Impact Fund*, we recognised that the funded projects were (individual) complex interventions with multiple, interacting components, and that they would be delivered in dynamic contexts (individual wards, which sit within wider socio-political systems). Therefore, the evaluation sought not only to understand whether the activities delivered through each project have an impact on democratic engagement at the ward level, but also to understand some of the pathways through which this does or does not happen.

The design of the evaluation of the *Impact Fund* also drew on principles of action research, or, the process of combining research with practical intervention for change¹⁷. In the case of the *Impact Fund*, the funded projects were developed by local new publishers, building on their existing work, but also designed to meet specific criteria set by PINF to enable the impact of the projects on democratic engagement to

be evaluated. Further, the evaluation was designed and conducted by working in partnership with practitioners, to deliver and assess change through their practice.

2.3 Evaluation design

Reflecting these principles, the evaluation of the *Impact Fund* took on a specific design. Each project was uniquely designed and delivered in its designated ward, and then evaluated to assess any impact on indicators of democratic engagement and to understand *how* the project was delivered. Each project was allocated a control area, selected for similarity to the project areas in terms of key indicators (explained in more detail in section 2.5. below), and in which no activities relating to the Impact Fund were delivered. At the project-level evaluation, the outcome measures were compared between the project and its control area, to identify first, if there was any change in

indicators of democratic engagement, and second, through comparison with the control area, the extent to which any change could be attributed to the project.

Although though the five individual projects were unique in their activities and modes of delivery, they were all were selected for meeting certain criteria for the *Impact Fund*, and share several theorised mechanisms of change through which local news publishing could influence democratic engagement (discussed in more detail below). This means that there was a level of comparability between the projects, that enabled an evaluation of the effect of the *Impact Fund* as a whole on democratic engagement, and to draw conclusions about the value of a funding model such as this for improving democratic engagement. The relationship between the project- and programme-levels of the evaluation are illustrated in *Figure 1* below.

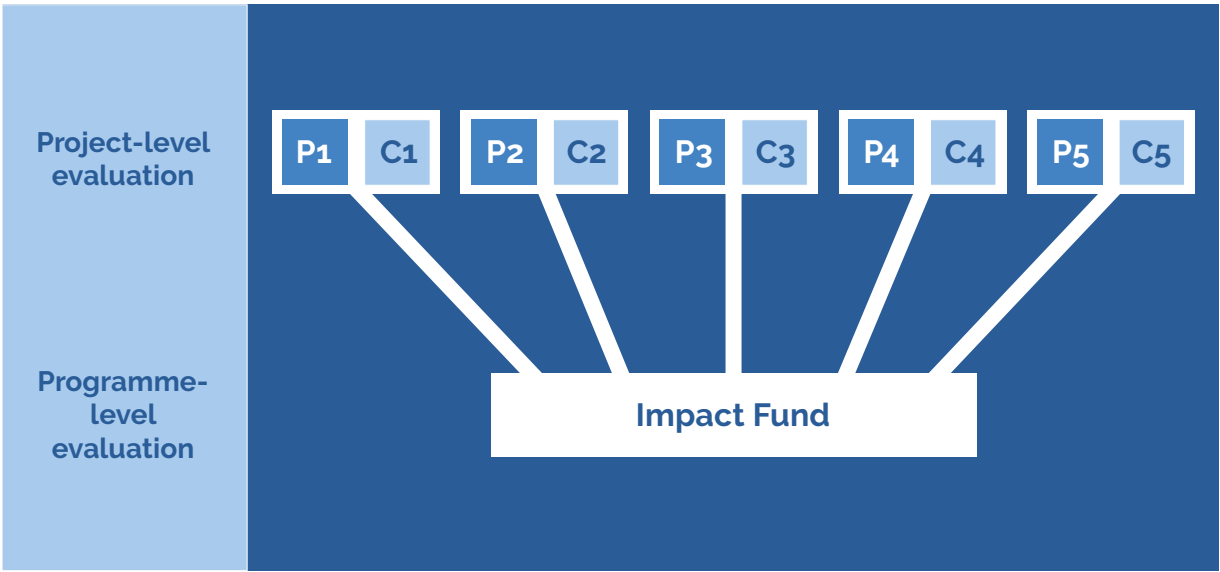


Figure 1 Diagram to illustrate the structure of the evaluation. P = project, C = control

2.4 Theorising the mechanisms of change

To inform the design of the evaluation, theories of change (ToC) were developed for each project to map out the hypothesised pathways of change between the planned activities and anticipated outcomes for democratic engagement. These ToCs were developed through participatory workshops with each project. These ToCs were then used to inform the evaluation for each project, including the data collection at baseline and follow-up. The ToCs for the projects can be seen in Appendix A.

From the development of the ToCs for the individual projects, five mechanisms of change were identified that were common to most or all the projects as either a primary or secondary process of change. These five mechanisms were taken as the framework for evaluating the *Impact Fund* as a whole, in addition to measuring change at the project level.

The five mechanisms of change are:

1. **Providing information** - on election processes, on candidates, on local issues, on the importance of voting - that is considered to be of interest and relevance to residents.

Assumption: increased access to information of relevant and interest will increase residents' understanding of local democratic processes, influencing motivation to vote.

2. **Providing opportunity for discussion and debate:** deliberative engagement; enabling voices to be heard; identifying issues and what matters to residents.

Assumption: enabling residents to engage in discussions will increase their understanding of local issues, their awareness of the democratic process, and their confidence to engage in local democracy.

3. **Building local connections:** between news publisher and local residents / community organisations / candidates; between residents and councillors, candidates, political parties and other stakeholders.

Assumption: building local connections will enable more and better dialogue between residents and stakeholders, increasing understanding of and responsiveness to local issues; and building connections between the news publisher and local stakeholders will increase trust in local news. Both will increase residents' motivation to vote.

4. **Supporting resident involvement in local news production:** enabling voices to be heard; raising consciousness of social and political structures; building trust with local news outlet; empowerment.

Assumption: being involved in producing local news is a form of democratic engagement itself, enabling residents to contribute to the circulation of information that can influence decision-making, and through this, residents will be exposed to the previous mechanisms.

5. Representation of 'people like us':

the visibility of 'ordinary' local people taking interest in and discussing the local elections; the 'Gogglebox' mechanism.

Assumption: seeing people 'like them' engaging with local issues and democratic processes will motivate people otherwise disengaged to take more interest in local democracy.

A summary of the mechanisms of change by project is presented in Appendix B.

2.5 Selection of control wards

For each project, a control (or comparator) ward was selected, based on similarity to the ward in which the project would be delivered, in relation to several criteria, and also following discussion with project leads to get local insight into suitability of wards. Projects in London were allocated control wards from London, from the same borough where possible. Projects in Birmingham were allocated control wards also from Birmingham. Where it was not possible to match project and control wards exactly

	Ward	Total votes turnout 2018	Ward Pop'n	% Pop'n registered to vote	No. councillors	No. candidates 2018	% candidate votes 2018 (elected)					
							C	L	LD	G	I	O
Project 1	Allen's Cross	29.2%	10466	93.6%	1	5	46.8	44.6	2.9	2.4		3.3
Control 1	Perry Common	27.3%	11854	88.2%	1	3	49.2	46.7	4.1			
Project 2	Canning Town South	28.4%	21253	74.4%	3	11	16.6	51.4	14.3	12.0		5.7
Control 2	Beckton (Newham)	29.3%	16433	81.3%	3	11	19.2	52.2		4.6	18.1	5.8
Project 3	Castle Vale	21.6%	9648	91.4%	1	4	50.8	44.4	2.4			2.4
Control 3	Frankley Great Park	24.9%	11717	93.0%	1	3	50.9	45.2	3.9			
Project 4	Edmonton Green	33.1%	19407	80.5%	3	9	12.6	71.8	5.6	7.7		2.2
Control 4	Lower Edmonton (Enfield)	32.6%	17905	82.2%	3	9	19.0	67.5	5.3	2.2		6.0
Project 5	Newington	31.6%*	14328	88.2%	3	12	8.3	64.8	13.9	13.0		
Control 5	Downham (Lewisham)	30.4%	15679	88.8%	3	15	16.0	53.9	10.3	9.2		10.7

C = Conservative; L = Labour; LD = Liberal Democrat; G = Green Party; I = Independent; O = other

*Figures for the turnout in Newington ward in 2018 differ: the declaration form by Southwark Council has 31.6%¹⁸ whereas a database from The Electoral Commission has 24.8%¹⁹. We assume the Southwark declaration is the primary source and that The Electoral Commission figure is an error.

Table 1 Summary of key information about project and control wards

against all criteria, pragmatic decisions about 'best fit' were made.

The information about the projects and their corresponding control wards is presented in Table 1 on p14.

2.6 Structure of evaluation

The evaluation took place between January and June 2022. It was designed to capture and analyse data across the following stages:

1. **Baseline** (January 2022): to explore levels of democratic engagement in the project and control wards before the projects commence in late January 2022.

2. **Process** (January to May 2022): to capture information about i) the number and nature of activities delivered, and the immediate products of these; and ii) the reality of delivering project activities, and about what's happening in the local system.

3. **Outcome** (May to June 2022): to capture the short-term effects of the projects on local democratic engagement.

2.7 Key indicators

To assess the impact of the projects on democratic engagement, the following primary indicators were used across all projects.

Indicator	Description	Data sources
People registered to vote	% people over 18 living in the ward who were registered to vote for the May 2018 (baseline) and 2022 (follow-up) elections	Electorate (ward level) – from local authorities and / or The Electoral Commission Mid-2018 and mid-2020 population estimate, aged 18+ (ward level) – from ONS
Voter turnout	% electorate who voted in May 2018 / 2022 elections	Total vote turnout (ward level) –from Local Authorities and / or Electoral Commission
Knowledge of what's happening locally	Self-rated perception of how well residents know what's happening i) in the local ward and ii) at the local council	Baseline & follow-up survey
Confidence in engaging with local democracy	Self-rated perception of confidence in how to contact local councillor(s)	Baseline & follow-up survey
Trust in democratic process	Self-rated amount of trust in local councillor(s) and local council	Baseline & follow-up survey

Table 2 Primary indicators for democratic engagement and how/when measured

In addition to the primary indicators of democratic engagement, we also measured the impact of the projects on residents' attitudes towards and engagement with local news media, as secondary outcomes. The following indicators were measured across all projects (see Table 3, below).

2.8 Data collection

A summary of the data collection methods for each stage of the evaluation (baseline, process and outcome) is below. For full details of the evaluation methods, please see the separate full evaluation plan, available on request.

1. Baseline
- To measure the baseline level of democratic engagement (and other related indicators) in the project and control areas, prior to the projects beginning, we used routine data sources (including local authority websites, ONS and The Electoral Commission) to gather data on voting and voter registration at the 2018 local elections.

We also developed a survey for residents of project and control wards to capture views on local elections, local issues, confidence in engaging with local democracy, and trust in local news media. The links to the online

Indicator	Description	Data sources
Engagement with local news media	Reported sources of information about what's happening in the local ward.	Baseline & follow-up survey
Perceived quality of local news media	Rating of how well local news media covers what's happening i) in the local ward, ii) in the local council	Baseline & follow-up survey
Trust in local news media	Rating of how reliable local news media is for information about local issues.	Baseline & follow-up survey

Table 3 Secondary indicators for perceptions of local news media and how/when measured

questionnaire were circulated using social media and local contacts in each ward in January 2022.

2. Process evaluation

The purpose of the process evaluation was to gather information about the delivery of activities in each project and the wider context in which the projects were delivered. Each project was asked to keep a record of the activities they delivered as part of the project, who engaged, and to note any relevant contextual changes or events beyond the project that might intersect the project's aims. For the control wards, local media was consulted regularly between January and May 2022, to identify any major changes in the local context that might influence residents' democratic engagement, such as significant political disruptions (e.g. resignation of a prominent councillor / local MP) or prominent local campaigns to improve democratic engagement (e.g. run by a community or voluntary organisation).

3. Outcome evaluation

This was conducted directly after the May 2022 local elections to capture the immediate impacts of the projects on the indicators of democratic engagement, and to explore perceptions and experiences of change among residents and other stakeholders in the project wards.

Measuring impact on democratic engagement:

Routine data sources were used to gather data on the indicators for democratic engagement (% eligible people registered to vote; turnout at local elections) for each of the project and control areas for May 2022, and to calculate the difference between the indicators for May 2018 and May 2022 elections.

Follow-up survey:

The baseline survey was repeated in May 2022 following the local elections, with the same questions as for the baseline. As with the baseline survey, the survey was circulated via social media and networks of contacts in the project and control wards, and sent directly to respondents to the baseline survey who had given consent to be contacted for the follow-up. As such the design was two cross-sectional surveys, rather than a longitudinal / cohort design of survey, with limitations arising from the likely differences in the samples at baseline and follow-up.

The survey responses were analysed by assessing the difference between baseline and follow-up in frequencies (for categorical data) and in mean scores and variance (for numerical data). Comparisons were made between the projects and their associated control areas, to identify any difference in change that could be attributed to the projects.

Qualitative data collection:

To inform understanding of how projects influenced change, and any barriers or facilitators to the delivery of projects and

influence on democratic engagement, qualitative data were collected through:

- Content analysis of comments on projects' online articles and social media posts, by residents and other stakeholders, to explore the nature of engagement with project activities.
- Focus group discussion or semi-structured questionnaire with project leads to explore experiences, perceptions of change and key lessons learned about project delivery and democratic engagement.
- Semi-structured interviews with a sample of residents, candidates / councillors and other community stakeholders in each project area, to

explore views on project activities and perceptions of influence and change.

The evaluation plan had also included content analysis of local candidates' manifestos and any other public outputs by candidates and councillors in project areas, to assess responsiveness of these stakeholders to issues raised through project activities. Due to a lack of time, and because a brief search for such local manifestos and candidate / councillor outputs revealed very little, this was not conducted for the evaluation.

A summary of the qualitative data collected for each project area is presented in Table 4 below.

Project	Reflections of project leads	Experiences of stakeholders
Central Bylines	Semi-structured questionnaire	1 interview with a community stakeholder
Newham Voices	Focus group & semi-structured questionnaire	2 interviews with residents 2 interviews with candidates
Switch Radio	Focus group	1 interview with a community stakeholder
Enfield Dispatch	Focus group	No interviews conducted
Southwark News	Focus group	3 interviews with residents 1 interview with a candidate/ councillor

Table 4 Summary of qualitative data collected per project area

A combination of content and framework analysis was used across the different qualitative data sources, to generate understanding of the mechanisms, barriers and facilitators of change in each project area, and to develop cross-cutting interpretations of what worked well and what worked less well in the delivery of the Impact Fund as a programme.

Project engagement data:

For each of the news media publishers delivering projects, additional information was collected to assess any levels of change in engagement with the publication potentially attributable to the project activities delivered. Projects were asked to provide information about the publication and audience at baseline (January 2022) and follow-up (May 2022) to measure any change in indicators including:

- Estimated readership or listenership; circulation
- Engagement with articles (downloads, shares, reposts, comments on articles etc)
- Social media subscribers; mailing list subscribers.

16 Pawson & Tilley (2004). *Realist Evaluation*. Community Matters: http://www.communitymatters.com.au/RE_chapter.pdf.

17 Somekh, B. (2006). *Action Research: A Methodology for Change and Development*. Open University Press.

18 The Returning Officer, London Borough of Southwark, (2018), "Declaration of Result of Poll, Southwark, Election of a Borough Councillor for,

Newington on Thursday 3 May 2018", accessed at <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/assets/attach/80075/Declaration-of-result-of-poll-Newington.pdf>.

19 The Electoral Commission, undated, "Results and turnout at the 2018 May England local elections". Database accessed via: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/Electoral%20data%20-%20Local-Elections%20-%20May%202018.ods>.

3. Summary of the Projects

Below is a description of each of the projects, the activities they delivered and the context in which the projects took place, drawn from the process evaluation data.

3.1 Central Bylines, Allen's Cross ward, Birmingham

[Central Bylines](#) is a regional online newspaper covering the Midlands and forms part of the Bylines Network of outlets. It was the newest of the project partners, having been established in February 2021. Central Bylines is also the publisher with the widest geographical coverage in the Impact Fund, publishing stories across several local authorities. For this project, the publisher focused on the ward of Allens Cross in south-west Birmingham, where on the ground they did not have an existing presence.

The project's Impact Fund activities included a series of articles discussing local issues and the performance of the council. It also ran articles explaining the importance of voting in local elections and explaining the democratic process. Central

Bylines made extensive use of social media and carried out door-to-door interviews in the ward. The project produced a one-off print edition before the election called 'News from Allens Cross', which included descriptions of the election candidates, and was distributed door-to-door in Allens Cross ward.

3.2 Enfield Dispatch, Edmonton Green ward, Enfield

[Enfield Dispatch](#) is a free community newspaper launched in October 2018, in London Borough of Enfield. It is published by Social Spider Community News and the paper was highly commended in the 2021 News Awards in the Independent Community Newspaper of the Year category.

The Dispatch joined the Impact Fund project in February 22, immediately carrying out vox pops with residents to inform its news coverage around issues which concerned local people. It produced feature articles reflecting residents' concerns and interviewed candidates prior to the local elections. The Dispatch also

held a hustings event in Edmonton Green prior to the local election attended by six candidates and around 25 voters.

The print run of the Dispatch was increased for the three editions prior to the election and, significantly, each of those editions was newly distributed to 2,500 homes in Edmonton Green ward (there are some 3,300 homes in the ward²⁰), as well as being available as usual at their newsstand in the Edmonton Green shopping centre. The team promoted articles and discussion on the Dispatch's social media pages.

3.3 Newham Voices, Canning Town South ward, Newham

[Newham Voices](#) was launched in 2020 in response to a perceived need for an independent, community-led news service in the Newham area of London. It produces a free monthly community paper, which in the months leading up to the local elections produced a series of articles to stimulate democratic engagement and discussion.

As part of their campaign to encourage people to vote, the Voices' team made extensive efforts to get their message across. These included leafletting the ward area, leveraging social media, appearing on radio, carrying out interviews and holding a stall at the local supermarket where they could meet shoppers.

Due to Newham Voices active presence in Canning Town, the team had a good relationship with the local Morrisons supermarket management, who allowed

them to use the foyer space at the supermarket for their activities. A stall promoting the voting campaign was held there before the election and it was the venue for two Newham Voices-organised hustings events, probably reaching audiences that would otherwise be unlikely to attend a hustings event. The first hustings was for the Newham Mayor election on April 23 and the second for the local election on April 27. Around 60 residents attended each event.

3.4 Southwark News, Newington ward, Southwark

[Southwark News](#) is an independent, weekly paid-for newspaper in south London which has been operating since 2002.

The Southwark News local election coverage centred on an initiative called 'Southwark Soapbox', in the style of Channel 4's 'Gogglebox'. This ran during the three months leading up to the elections. Candidates standing for election in the ward were invited to take part in filmed sessions where they discussed issues facing the area. Four households representing the ethnic make-up of Newington Ward were invited to be the 'Soapboxers', whose reactions to the discussions were then filmed and edited into a series of videos aired online. The event was also featured in the newspaper which also carried coverage of local issues.

Southwark Soapbox was designed to create discussion in the build-up to the local elections. Southwark News employed a reporter for the project and worked with

trainee journalists at London South Bank University to create the videos. These were shared in full and in short 'trailer'-style formats on Southwark News' website and via its social media channels.

3.5 Switch Radio, Castle Vale ward, Birmingham

Switch Radio is a non-profit community radio station launched in 2010 and based in Castle Vale, broadcasting in North East Birmingham. Switch was the only project without a print offering. It provides local news content via broadcast and via its website.

Switch found itself with an unexpected Parliamentary by-election on March 3, following the death of long-time Erdington MP Jack Dromey. The ward of Castle Vale is covered by the constituency. The project covered the by-election extensively as part of its activities, including coverage of a popular local hustings event on February 27. Their coverage promoted the by-election on its social media sites with 13 Facebook posts between February 4 and March 4, many of those mirrored on Twitter.

There was less coverage of the local election in Castle Vale than of the Erdington by-election, likely as a result of fewer media opportunities organised by the political parties. In the two weeks leading up to

the local election, Switch made use of syndicated stories written by the BBC Local Democracy Reporter and produced profiles of some Castle Vale candidates, published on its website. Switch introduced a submit-a-story page on its website in the run-up to the local election, but this attracted no use.

20 Enfield Council. (2021). "Ward profiles: Edmonton Green". <https://new.enfield.gov.uk/services/your-council/borough-and-wards-profiles/about-enfield-information-edmonton-green.pdf>

4. Results

4.1 Turnout data

	2018 (% turnout)	2022 (% turnout)	% points change
Central Bylines			
Project ward turnout (Allens Cross)	29.2	27.2	-2.0
Control ward turnout (Perry Common)	27.3	22.0	-5.3
Ave. turnout across Birmingham	31.9	28.4	-3.5
Enfield Dispatch			
Project ward turnout (Edmonton Green)	32.9	30.5	-2.4
Control ward turnout (Lower Edmonton)	32.5	28.5	-4.1
Ave. turnout across Enfield	38.2	37.6	-0.6
Newham Voices			
Project ward turnout (Canning Town South)	28.4	22.8	-5.6
Control ward turnout (Beckton)	29.3	28.0	-1.3
Ave. turnout across Newham	35.8	28.8	-7.0
Southwark News			
Project ward turnout (Newington)	31.6	32.0	0.4
Control ward turnout (Downham, Lewisham)	30.0	25.0	-5.0
Ave. turnout across Southwark	33.6	34.0	0.4
Switch Radio			
Project ward turnout (Castle Vale)	21.5	19.4	-2.1
Control ward turnout (Frankley Great Park)	24.9	27.0	2.1
Ave. turnout across Birmingham	31.9	28.4	-3.5

Turnout data was collected from the relevant local authority's website.

Table 5 Turnout data from project and control wards, and average across local authority

The data shows that for three projects (Central Bylines, Enfield Dispatch, Southwark News) the change in project ward turnout was better than the control ward, and in two projects (Newham Voices, Switch Radio) the change was worse.

Three projects (Central Bylines, Newham Voices, Switch Radio) saw a better change in the project wards compared with the average turnout across all the wards in the relevant local authority, one saw no difference (Southwark News), and one project saw worse change (Enfield Dispatch).

compared with 2018. This reduces the extent to which it is possible to make a comparison between those year's elections, depending on how significant the changes were. In Newham's Canning Town South ward, these changes were significant, less so in Beckton ward. In Lewisham's Downham ward (the control ward for Newington in Southwark) there were changes. In Enfield (Edmonton Green / Lower Edmonton) these changes were marginal. There were no changes in Southwark (Newington). There were no changes in Birmingham.

Some electoral wards in London had new boundaries for the elections in 2022,

4.2 Voter Registration / Size of Electorate Data

	2018 electorate	% pop'n registered to vote, 2018	2022 electorate	% pop'n registered to vote, 2022	Change
Central Bylines					
Project ward (Allens Cross, B'ham)	7,541	93.6%	7,392	94.8%	+1.2 pts
'Control' ward (Perry Common, B'ham)	7,572	88.2%	7,737	89.3%	+1.1 pts
Enfield Dispatch					
Project ward (Edmonton Green, Enfield)**	10,974	80.5%	10,414	75.5%	-5.0 pts
'Control' ward (Lower Edmonton, Enfield)**	10,348	82.2%	10,371	82.0%	-0.2 pts
Newham Voices					
Project ward (Canning Town S., Newham)**	11,749	74.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A
'Control' ward (Beckton, Newham)**	10,251	81.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Southwark News					
Project ward (Newington, Southwark)	10,301	88.2%	10,233	89.0%	+0.8 pts
'Control' ward (Downham, Lewisham)**	10,310	88.8%	12,137	104.5%**	+15.7 pts
Switch Radio					
Project ward (Castle Vale, B'ham)	6,733	91.4%	6,670	92.0%	+0.6 pts
'Control' ward (Frankley Great Park, B'ham)	8,090	93.0%	8,262	95.8%	+2.8 pts

* N/A indicates data not available from the relevant local authority.

** Percentage of population registered to vote is based on ward-level 18+ population estimates from the ONS at 2018 and 2020, the most recent available at 2 August 2022, so may not reflect boundary changes in Edmonton Green, Lower Edmonton, Canning Town South, Beckton, Downham wards, or population changes between 2020 and 2022.

Table 6 Electorate data in project and control wards

All things being equal, had the interventions increased voter registration, we would expect to see greater positive change, or lesser negative change, in the project wards versus the control wards. We only see slight evidence of this in the Central Bylines project (Allens Cross is slightly better than Perry Common). In the other areas, excepting Newham where the data is not published, we see lesser positive change or worse negative change.

Where there were significant changes in voter registration, these are more likely a result of population change or electoral ward boundary changes, as noted in the above section on voter turnout. For example, in Downham ward, the electorate increased in

size by nearly 2,000 people – likely due to the boundary change – while the population estimate has not increased at the same rate, hence the percentage figure is clearly in error.

4.3 Additional data on democratic engagement

We also looked at some secondary indicators that might have indicated a change in democratic engagement: spoilt ballot numbers, numbers of candidates and numbers of independent candidates. In terms of spoilt ballots, this data is provided by local authorities alongside the vote count and turnout data at a ward level. We found only a tiny proportion of voters ever spoil

	No. of candidates 2018	No. of candidates 2022	Change	No. of indep. candidates 2018	No. of indep. candidates 2022	Change
Central Bylines						
Project ward (Allens Cross)	5	4	-1	0	0	0
Control ward (Perry Common)	3	5	+2	0	0	0
Enfield Dispatch						
Project ward (Edmonton Green)	9	12	+3	0	2	+2
Control ward (Lower Edmonton)	9	10	+1	0	0	0
Newham Voices						
Project ward (Canning Town South)	11	14	+3	0	2	+2
Control ward (Beckton)	11	12	+1	1	0	-1
Southwark News						
Project ward (Newington)	12	12	0	0	0	0
Control ward (Downham)	15	12	-3	0	0	0
Switch Radio						
Project ward (Castle Vale)	4	4	0	0	0	0
Control ward (Frankley Great Park)	3	4	+1	0	0	0

Table 7 Data on numbers of candidates in project and control wards

their ballots (e.g. in 2022, there were 20 spoilt ballots returned in over 3,200 ballots issued in Newington ward, Southwark) and so no conclusions could be drawn from this data. The numbers of candidates and independent candidates are given in Table 7. In theory, a positive change in the numbers of candidates, and perhaps particularly independent candidates (assuming that generally, the main parties will always field candidates) could indicate an uptick in democratic engagement. The qualitative research could then have explained the extent to which this change was linked to the additional journalistic coverage.

The data above shows various changes, but nothing in our qualitative research suggests that any changes in the project wards were due to the interventions. In the case of Edmonton Green in Enfield, the new independent candidates were the result of a campaign against an incinerator planned for the ward, rather than attributable to any Enfield Dispatch activities. In Canning Town Ward, one of the new independent candidates was a former Labour Party member standing in protest at luxury housing, and there was no information available about the other independent candidate. Moreover, it was likely that decisions to stand as a candidate were made in advance of February 2022, when the Impact Fund projects typically began.

4.4 Survey results

Surveys were conducted among residents in project and control wards before and after the project activity, see section 2.8.3 above. It proved difficult to generate significant numbers of survey responses, as the tightly defined geographies could not be targeted by research companies or by social media or digital search advertising. Instead, we relied upon the publishers themselves to share the survey link via social media (and this worked best where publishers paid for promotion on Facebook) as well as finding other relevant social media pages to post or to invite admins to post. In the results tables below, the survey data for Southwark News and Switch Radio is included for interest, but neither generated enough responses to compare baseline and follow-up in project and control wards.

1. Local knowledge or understanding

Q. How well or badly do you think you know what's happening in [your ward]?

Score range: 1 (very badly) to 4 (very well)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	2.22	2.50	2.51	2.54	0.29	0.04	0.25	8.3%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	2.63	2.50	2.88	2.69	0.25	0.19	0.06	2.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	2.64	2.66	2.83	2.83	0.19	0.17	0.02	0.7%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	2.5	-	3.25	-	0.75	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	2.58	2.35	2.75	-	0.17	-	-	-

Q. How well or badly do you think you know what's happening in [your council]?

Score range: 1 (very badly) to 4 (very well)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	1.80	2.60	2.29	2.43	0.49	-0.17	0.66	22.0%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	2.35	2.21	2.44	2.92	0.09	0.71	-0.62	-21.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	2.36	2.67	3.00	3.00	0.64	0.33	0.31	10.3%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	2.50	-	3.00	-	0.50	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	2.00	1.88	2.11	-	0.11	-	-	-

2. Confidence in engaging with local democracy**Q. How confident do you feel that you could contact your local councillor(s) if you wanted to?**

Score range: 1 (not at all confident) to 4 (very confident)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	2.30	2.44	2.76	2.48	0.46	0.04	0.42	14.0%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	2.00	1.93	2.29	2.54	0.29	0.61	-0.32	-11.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	2.45	3.00	1.66	2.66	-0.79	-0.34	-0.45	-15.0%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	1.75	-	2.75	-	1.00	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	1.90	2.23	3.33	-	1.43	-	-	-

3. Trust in democratic process**Q. How much do you trust that your councillor(s) work well for [your ward]?**

Score range: from 1 (not trust at all) to 4 (trust a lot)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	2.57	2.22	2.38	2.67	-0.19	0.45	-0.64	-21.3%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	1.72	1.93	2.17	1.83	0.45	-0.1	0.55	18.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	2.11	2.20	2.20	2.67	0.09	0.47	-0.38	-12.7%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	2.00	-	2.75	-	0.75	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	1.96	2.42	2.78	-	0.82	-	-	-

We also asked a related question on trust in the local council itself, but perhaps due to the survey design this question was not answered by most respondents.

4. Views on, and trust in, local news

Q. How well or badly do you think local news covers what's happening in [your ward]?

Score range: from 1 (very badly) to 4 (very well)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	2.00	2.20	2.06	2.17	0.06	-0.03	0.09	3.0%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	2.00	2.15	2.43	2.2	0.43	0.05	0.38	13.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	1.91	2.00	1.80	1.83	-0.11	-0.17	0.06	2.0%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	2.66	-	2.50	-	-0.16	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	2.15	2.12	2.33	-	0.18	-	-	-

The following question had a poorer response rate than most of the other survey questions, perhaps due to survey design, but is included here for interest.

Q. How much do you trust that local news is a reliable source of information about local issues?

Score range: from 1 (not trust at all) to 4 (trust a lot)

	Baseline responses (n)		Follow-up responses (n)		Baseline average score		Follow-up average score		Change in score		Diff. in change between project and control	
	Project (P)	Control (C)	P	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	Score	%
Central Bylines	13	10	39	32	1.80	2.50	2.30	2.33	0.50	-0.17	0.67	22.3%
Enfield Dispatch	20	15	26	13	2.71	2.22	2.57	2.20	-0.14	-0.02	-0.12	-4.0%
Newham Voices	11	6	6	7	1.50	2.50	2.00	2.60	0.50	0.10	0.40	13.3%
Southwark News	4	0	4	0	3.50	-	2.50	-	-1.00	-	-	-
Switch Radio	55	22	9	1	2.14	2.11	2.60	-	0.46	-	-	-

* NB. Low response rate compared with other questions above, perhaps due to unclear survey design.

All things being equal, greater positive differences between the project wards and control wards would have generally indicated that the projects positively influenced the kinds of attitudes, beliefs or knowledge that we assume are linked to democratic engagement behaviours. The trust-in-councillor scores are harder to read: both a more trusting or less trusting score could indicate a better understanding of the true situation, and either could lead to greater democratic engagement.

In the case of these five projects, mostly small levels of change and very small sample sizes make it difficult to draw conclusions. The three projects with enough data to compare do all result in a more positive improvements, vs the control ward, in perceived understanding of 'what's going on' in the local ward and in the local council. The most positive overall changes appear to relate to the Central Bylines project: the changes in the project ward (Allens Cross) were consistently more positive than the changes in the control ward (Perry Common). Perhaps this could be attributed to the significant change of news provision in the ward – the print product distributed to a large part of the ward by Central Bylines was entirely new to the ward, compared with Newham Voices and Enfield Dispatch, which were both pre-existing newspapers in those areas.

Qualitative feedback from surveys

Both baseline and follow-up surveys in all the ten wards included one open question:

'Do you have any other comments about the local council, councillors or local news in your area?'

The most common form of answer across all wards, whether project ward or control ward, and whether baseline or follow-up, was a complaint about the council or councillors. There was also a strong theme of a lack of information or contact from councillors. Some such comments relating to the need for better information are below:

"Wish I knew who [they] are and not just on voting forms on the day."

– Response from Edmonton Green baseline survey

"There is never enough information given out... the local newspaper [used] to be delivered which was helpful and I'd like to see this brought back..."

– Edmonton Green, baseline survey

"Needs to be information out there."

– Castle Vale, baseline survey

"Would like to know more about our area and person we should contact to report or discuss issues."

– Frankley Great Park, baseline survey

"Some very hard working local people but what they do or what is available not promoted adequately."

– Allens Cross, baseline survey

"All information regarding the above is available if you have the time or are computer savvy. Most people in the perry common ward do not even know the name of there MP. There should be a paper/leaflet put the local shops for everybody to get (free of charge)."

- Perry Common, follow up survey

While we cannot draw any robust conclusions given the small number of comments in each ward survey, baseline and follow-up, there seemed to be fewer negative comments about the lack of information in the follow-up surveys versus the baseline survey in the project wards. This seems particularly true in the Enfield Dispatch ward, perhaps the result of the distribution of the newspaper to nearly every home in the project ward, or as a result of active independent candidates in the project ward. Similarly, the Newham Voices project ward, Canning Town South, saw several

comments in the baseline survey about a lack of contact from or information on the councillors, whereas the follow-up survey did not see any comments on that theme.

4.5 Impact on engagement with news media

To assess the impact of the projects on engagement with the individual publications, we measured change in a range of indicators between baseline (January 2022) and follow up (May / June 2022). Due to the heterogeneity of the publications and the data they routinely collect, the indicators used to measure engagement varied between projects, but in general reflected circulation, numbers of readers / listeners, and digital engagement. The summaries of change for four publications are presented below (it was not possible to collect this data for Southwark News), followed by broader interpretation of the changes identified.

1. Central Bylines					
		Baseline	Follow-up	Change	% change
Readership (monthly)	Total reads	30,105#	15,583	-14,522	-48.2%
	Views per article	1,141.9#	371	-770.9	-67.5%
	Av. time on site (sec)	52	63	11	21.2%
Soc. media	Total followers	12,336	18,723	6,387	51.8%
Mailing list	Total subscribers	239	397	158	66.1%

Monthly average for 2021 used as baseline, instead of figures for January 2022, due to unusually high visits to the Central Bylines website in that month, following an article that went 'viral'.

Not included in these figures is the print distribution of a special, single-issue 'Bylines Gazette' delivered to households in the project ward. The exact number of copies delivered is not known, but is estimated at around 1500.

The data for Central Bylines indicates that the project activities delivered between January and May 2022 did not have a

positive impact on people's engagement with individual articles, with total reads and views per article being considerably lower for May 2022 than the monthly average for 2021. However, there were notable increases in the average time spent on the Central Bylines site, and in the number of people subscribed to the publisher's social media and mailing list, which could have been influenced by the project activities.

2. Newham Voices

		Baseline	Follow-up	Change	% change
Readership (monthly)	Circulation	12,500	17,500	5,000	40.0%
	Estimated readers	37,500	53,500	16,000	42.7%
Soc. media	Engagements (monthly av. per post per platform)	13	13	0	0.0%
	Total followers	2,552	2,908	356	13.9%
Newsletter	Total subscribers	100	121	21	21.0%

Except for monthly average engagements per post per social media platform, which did not change, all other indicators of engagement with Newham Voices increased between baseline and follow-up. The increase in circulation and estimated readers reflects the deliberate increased print-run and distribution of

the newspaper in the run-up to the local election in May 2022, as part of the project. The modest increases in social media and newsletter subscribers suggests that the project activities may also have positively influenced digital engagement with Newham Voices.

3. Switch Radio

		Baseline	Follow-up	Change	% change
Listenership (monthly)	Estimated listeners	25,000	25,000#	0	0.0%
Soc. media	Reach (monthly av. views per news post)	301	341	40	13.3%
	Engagement (monthly av. per post per platform)	3.5	4.5	1	28.6%
	Total followers	7,638	7,820	182	2.4%
Website	Monthly av. views per page	52	161	109	209.6%
Volunteers	Total volunteers	90	104	14	15.6%
	Of which, ward-based	1	2	1	100.0%

No new survey of listeners was conducted between January and May 2022, so the follow-up estimate remains the same as the baseline estimate.

For all indicators except estimated listeners, there were increases in engagement with Switch Radio between baseline and follow-up, from a very small increase of 2.4% in social media followers, to the monthly average views per page of the website more than tripling between January and May 2022. Engaging residents directly in the process of producing local

news was identified as an important mechanism of change for the Switch Radio project. While the number of volunteers who live within the ward has only increased from one to two in that period, the slightly larger increase in total volunteers (15.6%) suggests possible impact of the project in terms of increasing direct engagement with news production.

4. Enfield Dispatch

		Baseline	Follow-up	Change	% change
Circulation		2000	4500	2500	125%
Soc. media	Monthly page views (Facebook)	140	174	34	24.3%
Website	Total users	20799	30131	9332	44.9%
	New users (past month)	18618	27994	9376	50.4%
	Monthly av. sessions per user	1.27	1.33	0.06	4.7%
	Monthly av. pages viewed per session	1.37	1.42	0.05	3.6%

There was a considerable increase in the circulation of Enfield Dispatch between January and May 2022, as the publisher increased the print run of the newspaper in March, April and May, as an intended activity for the project. Small to medium increases were seen across the other indicators, particularly in terms of

engagement with the publication's social media. As a relatively new publication, it is expected that the social media and website engagement would increase anyway during that period, but some of this increase may also have been influenced by the project activities.

Interpretation

Across the four projects for which engagement data was accessible, there is evidence of an overall increase in engagement with the publications, in terms of interaction with social media platforms and / or publication website, and subscription to newsletter or email list, across the period in which the project activities were delivered. While we cannot attribute this increase directly to the impact of the projects, it is plausible that the projects have contributed

to this increased engagement. The impact of the projects on the numbers of readers / listeners is not possible to determine, due to the challenges in estimating these figures, and the fact that for three projects (Newham Voices, Central Bylines and Enfield Dispatch) increasing the print-run of the newspaper was a specified activity within the project. For Central Bylines, as an online-only publication (aside from the one-off Gazette that was published for the project), the decrease in reads and views of articles between

baseline and follow-up may reflect the more changeable nature of the way people interact with online news sources, influenced by 'viral' articles and social media algorithms unlike traditional print media or radio.

4.6 Understanding positive change

From the primary outcome for measuring the impact of the projects on democratic engagement (voter turnout), there was positive change indicated for Southwark News, with a small increase in voter turnout, which was comparable to the borough average and greater than for the control ward. For Central Bylines, while voter turnout decreased in the project ward, this decrease was smaller than for both the control ward and city average, indicating positive change. Below we seek to describe and interpret the likely mechanisms contributing to these positive changes, drawing on the qualitative data (interviews, focus group and process evaluation information), for each project.

1. Southwark News

Process of change and impact

Through organising and filming debates between candidates on nine different local issues, and then showing and filming the reactions of four different local residents to these debates, Southwark News appeared to help increase knowledge and understanding of local political processes and issues among those residents actively involved:

"The soapbox actually did, like, let me get a feel for who I'm voting for."

– Resident interview; P01

"I got [my information] from the soapbox."

– Resident interview; P03.

This process seemed to highlight the lack of other sources of information about the local information, and challenges for some in accessing information online; and for one local resident, they indicated that Southwark News was instrumental in their decision to vote: *"I vote because of Southwark News"* [Resident interview; P02]. Engagement with the debates was also used as a measure of the integrity of political candidates, by some residents, with one interviewee indicating they would not vote for someone who had not participated in the debates.

These activities were viewed by other stakeholders as helping to increase awareness and enthusiasm for the local elections, and to encourage residents to find out more about the process:

"There was definitely more engagement, people were more keen to find out what was going on."

– Councillor interview; P04.

From the perspective of the project organisers, they felt there was considerable interest in the reactions of the 'soapbox' residents, as they were able to *"bulldoze through the waffle"* [Project Lead] of the candidates in the debates. The format of publishing articles and videos of the residents' reactions was thought to help make the

"voter seem the most important" [Project Lead] within the democratic process. For the newspaper itself the Project Lead felt the project had helped to increase the status and reputation of the paper in its coverage of politics, and had helped to cement their understanding of local issues and levels of knowledge about the local area among residents.

Facilitators and barriers

The project organisers described the value of collaborating with local stakeholders, such as a local university who provided access to resources for filming the debates and student journalists supported the work of the project. The commitment of the residents to the 'soapbox' process over time was important; only one resident dropped out from being involved. In terms of the publishing of content from the soapbox process, having short videos accompanying the text articles was viewed as effective for engaging audiences.

More challenging was realising the low levels of understanding and interest in the project among many residents at the beginning, which meant the project staff had to work very hard to engage people: "politics turns people off" [Project Lead]. They felt it was difficult to connect with residents beyond the 'usual suspects', and despite enthusiasm to participate in the project, there was continuing scepticism among residents about their ability to influence political decisions or engage with councillors:

"No matter what we do or say I feel like the council have their own agenda and they just gonna push it."

– Resident interview; P01

From the perspective of other stakeholders, there was no engagement in the project from candidates from the Conservative Party, and there was a perception among one interviewee of the political bias of the newspaper which might have negatively impacted their ability to build relationships with candidates:

"It's very difficult to want to build an effective relationship if you know that they are not impartial."

– Councillor interview; P04

Finally, from a more practical perspective, the project organisers reflected on the considerable amount of time and resources required to undertake this kind of activity, particularly in terms of editing lots of video footage into short, engaging clips.

Impact of project on voter turnout

The enthusiasm towards the soapbox project suggests that the project activities were well received and may have led to greater engagement with the newspaper and its coverage of the local elections. However, it is not possible to say definitively that the small increase in voter turnout in the project ward (even compared to the control ward) is attributable to the project, given the same increase in voter turnout seen

at the borough level. There may also be other factors contributing to the increased turnout in the project ward, such as changes in the demographic characteristics of the population, shaped in part by changes in recent years to private and social housing provision in the area, and increasing gentrification.

2. Central Bylines:

Process of change and impact

The project activities that facilitated face-to-face engagement with local residents in Allen's Cross ward, including leafletting, vox pops and conversations, proved valuable for helping the project organisers understand local issues and build connections. The door-to-door delivery of the printed gazette publication (eight pages of coverage of local issues and the election) also prompted conversations with residents on the doorstep, and led to further stories for the paper. According to the project organisers and interviewed stakeholders, there was a sense that residents were pleased to receive the gazette as a source of "objective information" about the election, and more so than receiving political leaflets and other campaign materials. It was also noted that the physical copy was likely valuable for people in the ward who lack internet access. Unfortunately, no interviews with local residents could be conducted so their direct perspectives on this cannot be confirmed.

From the perspective of other stakeholders, the level of information provided about the local elections

through the gazette and other outputs was considered valuable for increasing understanding among residents of candidates, and of the role of their local councillors:

"[Residents would not know] what their councillor did unless they've had a very personal need to get in touch with [them]."

– Stakeholder interview; P10

In turn, publishing information about local issues in the run up to the election was viewed to be beneficial for other local organisations working to address these issues. For example, the lead of a local 'pantry' (food bank) project reflected on the impact of coverage of their project in a Central Bylines article:

"We had more volunteers coming through and more local residents wanting to join up."

– Stakeholder interview; P10

Facilitators and barriers

The physical nature of the eight-page gazette with coverage of the local elections was well received by residents, and as described above, helped to generate more conversations and engagement through the door-to-door delivery process. Second, the perceived impartiality of Central Bylines as a publisher was valued by wider stakeholders, contributing to perceptions of trust in the "objective information" about candidates presented in the outputs:

“What I thought Bylines did very well indeed is that you absolutely had no sense of any political bias it was literally factual reporting.”

– Stakeholder interview; P10

The project team faced some challenges in delivering activities as intended, including not being able to arrange hustings and struggling to engage student journalists as originally planned, which meant reduced capacity on the ground for writing stories and knocking on doors. They also struggled to engage with some candidates, with two refusing to contribute to articles or the other activities. Part of this may reflect a limited, existing local identity of Central Bylines in the ward, meaning it was more difficult to establish relationships and engage people within the timeframe. Project leads also reflected on the lack of local meaning of the ward boundaries for Allen's Cross area, which meant that confining activities and coverage of local issues to Allen's Cross ward only was difficult and may have limited the interest and engagement of residents and other stakeholders.

Impact of project on voter turnout:

The project activities did not lead to an increase in voter turnout in Allen's Cross ward. However, the considerable increase in social media and newsletter subscribers to Central Bylines since the beginning of the project suggests possible increased awareness of local issues and the election process through the project outputs. This might have been one factor (among others) that led to a smaller decrease in voter turnout in Allen's Cross than in the

control ward and across Birmingham as a whole.

4.7 Understanding mixed and lack of change

For the remaining three projects (Enfield Dispatch, Newham Voices and Switch Radio), change in voter turnout in their respective wards was a more mixed picture: either performing better than the control ward (Enfield Dispatch) or better than the borough / city average (Newham Voices and Switch Radio), but not both. Again, drawing on qualitative data, we describe and interpret these mixed changes below.

3. Enfield Dispatch

Process of change and impact

The project lead described seeking to engage with residents in public spaces, such as conducting vox pops in the local shopping centre, which helped to generate information about local issues and also raise awareness among residents of the newspaper. The response to the articles published from the vox pops was positive, with people posting replies to and sharing the articles on social media, which suggested:

“... more chatter around social issues and local connections.”

– Project lead

This is reflected in data indicating increased engagement with the articles on the Enfield Dispatch website, and considerable increase in the number of subscribers to the paper's social media channels.

The organisation of a hustings event was also considered to be valuable for creating space for residents and candidates to engage, which is typically “really rare”. While not all candidates attended the hustings, the project lead reported positive feedback from the residents who attended, who were “very grateful” that this type of event had been organised. There was also a sense that the hustings had helped to establish the reputation and credibility of the paper “*among politicians and people who came to the meeting*” [Project lead]. Through the delivery of the project, a key relationship was established with the (future) deputy leader of the council, which was considered valuable for Enfield Dispatch and its local engagement going forwards.

Unfortunately, no interviews with local residents or other stakeholders could be conducted in connection with Enfield Dispatch, so it is not possible to report directly the views of these people on the change and impact from project activities.

Facilitators and barriers

Local interest in a borough-wide issue of the proposal for a new incinerator helped attract candidates to the hustings and contributed to the discussion and engagement of residents who attended the event. Also, establishing a visible presence in the ward, for example through circulating the physical paper and engaging with residents on the street, was thought to help raise the profile of the outputs.

However, the lack of interest from the opposition candidates (apart from two independent candidates), who “didn’t engage at all” with the project activities may have undermined engagement and perceived impartiality of the newspaper’s reporting and the hustings event.

Impact on voter turnout

The decrease in voter turnout in the project ward was lower than the control ward, but greater than the average for the borough. The lack of clear impact on voter turnout may reflect the fact that Enfield Dispatch is a relatively new publication in the area, and coming in later to the Impact Fund programme, may have been more limited in its capacity to deliver project activities within the timeframe.

4. Newham Voices

Process of change and impact

The project leads identified the different types of face-to-face engagement embedded in their activities, including conversations with residents at the local supermarket and distributing leaflets and newsletters, as valuable for making connections with residents and other stakeholders. This led to identifying local issues to report in articles and in some cases, fed into other efforts to increase democratic engagement, such as prompting the future mayor of the borough to suggest working with Newham Voices to hold “townhall-style meetings in the coming period” [Project lead 1]. Encouraging local residents to write articles was also influential, both in terms of producing content on local issues and the election, and for increasing the authors’ own understanding:

"I think if I hadn't been involved with the paper I probably would know less than nothing."

– Resident interview P06

The organisation of hustings – the only ones held in the borough – was valued by both local candidates and residents, for enabling connection and engagement. One local candidate, who lacked some connection to the ward, felt the hustings helped them to understand more about the concerns of the local residents:

"I think in terms of local issues, yes, I've definitely learned a little bit more... So I was really just, it was more of a fact finding mission for me. And just seeing just wanting to meet local people."

– Candidate interview, P08

Residents also found the hustings engaging, enjoying that the event revealed a local *"appetite for political engagement"* [Resident interview, P05], and that the quality of discussion and questions was high. While not all candidates attended the hustings, the project leads reported that residents respected the engagement from the different parties, despite being a *"partisan crowd"*, and that the (opposition) Conservative candidate received *"the biggest cheer"* for their efforts in the debate.

The Newham Voices project leads felt that the activities had impacted considerably on the profile of the

newspaper in the borough, among residents and other stakeholders, and perhaps reflected in the increase in social media and newsletter subscribers during the period. They reported that their raised profile had enabled them to apply for a project which would bring in more funding to the newspaper. Their coverage of the local election was praised by candidates for being *"independent"* [Candidate interview P07] and offering *"factually correct journalism"* [Candidate interview P08], and the project leads felt the paper was seen as an *"honest broker"*. However, one candidate suggested the reporting in the paper of the borough-level mayoral election was biased towards the sitting candidate over the opposition. In one resident interview, the trustworthiness of Newham Voices' reporting was contrasted with another local publication which was described as:

"just the mouthpiece of the council because they rely on revenues from advertising from the council."

– Resident interview, P05

However, some activities did not take place as planned. The project leads decided not to target first-time voters and seek to engage school students, as they originally intended to do, so this potential mechanism of change did not occur.

Facilitators and barriers

Finding appropriate space in the community to meet and engage with residents face-to-face, and

to hold hustings, was identified as highly valuable by the project leads. Space within a local supermarket was recognised as *"the hub of the community"* and facilitated this interaction. Also, connecting with organisations and stakeholders who were already engaging with the local community was effective for assisting the project leads in their work. They described how the community outreach team at the local supermarket became *"a kind of panel to guide the activities"* and engagement, with some members writing articles for the paper. At the borough level, there have been ongoing efforts to increase democratic activity, recognising the historical dominance of the Labour party in the council. These wider activities may have facilitated awareness and engagement in Canning Town South ward, but may also have contributed to the lack of clear impact from the project on voter turnout, compared with the control ward.

The political context of the ward and the wider borough were identified as challenging, in terms of a wider sense of disengagement and disenfranchisement from local politics, with the council being seen by many as a *"one party state... [and] people think nothing's going to change"* [Candidate interview P07]. This was echoed by a resident, who felt the council did not want hustings to be held, because they did not want *"to be held to account"* [Resident interview, P05]. The project leads also identified the "neglect" of the ward by all the political parties, as it was not considered an important "target" for campaigning:

"the parties didn't put their effort into Canning Town South, they go to the fought areas."

– Project lead 2

In delivering the project activities, challenges were faced in resourcing the door-to-door delivery, which was labour intensive. The project leads reflected that having more digital provision, such as print and online versions of articles, and even live-streaming and / or recording events to make them available online would have helped increase their online presence and reach more people.

Impact on voter turnout

The engagement activities, hustings and increased print run have likely contributed to the profile of the newspaper, reflected in the increase in newsletter subscribers and social media followers. However, the decrease in voter turnout in Canning Town South ward was smaller than the decrease for the borough overall, but greater than the decrease in the control ward. A single-issue campaign "erupted" in the control ward, relating to the threatened closure of a local city farm and targeted by the Green party, and might have contributed to the difference in voter turnout between the control and project wards. Further, changes to ward boundaries and polling stations prior to this local election might have influenced voter turnout in the project and control wards.

5. Switch Radio

Process of change and impact

Much of the project activity delivered by Switch Radio was articles written and published on the radio's website on key events happening within and beyond the ward, such as reporting on the death of the local MP in early 2022, and on issues arising within the ward that would affect residents, such as the organisation of a mobile recycling service. Nearer to the elections, articles were published with key information relevant to the democratic process, including sharing information about candidates standing to be ward councillor, as well as information about voting in the parliamentary by-election which occurred in March. Articles written for the website were also used to inform the content of various shows across the radio's broadcast schedule, such as a weekly magazine show which was broadcast for the first few months of the project period. While Switch Radio captured social media engagement with these articles, difficulty gaining interviews with residents means it is not possible to identify how this sharing of information about local issues and the democratic process influenced resident knowledge or motivation to vote.

A hustings event ahead of the by-election was organised by a community group in the area, to enable the parliamentary candidates to engage with residents. This was covered by Switch Radio and an article and full transcript of the event were published on the website. Although not an activity delivered by Switch Radio directly, one of the project

leads described the event in positive terms, saying that residents "*seemed interested and engaged*" and "*gave candidates a grilling*".

Among the intention to engage local residents in the news production process, Switch Radio invited residents to contribute their own stories to a dedicated portal on the website. The portal generated considerable interest (indicated by the number of views of this page on the website), though no stories were received from residents via the portal. Switch Radio also invited local young people to write for the news team as volunteers. They reported that they received only one application for this, and this did not result in the volunteer role being taken up.

Facilitators and barriers

Having a strong online presence was considered by the project lead to be valuable for facilitating people's engagement with the information conveyed through the news articles, with the facility to listen back to radio programmes later via the website. This is likely reflected in the increases in engagement with the website, news articles and social media, during the evaluation period.

Existing relationships between the radio station and key community groups and stakeholders was considered valuable, helping establish support for the project and facilitating access to key people for interviews for articles: "*lots of people wanted to help us deliver the project to improve the pride in the area*" [Project

lead 1]. The leader of Birmingham Council indicated support for the project, stating recognition of "how important" local journalism is. However, the project lead also reflected that bringing some of these stakeholders into the process earlier, for example through inviting them to join a radio phone-in for residents, might have helped share the key messages about the local elections more widely. As a newly appointed journalist to Switch Radio, the project lead felt it took some time for her to build 'credibility' with some local stakeholders, to be able to engage them in interviews.

The death of a long-standing, local MP in January and subsequent by-election in March may have been both a facilitator and barrier to increasing democratic engagement in the local elections. The by-election may have raised local residents' awareness of the democratic process, with national and local media coverage widespread. This raised awareness may also explain how Switch Radio were able to recruit 55 respondents to the baseline Castle Vale resident survey as part of the project, a much higher number than in the other project wards. A local stakeholder perceived an increased use of social media by parliamentary candidates in the run-up to the by-election to engage with residents:

"... quite a number of the candidates were reaching out to residents to say, talk to us, you know, engage with [us]. So that was that was... new."

– Stakeholder interview, P09

However, the attention on the by-election may also have detracted from attention on the local elections, and possibly have contributed to voter 'fatigue' and disengagement. The project lead identified a continuing disinterest with the local elections among residents, who seemed to indicate they wanted to:

"... just wait for the general election... local councillors aren't going to make any change."

– Project lead 1

Finally, a lack of physical print presence was identified as another possible barrier to the extent to which the Switch Radio activities reached local residents. A local stakeholder described the value of a local newspaper in another area, and identified that residents are *"really keen on... a physical format of news"* [Stakeholder interview, P09].

Impact on voter turnout

Voter turnout in Castle Vale ward decreased, whereas the turnout in the control ward increased (by a similar amount). However, the decrease in Castle Vale was smaller than the decrease in Birmingham overall. The control ward sits in a different parliamentary constituency than Castle Vale, so was not directly affected by the by-election; this may account for some of the difference in voter turnout between the wards. It is not clear from the evaluation that the activities conducted by Switch Radio have influenced voter turnout.

5. Key Insights and Conclusions

5.1 Overview of impact

The evaluation of PINF's Impact Fund aimed to assess whether local news publishing activities can influence democratic engagement, by focusing on five local news projects in Birmingham and London and their effects on citizen engagement with local elections in May 2022. The evaluation does not provide conclusive evidence of impact of the projects on the primary outcomes of democratic engagement: voter turnout and voter registration. While there is some indication of improved voter turnout in project wards compared with control wards and / or city or borough averages, these changes are typically very small and a causal relationship with the projects cannot be established. In three project wards there were small increases in voter registration, but typically this was accompanied by similar or greater increases in the control wards. For one project (Enfield Dispatch), there was a decrease in voter registration, which was greater than the decrease in the control ward.

Possible reasons for a lack of conclusive, positive impact on these primary outcomes of democratic engagement include the relatively short time period for delivery of

projects and the outcome of interest (voter turnout and registration in May 2022). The four-month timescale may be too short for the effects of the projects to be felt among the local populations, and for this to influence voter behaviour. Project leads' accounts of their experiences emphasised the value of building relationships with residents and local stakeholders, so it is perhaps unsurprising that more change was not seen, given what is known from wider community engagement literature about the time needed to establish these kinds of relationships²¹.

Across all the projects there were some limitations in delivering their intended activities, as detailed in the theories of change, due to lack of time and other resources. This may have influenced the capacity for these projects to influence certain mechanisms of change, such as not being able to engage many residents in the production of news. Other, contextual factors may have influenced both the potential impact of the projects and the measurement of this impact. These include:

- Changes in ward boundaries between the 2018 and 2022 elections for some project and control wards, which may

have modified the demographic make-up of these wards, and influenced the measurement of change in voter registration, as well as turnout.

- The wider political context, post-Brexit and following COVID-19, which may have influenced motivation towards voting more generally, and perhaps particularly in areas with low levels of voter engagement.

Through the evaluation we also attempted to measure the impact of the projects on residents' perceptions of democratic processes and local media, through a baseline and follow-up survey. Challenges with recruiting sufficient participants in the project and control wards at each timepoint, plus the fact that these were two cross-sectional samples, rather than the same sample followed up, mean that the strength of the findings from the survey are limited. The results indicated some improvement in (some) project wards, relative to control wards, for several of the variables, including knowledge of what's happening locally, knowledge of the local council and how to contact a councillor. Relating to local news, there was some improvement in scores for how well local news media covers local issues, and trust in local news. However, there were also some decreases in scores between baseline and follow-up, relative to control wards, for some variables, so overall, the evidence from the survey results is inconclusive.

The qualitative data from the survey give a little more insight into potential mechanisms of change, particularly in terms of the recognised need for access

to more information about local issues and democratic processes, which was a prominent theme. The apparent reduction in negative comments about a lack of local information in project wards between baseline and follow-up is suggestive of the value of the projects in terms of providing better access to local information.

5.2 Impact on publishers and local news

Despite the lack of evidence of positive impact on democratic engagement, the evaluation has indicated increased levels of engagement with the publications involved in the programme, via their website, social media platforms and / or newsletter subscriptions. Further, those involved, as well as wider stakeholders, recognised the positive impact of the projects on the status of the publications locally, including the perceived trustworthiness of the reporting of local politics, and the value of the provision of independent local news. Amid concerns about the decreasing quality and independence of local news in recent years²², this is a positive indication of benefits arising from the projects.

The project leads also identified the value to them of being able to establish and build relationships with residents, community groups and wider stakeholders in the local area, through their project activities. They felt this helped them get a better understanding of the issues affecting residents in the local areas, to inform future news coverage. This also gives a sense of the incremental process through which local news publishers might be able to

build relationships of trust with residents and stakeholders over time, which may help to influence democratic engagement further down the line, as suggested in evidence around successful community engagement²³. This indicates potential for local news publishing to be what one project lead described as a “community engagement vehicle”, through creating (neutral) spaces for residents, local politicians and other stakeholders to meet and engage, as well as share information about local issues and concerns. As such, this might plausibly lead, over time, to increased understanding, motivation and capacity for democratic engagement among local populations.

5.3 Facilitators, barriers and mechanisms of change

The evaluation highlighted the perceived value of news publishers conducting and / or facilitating face-to-face engagement with residents, such as through organising hustings, leafletting, door-knocking and having a physical presence in community spaces. This might lead to change by giving attention and voice to those who feel overlooked, particularly in wards neglected by political parties ahead of elections, if they feel the wards are not worth contesting. Further, it could increase the status and recognition of local news publications, potentially contributing to their credibility as sources of local information.

Second, the evaluation suggests the importance of having multiple forms of media for publishing local news, both online and in print. Being able to share

information and invite engagement across different platforms and spaces, including a physical news format, might be particularly important in areas with low levels of democratic engagement, where populations might also face digital inequalities. This finding seems particularly important given the increasing use of digital formats for hyperlocal news²⁴.

Third, the evaluation also highlighted a range of challenges faced by the project leads in delivering their planned activities and engaging residents and local politicians. A lack of suitable space in communities for meeting people and arranging events such as hustings is likely to be a barrier to news publishers facilitating engagement. It highlights the work involved in building the right kinds of connections locally, to help create access to resources to support news publishing's role in facilitating engagement. Project leads also identified challenges in connecting with local residents (directly or through news outputs) who lacked knowledge and understanding of local elections and / or were disengaged and ‘switched off’ at the mention of politics. This disengagement is a characteristic of areas with low voter turnout and populations facing multiple disadvantage. It suggests the effort and creativity needed, over time, by news publishers to find ways to connect with different residents and help to build knowledge of local democratic structures and processes.

Mechanisms of change

There were five potential mechanisms of change identified through the projects’ theories of change, which underpinned

the design of the evaluation. From the findings of the evaluation, it appears there is a potentially valuable role for local news publishing in i) *providing information about democratic processes* and ii) *providing opportunities for discussion and debate*, which are often lacking in areas with low levels of democratic engagement.

There is a weaker suggestion from the evaluation of the value of mechanism iii) *building local connections through local news publishing*. The findings indicate that this has occurred through project activities, and has been perceived as valuable by publishers for raising their status and credibility as a news source. However, there is a lack of evidence that these connections have shaped how local issues were covered or influenced candidates' campaigns, or residents' views of candidates, as theorised.

Lastly, there is a lack of evidence that mechanisms of change iv) *supporting resident involvement in local news production* or v) *representation of people like us* occurred or were influential. Due to resource constraints across several projects, there were few examples of resident involvement in local news production. While the 'soapboxers' of

Southwark News were a popular and engaging source of news content, it was not possible to determine from the evaluation that the representative dimension of this process influenced other residents' motivation to vote. These latter three theorised mechanisms of change remain plausible, but would require further evaluation.

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- 24 Tenor, C. (2018). "Hyperlocal News: After the Hype". LSE. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/Polis-Hyperlocal-News-report-Jul-2018.pdf>

6. Recommendations

The Impact Fund was the Public Interest News Foundation's first attempt at action research. It serves as valuable experience, with lessons learned on journalism's connection with democratic engagement and on the nature of research into the impact of local journalism. This section makes recommendations based on the lessons of the design, process and evaluation of the Impact Fund, with a view to being of use to other funders interested in the impact of journalism, and to PINF's work in future.

6.1 On boosting democratic engagement through journalism

In this section we recognise the value of in-person work, print products, sufficient time, and innovation, in boosting democratic engagement. We also recognise the limits of what journalism alone can achieve and the difficulty of sufficient resourcing.

First, publishers can boost democratic engagement by undertaking face-to-face conversations, door-knocking and hosting in-person events. All these activities led

to successes for the Impact Fund projects. These activities are in and of themselves democratic engagement, and they work to build trust between journalists and residents, councillors or candidates – growing the possibility of additional impact through the information and stories provided and shared between residents and publishers.

Second, print newspapers still have value; their existence and distribution may help boost democratic engagement. This is perhaps because as a tangible, tactile product, print newspapers seem more real, more salient than their digital equivalent – the print product occupies physical space in the immediate locality. Again, this perhaps builds trust, and in this Impact Fund, seemed to work particularly well when combined with face-to-face – for example, where journalists personally handed out the newspapers and used it to inspire conversations about a place. Door-to-door distribution of a print product also helps flatten the information inequality caused by unequal online access. Ideally, a mix of multiple media could be used to maximise reach and impact.

Third, sufficient time must be allowed for local journalists to do their work, build networks and trust, and, over time, influence democratic engagement. A reciprocal trusting arrangement cannot arise overnight. Even an electoral ward, the smallest political geography, has an average population of 10,000 people; and even the publishers who had been in their communities longest thought they needed more time to connect with residents. A long-term presence in the community, including where journalists live in the area served, providing useful information, making useful connections, seems necessary for reciprocal trust and engagement to build.

Fourth, there is room for innovation and finding new approaches to the production or delivery of content may be necessary to create new routes to democratic engagement. For the Impact Fund, this was best demonstrated by Southwark News' 'Gogglebox' approach, which tried to centre a 'people-like-us' view of the news.

These approaches, even at a small scale, require a significant investment of resources by a publisher, at a time when advertising revenues are low, and revenue from readers (a cover price, a subscription or a donation) is not significant enough to make up the shortfall. The typical independent news publishers' surplus is just £3,000 per year – giving publishers very little room to play with to invest in time-consuming in-person events or to attempt innovative new approaches. The positive benefits of journalism on democratic engagement may only be realised when local journalism is sufficiently resourced.

Finally, the limits of what journalism can achieve, at least in the elections area of democratic engagement, should be recognised. Independent or hyperlocal news publishers cannot work miracles in the face of an electoral system with significant challenges. In this Impact Fund, project leads faced challenges getting candidates to engage with news media, especially in 'safe seats' where no real efforts were made by opposition candidates to win the seat.

6.2 On the use of action research to understand the impact of journalism

Resourcing

While it will depend on the field of impact being researched, it is likely that any intervention needs a significant amount of work, over time, to result in measurable impact. Quick wins may be desirable, but in this field are hard to find. Ideally, the grant recipients in this Impact Fund might have had at least 12 months of work before the elections. Add to this the work done in designing the approach and in conducting the baseline and post-event surveys, we might estimate the minimum length of an action research project at 18 months.

It is also important to consider the number of interventions made, given the budget. With five interventions, plus five control wards, this first Impact Fund demanded a great deal of evidence collection, which in retrospect seems overly ambitious given the fund's budget. Fewer, larger interventions may be more likely to have an effect and to make it possible for that effect to be measurable.

Data collection

It makes sense to 'piggyback' on high-quality existing data sources. This Impact Fund relied for its headline measures on data already (relatively) reliably collected and published by local authorities, making it easy to compare rock solid measures of behaviour. On anything other than a very large research budget, any future action research will have to rely on similar such sources.

While using existing data sources for primary measures of impact, programmes like this should allow significant time and resource for collecting secondary measures of impact, such as recruiting survey and interview respondents. In the case of this Impact Fund, significantly shifting behaviour, in terms of voting or registering to vote, was always likely to be a stretch, which was why it was important to look for attitude or knowledge shift via local surveys, and to look for stories of how exactly residents related to local journalism. These proved significantly harder to recruit for than planned. Providing an incentive for survey completion likely helped boost respondents and could be used more broadly.

Choice of intervention areas

Any approach designed to test the impact of local journalism needs to decide on the geography in question. This Impact Fund found significant difficulties collecting new data at a ward or hyperlocal level. It seems that the smaller the area, the harder it is to survey: none of the research agencies contacted in the design phase were able to recruit respondents at a ward level, and attempts to advertise the surveys locally

using targeted digital ads were ineffective. Future projects may require a focus on a broader geography or a more significant research budget to pay for postal surveys or door-to-door surveys.

Several of the project leads felt that they could have achieved more impact working over a wider area – either at local authority level or an area covering several wards – in contrast to the assumption in the design stage that the hyperlocal focus would concentrate resources and make a measurable effect more likely. This may be related to the identity of a place in local democratic engagement. In some electoral wards, there is a relatively well-defined community, such as in Castle Vale ward – but in others, nobody would identify themselves as being from the area delineated by the ward boundary (e.g. nobody referred to themselves as 'from Allens Cross' in Allens Cross ward).

It is also important to consider the likelihood of change in an area, and what pre-existing conditions may affect any change. This Impact Fund leaned towards focusing on areas with poor existing voter turnout, which often related to areas of higher deprivation, and perhaps this only made change less likely. A more mixed group of pre-existing levels of democratic engagement could be chosen next time.

Lastly in terms of area choices, tapping local knowledge at the design stage could help gain quicker insights into the local context. Going beyond raw data on demographics and political make up would help guide decision-making on the appropriate local areas in

which to intervene. In this Impact Fund, local knowledge may have changed our choice of experimental areas - and may have helped us avoid areas with boundary changes.

Research design

Although not a problem for the 'objective' evidence given by data on behaviour, it is worth having regard to minimising 'demand characteristics' in secondary measures of impact, i.e. the risk of people telling the researchers what they think the researchers want to know, rather than what is true. This risk exists in any participant research but may be accentuated where the researcher is also the grantmaker: project leads and even residents may adapt their responses to fit a desired narrative. With more significant resourcing, it may be possible to employ an independent and condition-blind research facility.

It is also important to balance the 'action' and 'research' elements of action research, such as the needs for grantees to deliver the intervention and their non-project responsibilities, and the requirement for them to support data collection. In this Impact Fund, project leads were often best-placed to collect data, such as recruiting survey or interview respondents, that was vital to understanding impact, but all project leads had limited time to do so. If the priority is research, rather than grantmaking, future Impact Funds could consider a more contractual relationship with publishers.

7. Future Plans

To make the case for the importance of local journalism, there needs to be better evidence as to its positive impact on individuals, communities and society. It is widely believed that local journalism matters and that its decline, in both quality and quantity, over the past few decades has had deleterious consequences for communities – but can we prove exactly how it matters, what effect it has and why it has it?

In running this first Impact Fund, PINF has learned a great deal about the challenges and opportunities in taking a quasi-experimental approach operational in complex real-world environments. We would like now to iterate and improve on the approach, either remaining in the field of democratic engagement, or expanding to other areas of impact. There are other research methods that could be used to build the understanding of impact, from looking at historical data, to more ethnographic approaches. Ideally, we would take advantage of several such methodologies. For now, our status as a funder and researcher leads us to seek more opportunities for the action-research approach.

PINF believes that the 'impact fund' approach could be extended into other fields. At the launch event for the interim research findings of the Impact Fund, PINF led a workshop resulting in many enthusiastic suggestions for areas of impact that could be tested, such as crime and justice, community cohesion, economic growth, the environment, or public health, and proxies that could be measured to indicate impact. We look forward to taking this work forward.

Contact us

Public Interest News Foundation welcomes questions, comments or suggestions about this or future editions of the Impact Fund.

Please email:

contact@publicinterestnews.org.uk

Appendices

Appendix A: Theories of Change

Five theories of change are here:
<http://tiny.cc/ImpactFundToCs>

Appendix B: Mechanisms of Change

Through the process of developing the individual projects' theories of change, five mechanisms of change were identified that were common to most or all the projects. These mechanisms of change are the processes through which local news publishing activities can be theorised to impact on democratic engagement, as identified in the outcomes for each project.

The five mechanisms of change are:

- i. *Providing information:* on election process, on candidates, on local issues, on importance of voting, that is considered to be of interest and relevance to residents. This reflects the assumption that access to more information, and information that is relevant and of interest, will increase understanding among residents of the local democratic process and the value of voting, thus influencing motivation to vote.
- ii. *Providing opportunity for discussion and debate:* deliberative engagement; enabling voices to be heard; identifying issues and what matters. This reflects the assumption that encouraging and enabling residents to engage in discussions will increase their understanding of local issues, their awareness of the democratic process, and their confidence to engage in local democracy.
- iii. *Building local connections:* between news outlets and local residents / community organisations / candidates; between residents and other community stakeholders; between residents and councillors / candidates / political parties. This reflects the assumption that building local connections will help establish closer dialogue between residents and candidates, which will increase understanding of local issues, thus influencing the responsiveness of candidates / councillors, and the perceived accountability and relevance of the democratic process to residents. In turn, this will mean residents will be more motivated to engage in the democratic process.
- iv. *Supporting resident involvement in local news production:* enabling voices to be heard; conscientisation or raising consciousness of social and political structures; building trust with local news outlet; empowerment. This reflects the assumption that being involved in producing local news is a form of democratic engagement itself, in that it enables residents to contribute directly to the circulation of information that can influence decision-making. Additionally, being involved in local news production is likely to expose residents to the other three mechanisms listed above.
- v. *Representation of 'people like us':* the visibility of 'ordinary' local people taking interest in and discussing the local elections; the 'Gogglebox' mechanism. This reflects the assumption that people who would otherwise be disengaged from the democratic process may take more interest and become motivated to engage through seeing people 'like them' discussing local issues and taking an interest in the local elections. Through watching, reading and / or commenting on the discussions of people who are seen to represent, or resemble other groups within

the local population, residents may feel more connected to the local elections, take more interest in the process and then be more motivated to vote, and engage further with local democracy. This mechanism will have some overlap with resident involvement in local news production.

Appendix C: Links to Project Outputs

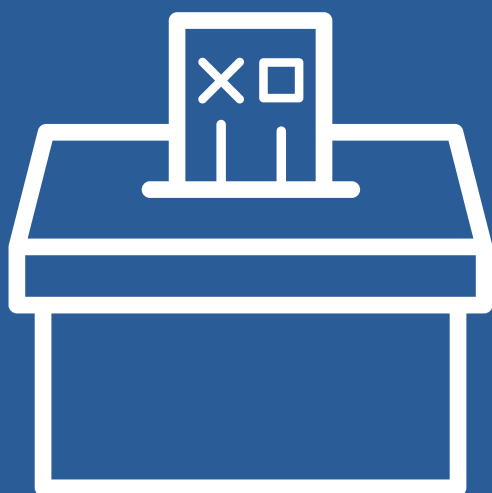
The links below represent some of the outputs produced by publishers for the Impact Fund. The links are not comprehensive, but give a sense of the work produced. Switch Radio does not link to archived radio programmes and so those project outputs are not represented here.

Central Bylines: [Allen's Cross Gazette](#) (one-off print edition)

Enfield Dispatch: [March 2022 edition](#); [April 2022 edition](#), [May 2022 edition](#), [June 2022 edition](#)

Newham Voices: [February 2022 edition](#); [June 2022 edition](#)

Southwark News: [Series of posts related to the Soapbox project](#).



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