



# where we belong

The trends shaping communities across the UK

# setting the stage for thriving communities

**Rick de Blaby, Chief Executive, Get Living**

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of East Village, the former 2012 Athletes' Village, it has been an incredible privilege to watch this community come to life. We've learned so much over the decade – we could fill a whole book on this – but as neighbourhood creators, one of our biggest learnings has been about belonging. What belonging means to a place, to a community and to people. How it impacts their lives. And how we can nurture it.

The things that people value when they come to one of our neighbourhoods, and the things they value while they're in them, are completely different. What starts as quite transactional (good processes, a high quality home, a helpful team) and the attraction of a shiny new building with great amenities, soon becomes the experience they have here, the friendships and other relationships they make and the positive habits they form. This is what they value – the feeling that they belong somewhere.

We, at Get Living, do not create communities. People create communities. Our job is to create the stage for these communities to grow and thrive. Understanding this from our early days has led us to develop our unique proposition and it is the success of that proposition that has seen us become one of the UK's leading built-to-rent companies. What started as one neighbourhood in East Village, before anyone had heard of build-to-



rent, has become three thriving neighbourhoods, in London and Manchester, with four more to come in the next two years. We know we have an approach that works.

This report is a celebration of these communities and the sense of belonging that has grown out of that first neighbourhood at East Village over the past ten years. But as we continue to grow and learn, we want to go further than that. We want to better understand what shapes vibrant communities across the whole of the UK. What kinds of trends contribute to our sense of togetherness? What does it mean to feel a sense

of belonging and how does it really impact us? And what do we need to do to nurture it further? To help answer these questions, we've worked with Censuswide to survey 10,000 people across the country and 100 of our Get Living residents. This report will delve into what we've found.

What has really struck me from the research is that there is a clear connection between a person's sense of belonging and their physical and mental health – 65% of those who rated their mental health and wellbeing as good had a high sense of belonging (versus 38% with poor health). Interestingly, Greater London had the most instances of a high sense of belonging (38%). It may seem at odds with stereotypes – but, as we know, London is a rich tapestry of “villages” with their own identity and clearly somewhere that belonging can thrive. We also found that those in build-to-rent housing reported the highest (61%) sense of belonging in their communities. It feels good to know we play a part in that.

Everyone's experience of what belonging means to them is different. But it all speaks to the visceral human need for connections and security. The ability to socialise and have the stage on which to build the life that you want for yourself. When I walk around East Village this is what I see. Families together having fun. I see the independent, entrepreneurial businesses that have grown out of East Village. I see people enjoying these amenities – creating connections and living their lives. I see pride, enterprise, community and social good. I see belonging.

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# belonging: a snapshot

**Belonging:** "A feeling of being connected to, and supported by, the communities and the neighbourhood that you are part of (i.e. where you live, your workplace, your friendship groups)."

Survey sample size: 10,000 participants surveyed across the UK (May 2023)

**Togetherness:** "The positive feeling of being united with other people in friendship and understanding."

**↑ 15.5m**

people with a high sense of belonging

**↓ 20m**

people with a low sense of belonging

**63%**

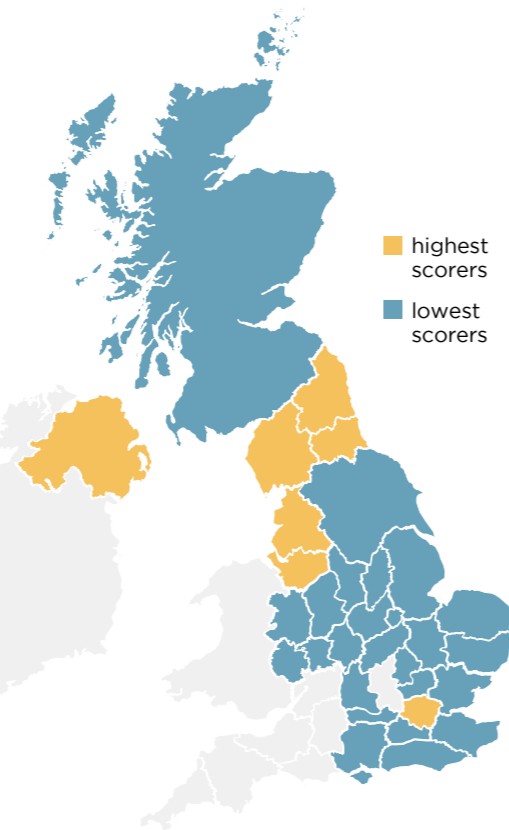
report an overall sense of belonging

**52%**

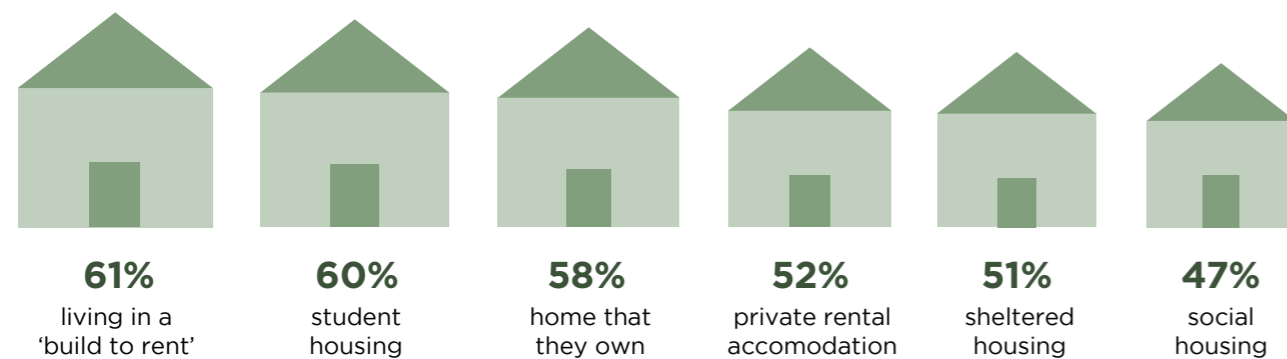
have a sense of belonging at work

## Regional scores for high sense of belonging

<b>38%</b> Greater London	<b>27%</b> East of England
<b>33%</b> Northern Ireland	<b>27%</b> South East
<b>30%</b> North East	<b>27%</b> Scotland
<b>29%</b> North West	<b>26%</b> West Midlands
	<b>26%</b> Yorkshire & The Humber



## People who feel a sense of belonging in their local community



## Considerations when choosing a place to live



**57%**  
being safe and secure

**54%**  
price and affordability

**45%**  
location and proximity to amenities

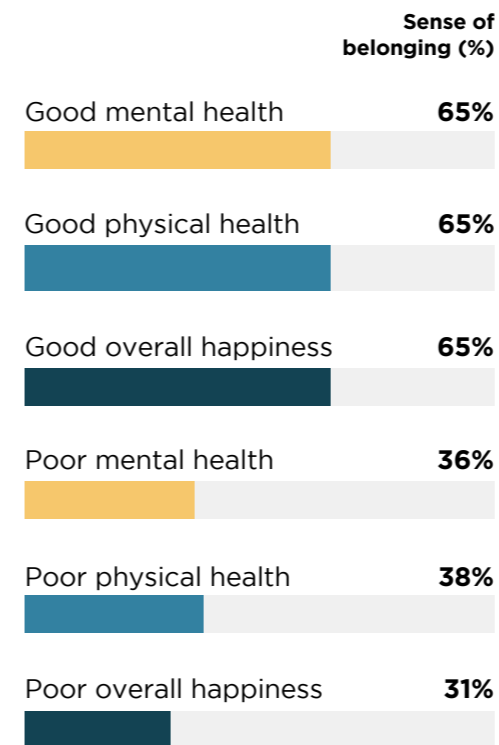
**13%**  
sustainability

**8%**  
technology enabled

**21%**  
sense of community

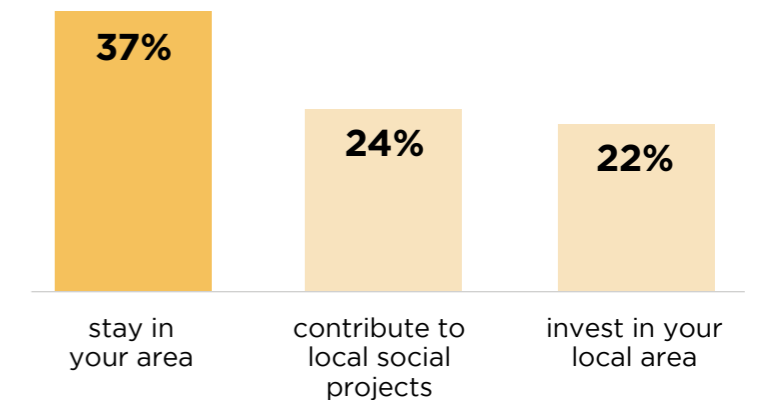
## Impact on wellbeing

Good wellbeing scores correlate with good belonging scores

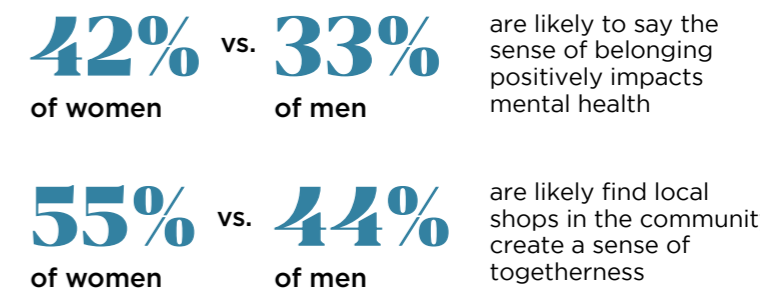


## Belonging creates community engagement

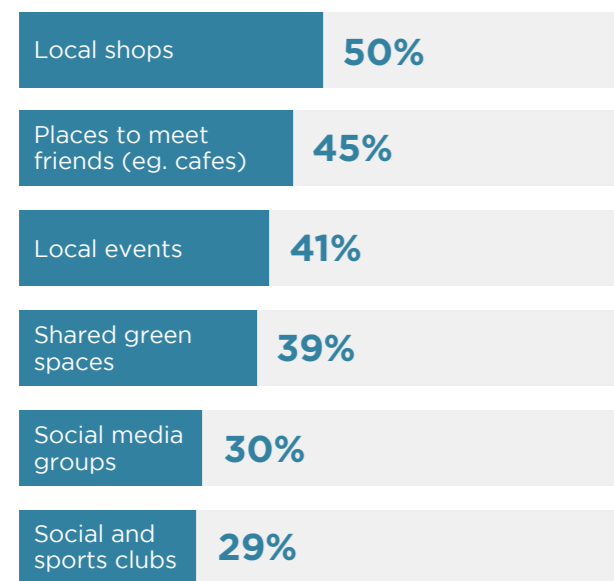
Sense of belonging makes you more likely to:



## Gender gap



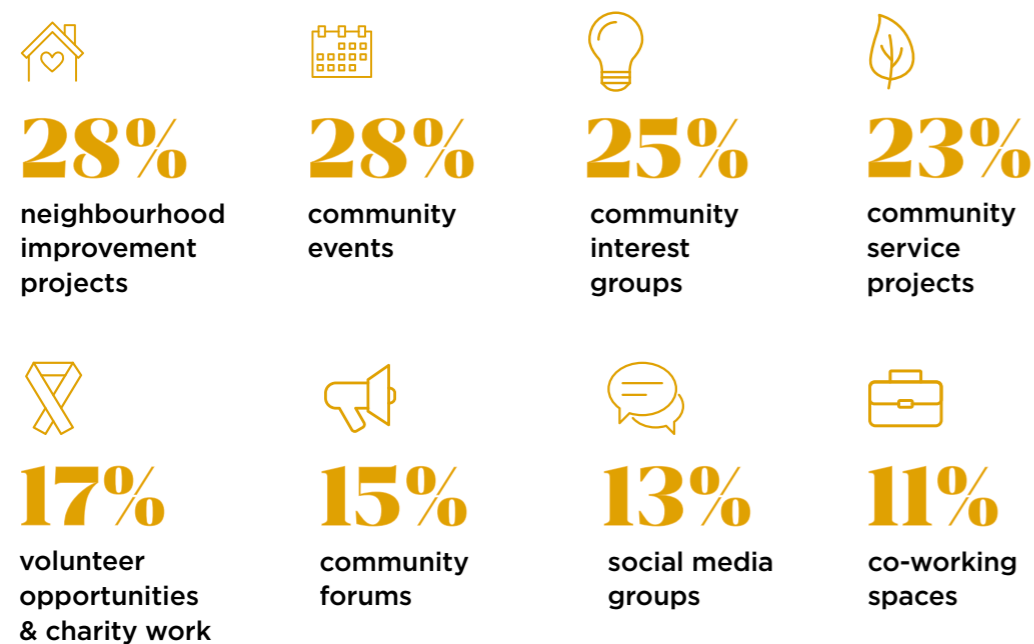
### How communities across the UK can foster belonging



### Things that people do that contributes to their sense of belonging

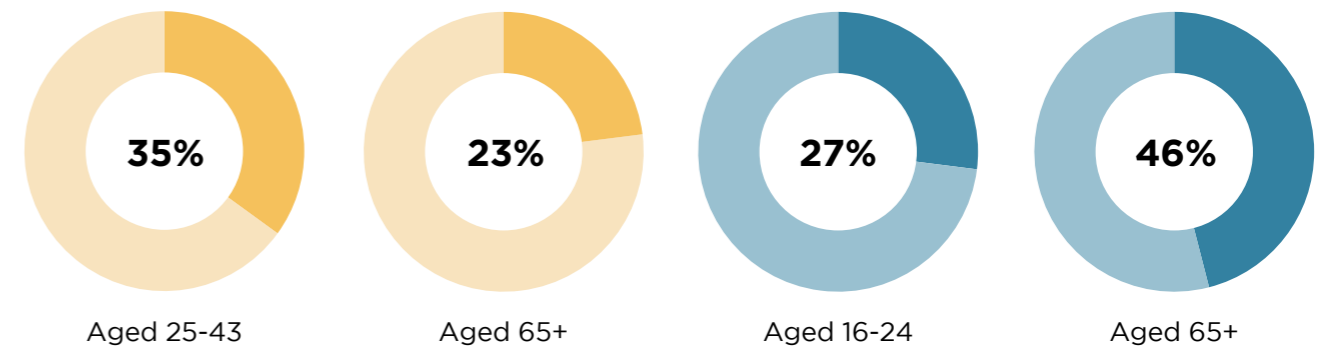


### Suggested improvements local communities could make to boost togetherness



### Generational differences

Reported high sense of belonging among key demographics



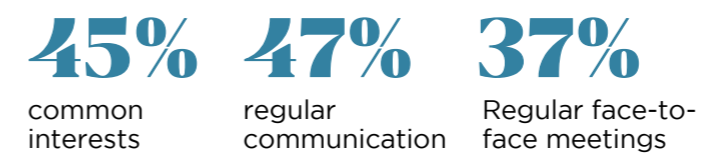
### A sense of belonging likely to make the people stay in their area

### How people build connection

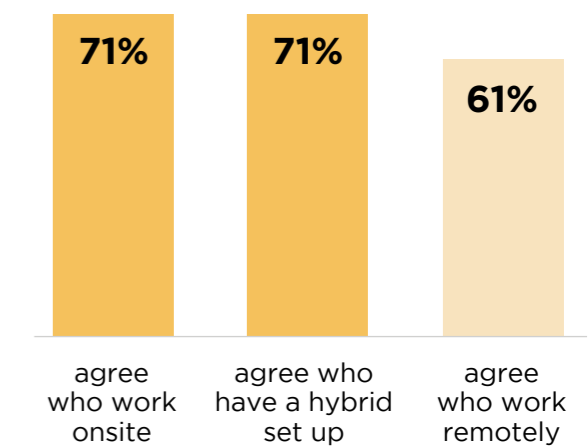
People aged 65+



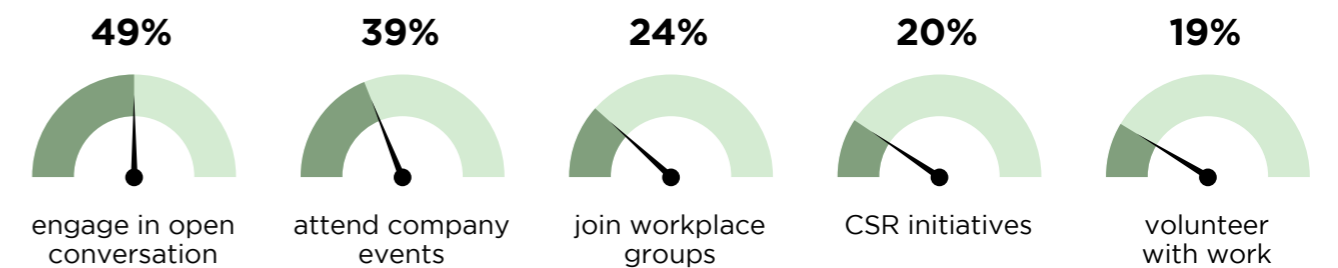
People aged 25-34



### Do people have a sense of belonging at work?



### How people create togetherness at work





# why neighbourhoods across the UK could benefit from greater community and connection

The sense of belonging is quite a hard thing to define. It spans many aspects of a person's life, from their home, to work, friendships and community. It can even have wider implications for health and wealth, happiness and security. Intangible as it may be, somehow when people feel it, they know.

In conducting this research, we set out to understand how people from all walks of life across the UK experience a sense of belonging. Do they feel it at all? Where is it felt the most? Does it intersect with their wellness? In their happiness? Ultimately - what creates belonging and how can we encourage it?

We defined belonging as a feeling of being connected to, and supported by, the communities and the neighbourhood that you are part of. Looking at the UK as a whole, the sense of belonging is mixed. Nearly two thirds of people in Britain (63%) report a sense of belonging, while 37% have a low sense of belonging.

Where you are in the country has an impact on whether you have a high sense of belonging. Greater London (38%) and Northern Ireland (33%) come out on top, with areas such as Yorkshire and Humber (26%) and the East and West Midlands (both 26%) trailing behind.

## CHAPTER 01

# belonging boost

63% ↑

of people in Britain have sense of belonging

37% ↓

of people have a low sense of belonging

**24%**

said the sense of belonging makes them more willing to contribute to local social projects

**22%**

said it makes them more willing to invest in their local area

While there is a mix across the UK, what is clear is that belonging is something worth nurturing. From mental and physical health, to happiness, and the willingness to take part in social projects – high instances of belonging correlate with high scores in these positive outcomes. For example, people who rate their mental health as good are more likely to have a high sense of belonging than those who rate it as poor (39% v 13%). This could be important in England, where – according to the NHS survey, Mental Health and Wellbeing in England – one in six people over the age of 16 have reported a common mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression.

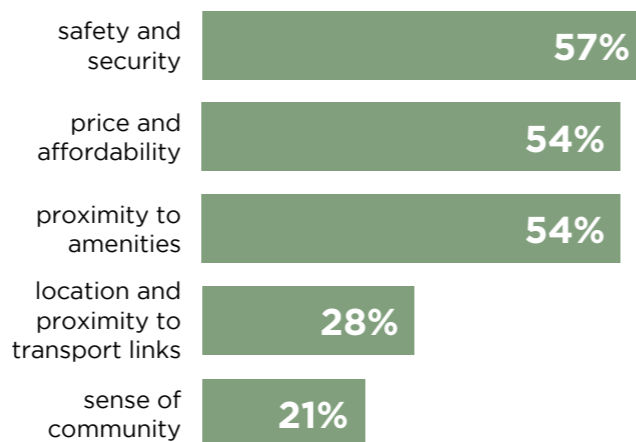
Belonging can also have an impact beyond an individual. Almost 1 in 4 (24%) said the sense of belonging makes them more willing to contribute to local social projects and over 1 in 5 (22%) said it makes them more willing to invest in their local area.

“If you live somewhere that feels safe and comfortable, that enables you to live the lifestyle you want, you’re naturally more invested in it and will pursue or engage in things that make it even better,” says Rick de Blaby, chief executive, Get Living. “Investing in where we live is fulfilling – nobody is an island entirely of themselves.”

When it comes to living situations, people in build-to-rent accommodation were most likely (61%) to feel a sense of belonging in their local community, followed by 60% in student housing, 58% in their own homes with a mortgage and 52% in private rented accommodation. Wherever and however they live, 21% of people said a sense of community is an important feature for them to consider when deciding where to live, coming directly after essential elements such as safety and security (57%), price and affordability (54%) and location in proximity to amenities (45%).

“Ultimately, I think it’s probably easier to have a sense of belonging when the neighbourhood or community you’re living in has something which is a stimulus of pride,” says Rick. “Whether it’s a physical asset or pride in the strength of community connections and relationships. I think it’s our duty to create the stage for this to happen.”

**The top 5 features people said they consider when deciding where to live**



# life through a lens

## Frank Da Silva, East Village resident

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Frank Da Silva visited London’s Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park during the 2012 event and was impressed with how cool the area looked and the vast developments that had taken place. Shortly after he saw an advert in a magazine for the East Village. “Having visited, I thought ‘amazing, let’s go and look’,” says Frank. “Me and my lovely partner Gianne were keen to leave Shepherd’s Bush where we had been for a few years – it was so noisy. We came to look at the East Village while it was still all sealed off to the public. We decided to go for it and we found this amazing community.”

As one of the first residents, Frank has now been at East Village for 10 years. But his connection to the area goes beyond living in it. As an architectural photographer, he has spent a lot of time documenting its growth through his vibrant images. “I have worked for some of the companies involved in creating this area, taking lots of photographs, many of which ended up in a book that was published about the regeneration,” says Frank. “It’s an inspiring place. This was a wasteland before the Olympics. The transformation is unbelievable.”

Frank now runs a small media and content creation agency, FDAS Media, out of East Village. Supported by Get Living, he used to organise local photography walks, showing amateur photographers around the area, talking about the transformation and offering photography tips. His next big plan is to run photography workshops.



Outside of working life, Frank and his wife like to go to the East Village Lates, evening get togethers put on by Get Living, which bring the community out to meet and share a few drinks. “When we first moved here, we knew everyone’s names, it is such a close-knit community,” Frank explains. “Now it’s a bit harder to know every person as there are so many more of us but the spirit remains the same.”

Frank is also a member of the local running club but when he’s not running, Frank is likely to be found walking his rescue dog, Toby. One of the many things that sets Get Living aside from other rental developments is that it allows pets. “There are so many dogs around here,” he laughs. “Thankfully now there are a lot of dog walking businesses popping up around East Village too. The parks make it a brilliant place for dogs.”

“

Now it’s a bit harder to know every person as there are so many more of us but the spirit remains the same.



# powerful connections only take a moment

**We're living increasingly digital lives. We have more ways than ever to connect with people virtually. We can go to live events, meet our future partners, and do the weekly shop all on our digital devices without speaking to anyone face-to-face.**

According to research from LivePerson, Gen Z and Millennials communicate with others more digitally (65%) than in person. But our findings suggest that it is actually the most simple, face-to-face interaction that can boost our sense of belonging.

Let's take relationships with neighbours. A simple 'hello' to a neighbour may seem innocuous, but interactions with neighbours have emerged as one of the key drivers of belonging in our local communities.

When citing things that people do within their local community that contribute to their sense of belonging, just under half said conversations with neighbours (48%). This represents a much higher percentage than those who cited being part of a community social media group (22%), suggesting that in-person, local interactions are still more powerful than virtual ones.

## CHAPTER 02

# a little goes a long way



**48%**

said conversations with neighbours contribute to their sense of belonging



**22%**

said being part of a community social media group contribute to their sense of belonging

**74%**

said that they feel a sense of belonging with the people that they live with

**44%**

said that cooking and eating meals together brings them together

Over half (55%) of people agree they feel a sense of belonging in their local community (48% feel it in their wider community) and those who engage in conversations with their neighbours (59% vs 27%) and attend local events (43% vs 15%) are much more likely to agree than disagree they feel this sense of belonging.

“I think belonging doesn’t have to always be deep and meaningful,” says Ailish Christian West, Chief Operating Officer, Get Living. “It can be sparked by a little moment of human interaction. A small ‘good morning’ can really brighten someone’s day. It’s an opportunity to connect – or learn about different people.”

When asked what their local community could offer to make them feel more together, almost 3 in 10 people said neighbourhood improvement

projects (28%) and community events such as pop-up spaces and markets (28%) could help make people feel more together. A quarter said community interest groups about hobbies, for example, and over 1 in 5 (23%) said community service projects such as clean-up projects or foodbanks could help people feel more together.

This idea that simple everyday interactions are powerful also continues within the home. Almost three quarters (74%) of people feel a sense of belonging within the place that they live and the people that they live with. Cooking or eating meals together (44%) is the most common way of bringing them together with the people they live with.

Neighbourhoods and communities which support these interactions and engagements are undoubtedly going to have a higher sense of belonging.

**55%**

feel a sense of belonging in their local community

**48%**

feel a sense of belonging in their wider community

# a place for all the family to call home

**Kanu Bhatnagar, East Village resident**



When Kanu Bhatnagar moved to the UK from India in 2014, she didn’t know anyone apart from her husband. But when she moved to East Village, and especially when she had her first child, she was able to quickly create a powerful community around herself – turning a new and foreign place into a home, packed with friendly faces.

“When I had my daughter, I quickly realised how many other parents there were all living here,” she explains. “The East Village Parents Club meets every week and it became part of my routine, a place to meet other people in the same boat, no judgments, just a friendly space to let the children play, swap toys and share advice. I made so many friends at that time, we’re all still close, even those who have since left the area.”

Having lived in other parts of Stratford for a few years, Kanu’s husband was attracted to East Village as a place for them to start their new life together. He actually became the fifth resident of the whole development. “He could see a vast difference between the old Stratford he had lived in and the East Village, which had such new facilities and a real central London vibe,” says Kanu.

“

I made so many friends at the time, we’re all still close, even those who have since left the area.

The daunting nature of moving from her home country to the UK’s capital city was countered by starting a new home in a community like East Village. “Finding my way around the city was made so much easier living so close to the station and brilliant transport links, my commute was super easy, and I didn’t need my husband to help me navigate,” she says. “All of the services we need are close by, from schools for both of my children, there’s the East Village dental surgery, GP not far and most of all - lots of green space. It makes it impossible to stay in!”

A big moment for Kanu was when her sister, Shipra, moved to London from India – straight to East Village also. “I really wanted to get her into East Village and luckily a flat in my building became free and she was able to move in. It has been incredible having extended family here now as well as my own family.”

Kanu’s sister Shipra is a baker, and used the move to East Village as an opportunity to start her own bakery business – Sweet Tooth Shipra, which she finds many customers for in the community and also runs a regular pop up at the Village. She is now hoping to get a permanent shop space within East Village.







# places with soul are all about people

**Wayne Hemingway MBE, Partner, HemingwayDesign**

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When it comes to good urban design, it's about people – how they use a space and how they live. That's much more important than the design of a building or the design of a space. Of course, design helps, we're designers so we do understand how important it is, but community is made by people enjoying things.

Our agency, HemingwayDesign, brings together lots of different disciplines, from urban design and placemaking, to events, brand, graphic design and interior architecture, but it only comes together seamlessly when it's focused on the reasons that people want to live in towns and cities – because they want to enjoy the benefits of being with and having access to other human beings.

Events play a big role in placemaking. A built environment has the potential to be uninspiring as a place for people to hang out. As soon as you start to get people into a space and having fun social interactions – talking, playing, dancing, learning, drinking, and eating together – a place changes and people's perceptions change. You can spend money on a space in advertising, public art and landscaping but it means naff all if the place doesn't have soul. And that soul comes from human beings.

This is one of the things we look at when we measure the success of a project. We don't judge success by how many properties are sold as a result of gathering thousands of people in a place but rather what the social value was. What are people saying? What did something mean to them? Did they have fun?



This is key when we're talking about belonging. It's true that the first things that can draw some people into a place to live might be design and if you're talking about a flat or house – the interior. But that's just the first flush of love. You need something deeper if you're going to "get married". You can be seduced by appearance but there has to be something more if you're going to stay and put down roots.

An important consideration for placemaking is social impact. One of the ways we try to create this is through inclusivity. Our events are free. At a recent event we held you could watch a band, learn to skateboard, take a dance class – you name it, and you could come without a penny in your pocket. Just bring a sandwich, have an amazing day out with your kids – all for free. That feels like how the world should be. People from all backgrounds coming together to have a good time.

Ultimately, successful communities of the future will be diverse and inclusive. We should all make sure that a development creates spaces that allow things to happen. Things that are positive and don't have to be policed. Children running through a fountain, people sitting by a canal to enjoy their lunch, getting together to shop and enjoy each other's company. It's about bringing the joy of freedom to a city. That's what public space is about.

**HemingwayDesign is a multi-disciplinary design studio focused on place, people and positive social impact.**



We don't judge success by how many properties are sold as a result of gathering thousands of people in a place but rather what the social value was.



## the environment and the local amenities are the vital ingredients of neighbourhoods that work

**The death of the Great British high street is never too far from the headlines. From small shop closures to big chain failures, some people have been quick to suggest that high streets are a thing of the past.**

According to ONS data, 25% of total retail sales are online in the UK, up from 10% in 2013. This is being reflected in shop closures across the country – the Centre for Retail Research found an estimated 17,000 shops closed in 2022 – a 5-year high.

But it's not all bad news for the high street – it is simply going through an evolution. Our research suggests the high street is a very important part of the fabric of society. Our findings suggest local shops (50%) are most likely to be cited as creating a sense of togetherness, followed by places to meet friends such as restaurants, cafes, bars, cinemas, theatres (45%), local events (41%), and shared green spaces (39%).

In a similar pattern to local communities, people are most likely to say their high street or town centre (45%) and social spaces like restaurants, cafes, bars, and cultural spaces (42%) create a sense of togetherness in their wider community.

### CHAPTER 03

# an age of community shopping

**50%**

said local shops create a sense of togetherness

**45%**

said their high street or town centre creates a sense of togetherness

**59%**

said shopping and eating locally contributed to their sense of belonging

**45%**

said location and proximity to amenities is a top priority

“The future of the high street is secure,” says Wayne Hemingway, Partner, Hemingway Design. “It’s just got to do the right thing. Since the Roman Forum, eating, watching performances, shopping and drinking have always been what a town centre is about. Our problem is we went too commercial, and we’ve forgotten about the entertainment and social side of things.”

People want a reason and a place to get together and perhaps visiting the local shops has become a social event, rather than something that needs

to get done. Indeed, when asked about the things that Brits do within their local community that contributes to their sense of belonging, almost 3 in 5 (59%) said they shop and eat locally.

Local shops and restaurants still hold a place in the hearts of people across the UK. When choosing a place to live, just under half (45%) of Brits said location and proximity to amenities such as shops, restaurants, cultural places, and leisure facilities are a top priority. They’re a vital driver when it comes to choosing a place to live and play a big role in fostering a sense of belonging.

“High streets and town centres in every neighbourhood have got to think much harder about what the consumer proposition is,” says Rick de Blaby. “Fractional ownership of the high street isn’t helping. It’s important to have a cohesive vision for high streets, with a good mix of uses. That way we can ensure needs are catered for and all of the retailers have their own differentiated offer.”

# belonging is at the heart of future high streets

**Ibrahim Ibrahim, Managing Director, Portland Design**

[WEBSITE >](#)



When we’re talking about high streets of the future they have to deliver on four pillars: fast – they must be convenient, intuitive and easy to accommodate our increasingly hectic lives. They must also be slow – audiences increasingly want experiences from their brands and physical spaces must become participatory and immersive. High streets must also be local – we’re seeing a move towards localism, using data to determine the things on offer and unique experiences. Lastly, belonging – this is about values and having a higher purpose. We must have brands and experiences that galvanise communities and brings people with similar interests together.

A huge part of this is an urgent need to rethink public realm spaces. We’re seeing that in the future, there’s going to be less and less of a dividing line between tenanted space and public realm. The new anchor of any development will be the public space, not a big department store, not a big restaurant, but the public space. And this needs to be activated. This public realm space needs to be a constantly changing stage set that delivers serendipity and drives interest. This is how places will develop their authentic spirit and it’s this authentic spirit that will drive belonging.

Independent retailers have a big part to play but I don’t think any place will work unless you have a blend of independents and big brands. In many

cases people crave familiarity but not to the extent that we have cloned high streets and shopping centres. Historically real estate agents would put independent brands into tertiary spaces but those days are finished. We need to bring them together into the same space. Retail also needs to be inward and outward facing. High streets and shopping centres need to connect with the outside and bring people in – not sealed off spaces that turn their back on the community.

Ultimately, high streets and retail centres are going to have to change. It’s important that they do – because they are everything. They are so important to communities. But the way people use physical shop spaces has changed. Retail has always been, and will always be, about four things – recruitment, transaction, fulfilment and retention. What is interesting is that transaction and fulfilment is increasingly taking place online. The store now needs to play the role of attracting and retaining customers. Shelves with products to sell will become stages with stories to share. Retailers and landlords need to consider the value of a store not only by turnover, but also by engagement and media impressions a store drives. Stores will become places to connect with a brand and with people who have the same interests as you. They’ll become communities where you experience a brand and buy from it later. That’s the future of physical retail – belonging.



# bringing football to the community

**Jonathan Silman, Founder, E20 Football Foundation**

[WEBSITE >](#)

**A passionate sportsman, Jonathan jumped at the chance to move to the former Athletes' Village when it launched as East Village.**

When taking his young sons to the local park for a kickabout, some fellow footballers mistook him for a scout: "It gave me an idea because the park was quite hilly for a proper game of football so I asked the local school if we could borrow their pitch so we could do some coaching at weekends."

The coaching sessions at Chobham Academy started with just Jonathan and gradually grew to include other volunteers and many more local players. Silman called it E20 Football Foundation. "Thanks to Get Living and its housing association partner, Triathlon Homes, we are able to pay the coaches, many of whom start volunteering with us from age 15 or 16 before qualifying and getting a job. We're also able to offer the sessions for free."

As members continued to grow, they started to split the sessions into age ranges and added an elite session for older players with real potential. "Now we've got 4,500 members and we run sessions every day of the week," says Jonathan.



# a creative space to inspire

**Christopher Raeburn & Yasmin Jones-Henry, Co-founders, The Lab E20**

[WEBSITE >](#)

**Christopher Raeburn's journey as a fashion designer began in 2009 with the project 'Remade in England,' when he deconstructed a military parachute into eight garments. With a focus on material use and reuse, Raeburn's fashion brand has grown over the years with a strong commitment to responsible practices. This made him the perfect collaborator for The Lab E20, a 3,000-square-foot co-creative hub located in the East Village.**

Designed to be flexible and adaptable, the space allows for various activities, such as exhibitions, immersive retail experiences and co-working. The goal is to provide a backdrop for the local community to co-create and co-design. "We want to highlight the work of local innovators who may not have had the opportunity to showcase their creations otherwise," says exhibition curator Yasmin Jones-Henry.

The Lab E20 is programmed exclusively by residents from Mondays to Wednesdays, while Thursdays to Sundays are curated by Raeburn's team and cultural partners. Christopher says: "We also engage the wider community by anchoring events around activities happening in the area, such as summer fetes and Christmas markets. By being transparent and approachable, we want to make the space accessible to all."



## creating neighbourhoods that work for everyone

The UK has seen a huge rise in the number of households with three generations living under one roof. According to research from Aviva, 14% of homes now have children and a grandparent – that’s 1.3 million in total. Between the phenomena that people are living longer than ever before and that young adults are increasingly staying home with parents, we’re moving back towards multigenerational living.

In many ways this is a good thing. Older generations especially suffer from loneliness – Age UK estimates that two million people over 75 live alone. Our research suggests that this is having an impact on the sense of belonging among the older generations. Across the age groups, those aged 25-43 are most likely (35%) to have a high sense of belonging, whereas those aged 65+ are least likely (23%).

Their overall sense of belonging may be lower, but it seems the older generations do have strengths when it comes to connecting in person. For example, when talking about creating togetherness with friends, just over half (51%) of the over 65s cite regular face-to-face meetings as important, compared with 37% of 16-24 year olds.

### CHAPTER 04

# generation game

**35%** ↑  
of those aged 25-43 have a high sense of belonging

**23%** ↑  
of those aged +65 have a high sense of belonging

**49%**

of 25-34-year olds say cooking and eating meals brings people together at home

**46%**

of those aged 65+ say outside spaces and recreational facilities bring them together

With increasing instances of multigeneration houses and communities, it's important for neighbourhoods to offer the things that they each value and get the most out of. Unsurprisingly, priorities are different for different age groups. When asked what brings people together at home, those aged 25-34 are most likely to say cooking and eating meals together (49%), activities and events (44%), shared living spaces (40%) and places to explore common interests (38%).

Outside spaces are more important to older Brits, indeed, those aged 65+ are most likely to say outside spaces and recreational facilities (46%) bring them together, while those aged 16-24 (31%) are least likely to say the same.

"Having different generations living together and sharing a neighbourhood is incredibly healthy," says Rick. "We can only encourage it by creating the facilities that attract people of all ages and demographics and creating conditions where it happens naturally. Our first residents were generally quite young, they were the pioneers ready to take a risk, but we've seen that they are starting to put down roots. Actually we've got way more prams whizzing around now than ever before, showing that our residents are maturing."



# the importance of cultural identity

**Vivienne King, Head of Real Estate Social Impact, The Good Economy**

[WEBSITE >](#)

Buildings contribute enormously to the sense of identity of a community. Whether that's a cultural identity or a physical one. It might be the way the streets are laid out or a particular theme of architecture that people recognise as their place. It could even be the mix of shops on offer or the kinds of public realm spaces there.

As a result, communities tend to be emotionally invested in their built environment. The public outcry over the remodelling of M&S in Marble Arch is a case in point. We see this in ex-industrial towns too. Buildings that have real character and speak to the culture of a place define the identity of the people in that place. Which is why regeneration and repurposing of heritage assets is placemaking at its best. Adapting and reusing these buildings also helps to manage embodied carbon. Regenerating historical buildings is not always possible, but understanding the role a building might have played in a community is key.

Placemaking is, however, not just about the built environment. One also needs to consider the culture of a place. How do people spend their time? What do they like to do? Maintaining cultural identity is about understanding what makes a place 'tick' and ensuring that this is catered for. There's no one size fits all approach to placemaking.

Another big consideration is what we call neighbourliness - designing a space intentionally so that people 'bump' into each other. This requires a lot of thought. The pathways through a community, the spaces that pop up around the pathways, the opportunities to sit and chat. Everything needs to be deliberate and foster serendipity.



The design of public realm space also includes green space, which is much more than a patch of grass. Green spaces need to be accessible, well designed, interesting and contribute positively to the health of the community, both through the physical health benefits of a biodiverse space and the mental health benefits of nature. Designers and developers therefore need to think carefully about what they are planting and why.

Attention to these sorts of details is what creates places that people want to live in. It's what turns some buildings into a community and a house into a home. We all, after all, want to live in a place we feel we belong.



# connections in an age of remote working

Remote and hybrid working has gone through a rapid acceleration thanks to the pandemic. According to the ONS, 40% of people report working remotely at some point over a seven day period in 2023. More than ever, employers are enabling people to work from home on days that suit them or even working remotely all of the time - with no visits to the office required.

But while remote or hybrid working brings many benefits, such as increased flexibility and work/life balance, it can increase isolation and remote workers can miss out on opportunities

to connect. Indeed, our research has highlighted the importance of the workplace as a community in which to feel belonging. Over half of people (52%) feel they have a sense of belonging at work. People are more likely to agree that they have a strong sense of belonging at work (20%) than in their local community (16%) and wider community (13%).

Interestingly, of those who work on-site in offices, 71% agree that they have a sense of belonging at work. This reduces significantly, when it comes to those who work remotely (61%). With hybrid and remote working continuing to be a feature of most workplaces, it's important to create homes that better enable connection for those who work there.

## CHAPTER 05

# hybrid futures

**71%**

of those working on-site agree that they have a sense of belonging at work

**71%**

of hybrid workers agree that they have a sense of belonging at work

**61%**

of remote workers agree that they have a sense of belonging at work

**19%**

of workers said that volunteering with work increases sense of belonging

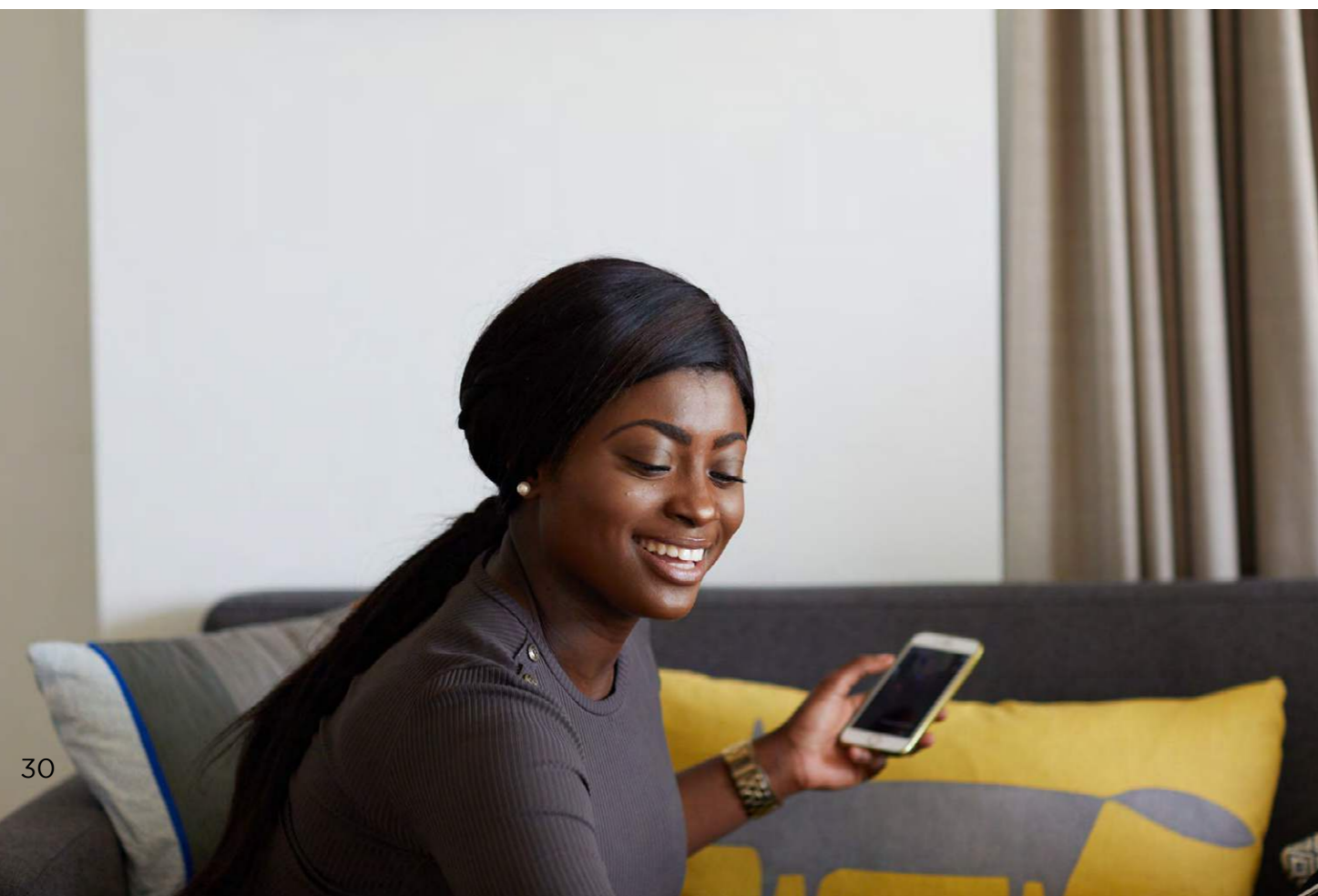
**49%**

of workers said the same about engaging in open conversation

“Just because someone is working at home doesn’t mean they have to be alone,” says Ailish Christian West. “Ensuring that co-working spaces are included in communities and neighbourhoods is important and something we’ve been doing. But it’s not all about working next to someone, sometimes it’s about creating the spaces where people can dwell when they get away from their desks – places where they can pop out, for lunch or a walk, and serendipitously bump into people.”

Once again, it seems it is the little things that matter most. Engaging in open conversation is the number one thing workers cite as increasing sense of belonging (49%). This is followed by attending company events (39%), joining workplace groups (24%), CSR initiatives (20%) and volunteering with work (19%).

“If you’ve got great lunch offerings, classes to go to, and things that people can go to at the end of their working day.” Ailish adds. “Then you’re providing the opportunity for connectivity that people might miss by not visiting the office – a chance to come together.”



# Social prescriptions are an important tool to improve mental health

**Dr Nick Prior, Co-founder, Minderful**

[WEBSITE >](#)

Having navigated my own mental health journey, living with bipolar disorder, I recognised the need for scalable and accessible solutions that address the social aspects of mental well-being, as well as the biopsychological causes.

While modern psychiatric practices acknowledge the interplay between biological, psychological, and social factors in mental health, traditional approaches have primarily focused on medication (biological) and therapy (psychological); neglecting the immense potential of social interventions.

At Minderful, we have compiled 100 social prescriptions on our app, each known to have benefits for mental health. These interventions span from breath work and yoga to mud larking and calling your loved ones. Our mission is to reframe and instil value in seemingly mundane activities, encouraging individuals to make behavioural changes that positively impact their mental well-being.

Belonging lies at the core of our human experience, fulfilling our innate need for social connection, security, and sense of identity. By fostering a sense of belonging within communities, we tap into our parasympathetic nervous system, which allows us to rest and digest, promoting relaxation and reducing stress. Belonging also dissolves the barriers of isolation and empowers individuals to share their problems, alleviating stress and promoting overall well-being.



An even greater driver of mental health challenges come from our increasingly digital world. Paradoxically, we find ourselves more connected than ever but, in many cases, lonelier than ever. While social media provides momentary dopamine hits, meaningful conversations and authentic relationships are often neglected.

Even the fathers of psychology, like Freud, recognised the significance of bricks and mortar buildings as a mother ship – a constant presence that instils a sense of belonging. It may explain why people who work completely remotely do not feel a sense of belonging as strongly as on-site/hybrid workers.

In this digital attention economy, connecting with nature holds tremendous potential for bolstering mental health. In a society driven by relentless achievement and perpetual motion, the simple act of observing a centuries-old tree or taking a stroll in the park offers perspective and cultivates a relaxed state of mind. By immersing ourselves in natural environments, we can escape the cacophony of our thoughts and embrace mindfulness.





## a café for all

**Michelle Tohill, Owner, Bridget's Café**

[WEBSITE >](#)

Michelle Tohill was working in a day centre for people with additional needs when it occurred to her that there weren't enough opportunities for adults with conditions such as Down's syndrome, autism, and cerebral palsy once they had left the college system.

Having tendered for a space at Olympic Park, Bridget's Café was born (named after Michelle's mum). A stone's throw from the Velodrome and East Village's Victory Park, the café offers workplace training for adults with additional

needs. Those who are able, are fully supported to bake or cook in the kitchen, deal with customers, take card payments, tidy and clear at the end of the day. So far, Michelle has fully employed three people with Down's syndrome, and she has a total of 12 other additional needs adults training at the café.

"Everyone in the area has been really inclusive and welcoming," says Michelle. "When people come in, usually they think we're a normal café and when they find out what we do, they say it makes them want to come back even more."

# A view from our residents

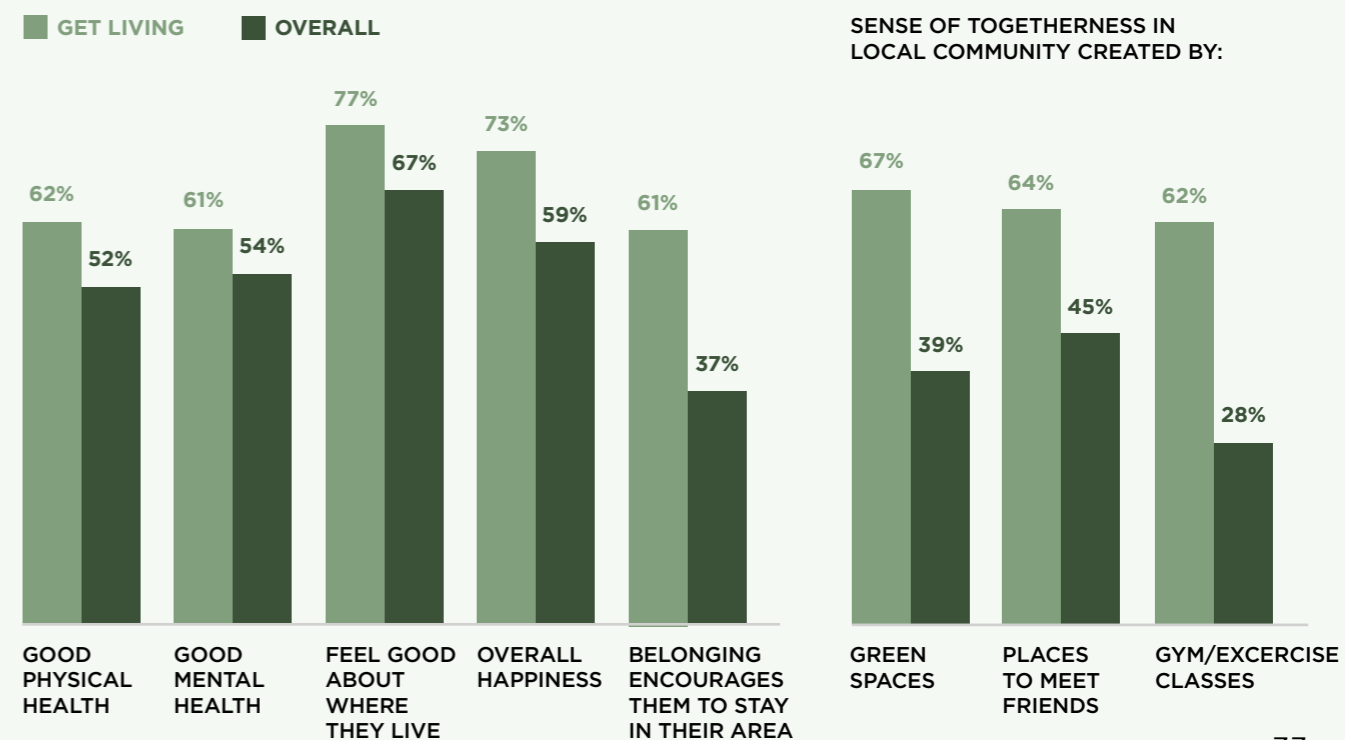
As we have seen, belonging and a sense of togetherness in the place you live in is important. It contributes to better outcomes in many different aspects of your life. This has been one of our vital ingredients when considering how to create thriving communities and something we think about a lot. As well as surveying 10,000 UK residents for our main research, we have also put the same questions to a sample of Get Living residents. The results suggest that the things we're doing are working.

It's heartening to see a good overall happiness score of 73% among residents, versus 59% in our national survey. When talking about the things that help to create a sense of togetherness, our residents picked out elements such as green space (67%), places to meet friends (64%) and gym and exercise classes (62%) – all things we have made an effort to provide and take pride in. Our neighbourhoods are located next to parks and biodiverse green spaces. We also have a busy hub of spaces to connect, community events and places to exercise. It's also brilliant to see that 77% of our residents say they feel good about where they live. This is 10% higher than the national picture.

**71%** Get Living residents' overall sense of belonging

**63%** National overall sense of belonging

### Get Living residents vs Overall research



## CONCLUSION

# nurturing the thriving communities of the future

Belonging is at the heart of successful, thriving communities. We've seen time and time again how feeling connected to and supported by the community in which you live is important to quality of life. As placemakers, we must take this into account and make it our mission to create the neighbourhoods that support this.

We undertook our research knowing from experience that belonging mattered. But what the responses have shown us is just how much – and also what people believe are the key ingredients in feeling like you belong. We hope this report has provided the kind of useful insight that can continue to support the creation of thriving communities and neighbourhoods. Here are some of our key takeaways:

**Belonging creates a ripple effect that starts with an individual and moves out to create positive outcomes for local and wider communities.** From dedicating time to community projects, to investing in an area and putting down roots for longer.

**Belonging can be as simple as a quick hello from a neighbour.** We can't create these interactions ourselves, these come from the people living in our communities. But we can design the spaces to create opportunities for people to bump into each other. We create the stage for connection and how we design that stage matters.

**Retail spaces are an essential part of every community.** But the reasons for this are evolving. Shopping in physical spaces satisfies a need for connection with others as much as it does a need for goods. They should be engaging, experiential and create opportunities to dwell as well as spend.

**The way people use homes and the demographic of the people in them is always changing.** Whether it's three generations under one roof or someone running a business from the kitchen table, our communities need to support their needs, create reasons for them all to get outside and always be inclusive.



“ My vision for communities is to be healthy, happy, safe and vibrant places for people to live. Where they feel at home in their space, where they feel safe to go out and make friends and enjoy the full benefits of the community outside their homes. What we do is so important and it was born out of a need in the rental market. A need for individualism but also for togetherness. We're talking about people's homes – it is as personal as it gets. We want people to feel they can be themselves, create the lives they want to lead and belong somewhere. Somewhere special.

**My vision for communities of the future**  
Ailish Christian-West, Chief Operating Officer, Get Living



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