Building the World's First Restorative Justice Postcode

Sixth Quarterly Impact Report from December 2024 - February 2025 "Speak-up Restorative Justice Circles"

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Restorative Justice for All
June 2025

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First published in the UK in July 2025 by RJ4All Publications

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Executive Summary

Background

In January 2023, Restorative Justice For All International Institute (thereafter RJ4All) started the mission to establish the world's first restorative justice postcode project in SE16.

As we are starting our third year, RJ4All hasn't stop continuously tracking and monitoring the outcomes of its services provided in its community centre located in Rotherhithe, SE16, that aims to tackle root issues of inequality, power imbalances and abuse and social fragmentation that later can contribute to anti-social behaviour, insecurity, dissatisfaction and tensions.

Services offered at our community centre reflect Restorative Justice Values and its ethos for a better neighbourhood, and later influence its implementation in other postcodes in the UK or internationally.

This document is the 6th qualitative impact report on the Postcode project and reflects the discussion outcome of our last "Speak Up Restorative Justice circles" held in February 2025, following up on our series of "Speak Up Restorative Justice circle" that started in early 2023 are contributing to an ongoing collection of current qualitative evidence. The Speak-up circles are supported by Rotherhithe Consolidates Charities, a local funder who is also member of the programme's steering group.

The report includes the gathering and analysis of qualitative narratives shared with us through the Speak Up circle, allowing for an evaluation of the project's effects and the development of recommendations. Ultimately, it seeks to provide insights to achieve three key objectives:

1. Inform the RJ4All team and the project's steering group
2. Facilitate continued project development, and
3. Function as a strategic communication resource for other stakeholders

Methodology

Substantial evidence indicates that power abuse acts as a central factor in the underlying inequalities, unmet mental health needs, and human violations. This needs urgent action to correct power imbalances and emphasise community voices. Through community consultation forums, RJ4All creates a space to enhance local perspectives and insights.

Following our successful Speak Up circle held last November on the topic of youth social perception, we have decided to hold our 6th circle in February 2025, this time focusing on democratic engagement in collaboration with our Democracy4All project.

Using a focus group research method, we invited our community members, stakeholders, and public authorities to discuss the low democratic engagement in SE16 and ways to address it. We explored, during our discussion, their confidence to engage in democratic engagement, the barriers they face to engage and how we can address them, before we concluded with the role of the community and local organisations in democratic engagement.

This topic aligns with our project's aims of community empowerment and trust building. As we will explore, our community lacks the trust and confidence in letting their voices be heard, and by thinking that their voice isn't heard and doesn't matter, a vicious circle has been created undermining their participation, the community's overall wellbeing, and creating another challenge for the public authorities.

Summary findings from the first quarter of the third year of the project

From the February 2025 community forum, insights were gathered from an exceptionally low number of attendees representing southeast London. This low participation demonstrated to us from the beginning the hardship of this topic and the consequences of years of distrust, disempowerment and lack of effective policies in addressing day-to-day incivilities.

The study showed us emerging themes such as:

- ***Years of poor political decisions have led to a high level of distrust***
- ***Ineffective ways of communication between the local community and the local government***
- ***Lack of awareness from the community***
- ***Lack of confidence and trust that individual and community engagement will lead to government actions***

Our research indicated a need for enhanced efforts to:

- ***Encouraging the use of Restorative Justice practices to enhance communication between the local community and the local authorities***
- ***Expanding the offer for local community spaces for peaceful and fruitful dialogue between the community and local authorities***
- ***Make it mandatory to have the presence of a local councillor/MP or one of their representatives at future Speak Up circles relevant to them, to foster communication, empowerment and trust building.***
- ***Increasing the awareness of democratic engagement through the tenure of workshops and training for all ages***
- ***Increase the communication on local government's actions in SE16 to increase their visibility and target false shared information to keep all staff members, volunteers and service users aware.***

Originality

This report provides insight into our first focus group, called the 'Speak up Restorative Justice Circle' of Year 3 (2025) of the Restorative Justice Postcode Project.

The discussion revealed an urgent need to address the distrust that exists between our community and the public authorities, and the need to increase confidence and insightful communication between them to build trust and further democratic engagement.

Reflecting on previous years' findings, we compare previous conclusions, enabling the RJ4All team to assess our service and work's efficiency and seek new feedback regularly. This examination significantly contributes to establishing the world's first restorative justice postcode, highlighting the need to seek feedback through our community forums regularly.

Research Limitations

The recruitment process involves various means, including an open call on all RJ4All social media platforms, the Southwark community events website, direct emailing to community members, stakeholders, local MPs and councillors, as well as through our newsletter or word of mouth. Through these means, we aim to reach people from SE16, as well as southeast London more broadly.

While in previous Speak-up circles, our non-probability sample of individuals was around 10 to 15 individuals, for this session, our sample is only 3. We do favour smaller focus groups to allow for deeper discussions and allow everyone a decent amount of time to voice their opinions. However, we acknowledge that our sample size may not accurately reflect the entire SE16 community, and therefore, it is essential to consider this limitation when reviewing our analysis and recommendations.

Key words: Restorative Justice Postcode project, democratic engagement, trust building, restorative justice circles, public authority, confidence, community voice.

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Paper

On the 25th of February 2025, we held our sixth Speak Up Restorative Justice Circle, this time on democratic engagement. 'Speak up Restorative Justice Circles' are community circles where we invite people from various backgrounds in our local community to gather and discuss specific topics. The aim of these circles is to **provide a safe space within the community to discuss and have their voices heard**. They are part of RJ4all's initiative to achieve a redistribution of power, rebuild trust between marginalised groups and the local authority and reduce inequality.

RJ4All was founded over ten years ago to promote power redistribution through a restorative justice approach. Instead of supporting more punitive measures to address social issues, we prefer an approach that is more community-led and beneficial for both offenders and victims in repairing harm. Incorporating restorative justice principles and practices into the crime-prevention framework helps us move away from blaming individuals entirely and instead consider the impact of societal failures and unmet needs. RJ4All uses a model that nurtures an individual's strengths and taps into the community interest (Gavrielides, 2020). In accordance with the values shared over the past ten years, RJ4All decided to express its work and vision for building the world's first restorative justice postcode through a diligent research study.

The RJ4All community centre, located in the Southwark borough in southeast London, forms the geographical scope of our research study. This community centre has been created to empower the community. It provides our service users with access to a comprehensive range of free services in one place, such as our foodbank to address food poverty, our digital hub for education and digital inclusion, and activities like sports classes, wellbeing circles and workshops to promote health, mental health and community cohesion. By offering these services, we aim to reduce inequality by addressing unmet needs and societal failures.

RJ4All also pursues and is committed to rebuilding the relationship between the community and the State, striving toward a global effort encouraging restorative justice as a world justice movement. This initiative honours this goal by reducing the gap between the community and the state, asking for both their participation and viewpoints. In practice, this means we pay strict attention to inviting stakeholders and members of the local community, as well as local councillors up to MPs, to our community forums or events such as our Speak Up circles, providing a space where equal distribution of power and voice strive. Additionally, we have created a steering group consisting of community leaders, local councillors, local authorities and organisations. Members of this group have been selected either through invitation or an open call. They have a role in ensuring the project's success by providing advice on the strategic direction, promoting the community voice and facilitating partnerships, further enhancing our impact. Quarterly, the steering group meet to review, advise and support the project.

As previously mentioned, Speak Up circles aim to gather the community, including local authorities, for constructive discussions and debates on topics that matter to them. We usually choose topics based on any insecurity the participants may have raised in previous discussions, such as insecurity, mental health, and youth empowerment.

For instance, in previous Speak Up circles, the community repeatedly mentioned low trust in the local authority as a significant issue (Richard et al., 2024). This feeling is not restricted to our community; a 2023 survey from the Office for National Statistics showed that 46% of respondents had "low or no trust " in their local government, increasing to 57% for the UK government (ONS, 2014)

A **low level of trust** in public authorities, especially the UK and local governments, negatively affects people's interest and willingness to participate in democratic processes, leading to low turnout. Only 31.22% of people voted in the last local council elections in Rotherhithe in 2022, a similar turnout to local elections in 2018, while the last general election's

turnout in Bermondsey and Old Southwark constituency reached a 54.38% in 2024, a reduction of nearly nine percentage points compared to 2019 (Southwark Council). Low turnouts can be the result of multiple factors such as logistical or bureaucratic barriers, but high distrust is one key factor to political disengagement, as more and more people lack confidence that they have a say in what the government is doing, that their participation will make a difference, installing and perpetuating a vicious circle that is hard to stop.

Exceptionally, the topic for this session was chosen not only based on previous discussions. Although low trust levels have repeatedly been highlighted as a barrier within the community, we have decided to hold this Speak Up session under our other project, Democracy4All, which the Electoral Commission funds. This time, the title of our Speak Up circle, "**Using your democratic voices**," addresses both our issue of low trust and the Electoral Commission's aim to raise awareness of democratic processes and to understand people's level of democratic engagement. Later, we will observe that elections are not the only ones suffering from low turnout, and individuals may have less interest in discussing democracy in community circles.

This report is a continuation of the previous impact report published last December 2024. This report gathers quantitative and qualitative data obtained through discussions during our last Speak Up circle on February 25th, on "Using your Democratic Voice" or more generally, democratic engagement. This report will discuss the meaning of local democracy for them, their confidence in participating in democratic processes, barriers to democratic engagement, and solutions to tackle low participation.

2. Research Methodology and Sampling

2.1. Recruitment Process

Participants for the focus group were recruited through different means. First, we created a dedicated webpage with a registration link on our website and Eventbrite. Second, we sent direct invitations by email to our stakeholders in local organisations, schools, local authorities, including local councillors and MPs, using our own database. This widespread dissemination aimed to gather representatives from both the community and public authorities. We also did not miss promoting the circle to our service users and volunteers through in-person invitations and messages sent via the WhatsApp group. Finally, we also shared our events on social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and the Southwark council event page.

2.2. Participants

Participants were asked to confirm their attendance through Eventbrite's online booking system, for which we created a dedicated event page. During registration, participants were prompted to provide their consent to participate as research subjects. We also had an open-door policy, allowing individuals not registered on Eventbrite to join the focus group upon signing a printed consent form. No registration or participation fee was required, and attendees were free to join. If they ultimately could no longer attend, no penalty fee was imposed.

On the day of the circle, all participants (both registered and walk-ins) were registered to provide their demographic information, including gender, age group, postcode and ethnicity. This information is important for the representation factor of our analysis and the conclusion we draw after each circle. Unfortunately, in this circle, only four people had registered on Eventbrite for this session, of whom two ultimately did not attend. However, one person walked in to participate in the focus group. Due to the low number of attendees, one of RJ4All's staff members actively participated in the discussion with one of our two facilitators.

2.3. Method

Constructed through a restorative justice lens, this research employed a focus group that mirrors traditional peace-making circles. This method was chosen to foster group discussion in a

safe environment where all participants could voice their own opinions, comments, and experiences on a given topic. Such circles enable people to relate as equal human beings and communicate respectfully and constructively. This format invites insightful discussions among individuals from varying backgrounds and promotes open dialogue between the local community and local authorities or public figures. During those circles, we used a 'talking piece' materialised by an object (United Nations, 2016). It is a tool used to provide an equal chance to speak, with no interruptions and be heard by the whole circle, as it is passed down to every participant consecutively. Participants who do not wish to answer a question are free to pass the talking piece to the person next to them.

With our goal to achieve the first Restorative Justice Postcode in our area, SE16, local stakeholders and public authorities assemble quarterly for our Speak-Up! Community circle. These forums create an equitable environment where every local stakeholder can share their perspectives on the given topic. By enabling both local stakeholders and public figures to attend, those forums offer an opportunity to be closer to the community, have a better understanding of their needs, and allow for immediate consideration. All of our Speak-Up circles are held in our premises, at Rotherhithe Community Centre, allowing local public figures to visit the local area and our community. By holding those circles in our Centre, a familiar place for our service users where we provide all our services, we want to show our commitment to providing a safe place to voice opinions, experiences, and hardships, where everyone will be listened to.

'Speak-up Restorative Justice Circles' started in March 2023, with the aim to hold them regularly (Mlcek et al, 2023). Since this first circle, early 2023, we have held five additional circles, the most recent one being in February 2025. As explained previously, each Speak Up covers a specific topic, determined based on previous discussions, recent events or specific projects. For instance, our second Speak-Up circle held in October 2023, focused on power imbalance and injustice. This was followed in February 2024 by another Speak Up circle centring on a recent incident that heightened the community's insecurity. Our fourth circle, held in July 2024, dealt

with the topic of mental health, which was frequently mentioned in the February circle. Our last circle in 2024 explored the topic of youth, specifically empowering young people and how we can address the negative perception that hinders them. All Speak-Up circles are followed by an impact report, like this one, where we analyse the discussion held and publish key findings that are subsequently shared with our stakeholders. Efforts to tackle community needs and concerns should be consistently upheld through these community forums and projects.

Our most recent Speak Up circle was held on the 25th of February and facilitated by two RJ4All volunteers, Aish and Louise. Exceptionally, this circle was carried out under two projects. First, our Postcode Project is funded by the Rotherhithe Consolidated Charities, which also funds this circle, and another project, "Democracy4All", a new project funded by the Electoral Commission, to whom we will share the results of the discussion. In accordance with this latter project, we have decided to do our Speak Up circle on democratic engagement titled "Using our Democratic voice", with a focus on ***understanding how confident people are in taking part in democratic processes, what are the barriers that could explain low participation in democratic processes***, such as low turnout in election, and ***what could be the solution to address these barriers***. However, we believe that this topic may have deterred turnout to this circle, which, with only six participants in our focus group, including one RJ4All staff member and two volunteers as facilitators for this circle, cannot be deemed representative of our community.

2.4. Procedure

The RJ4All organisation facilitated a semi-structured group discussion led by two RJ4All volunteers, Louise and Aish, who encouraged participants to engage in the discussion as equal community members and create a safe space of expression and dialogue. For this circle and due to the small groups, four questions were covered.

First, to break the ice between the participants, they were asked to form two pairs, introduce themselves to each other, and then introduce their partners to the rest of the

participants. Following this, we started the circle with an introductory question, "**Can you describe what local democracy means to you**?" inviting all participants to share their own understanding of what local democracy meant to them. Similar to our fourth Speak Up held in July 2024, we used Post-its for our second and third questions. Our second question, "**how confident are you in engaging in democratic processes on a scale of 1-5**," invited our participants to grade their confidence and write their answers on a post-it (Figure 1), later stick on a flipchart, and explain more in depth their answers. Similarly, for our third question, "**what barriers do you believe are the factors that undermine democratic engagement**?", facilitators asked our participants to write down three barriers each and later explain their choices (Figure 3).

We concluded the discussion with our fourth and last questions "**how do you think, at the community level, we can improve democratic participation**?", looking to hear suggestions for us, local organisations, but also for our local community what should be improved in our way of addressing democratic processes and political topics, in the most constructive way. Finally, before handing out feedback forms to our participants, our facilitators asked them what they took from this discussion, what they retain, leading to key feedback that will be shared later in this report.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Data Display

This section presents the demographics of participants who attended the February 2025 Speak Up circle, including their gender, postcode, ethnicity and age. Three participants (excluding one RJ4All staff member who participated along with the two RJ4All volunteers who facilitated the circle) attended this community forum. The quantitative data shown below provide details for the three participants. Due to the small sample size, the data shown below are solely for display purposes, and no further analysis will be provided, as we usually do, in the following section, as they will not be representative.

3.1.1. Gender Demographics

In this circle, two participants were men, and one participant was a woman.

3.1.2. Postcode Demographics

All attendees resided in Southeast London, with two attendees living in our postcode, SE16, and one participant residing in SE8.

3.1.3. Ethnicity Demographics

Two attendees shared that their ethnicity was "White British or any other white background". Our third attendee stated that their ethnicity was "Black Africans or any other black background".

3.1.4. Age Demographics

Two age groups were represented in this community circle, with one attendee belonging to the 20-29 age group and the other two participants being part of the 60+ age group.

PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: 6TH SPEAK UP CIRCLE

GENDER	Men: **2** Woman: **1**
POSTCODE	SE8: **1** SE16: **2**
ETHNIC IDENTITY	**1** 'Black Africans, Black British, or any other Black background' **2** 'White British or any other White background'
AGE GROUP	20-29: **1** 60+: **2**

Table 1: Recap table of our participants' demographic information

4. Qualitative Data Display

4.1. Framing Piece – thematic context

Participation in democratic processes was the main topic of discussion in this circle. This topic was not mentioned in previous speak-up circles. However, research shows that one cause of low participation in democratic processes is a lack of trust between the population and the government, including local authorities. This lack of trust has repeatedly been mentioned as one barrier in our community, and this circle, for example, is one of the actions we took aiming at rebuilding that trust.

This community circle aimed to **address the low participation in democratic engagement, why people are not participating, and what we can do**, at our scale, to address this issue. But before that, we started our discussion by assessing our participants' understanding of local democracy and their confidence in participating in such processes. As we will see later in more detail, a high confidence in their capacity to participate in democratic processes doesn't necessarily correlate with a high trust or high participation in the process.

4.2. Question discussed

For this circle, we have been able to cover four questions, which is more than what we usually cover (around two questions).

1. What does local democracy mean to you?
2. How confident are you in engaging in democratic processes? (Scale 1-5)
3. What do you believe are the factors that undermine democratic engagement?
4. How do you think, at the community level, we can improve democratic participation?

4.2.1. Key points

What does local democracy mean to you?

- ***"Having a voice"***: This was our most common answer, highlighting that local democracy is about having a say through voting, meetings, and consultations. Although they see having a voice as the core of local democracy, they were less convinced that their voice is always heard, citing various reasons.

- ***"Different layers in our daily life"***: One participant visualised democracy as something that surrounds us in our daily life through different layers, such as at our workplace, neighbourhood, families, and friendships.

- ***"Theory vs. Practice"***: Another participant raised the idea that democracy's theory is different from its practice. Only the idea of democracy is implemented, and while democracy allows everyone to have a voice, spaces need to be created to expose this voice and listen to it, which is not always the case in practice.

How confident are you in engaging in democratic processes? (Scale 1-5)

- ***"Confidence vs Willingness"***: One key point raised was the distinction between a high level of confidence in engaging in democratic processes and a comparatively low level of interest and willingness to engage. The perceived low impact of their voices on governmental decisions negatively affected our participants' willingness to engage, raising questions about the purpose of doing so.

- ***"Democratic processes that are not democratic at all"***: One participant pointed out how some processes, such as meetings and consultations, are not engaging due to the overall ambience of such events, as people express their anger, bullying or share misinformation instead of working on solutions and common approach to the various societal issues.

- ***"Collective and Individual confidence are blended"***: One of our participants recognised that, despite being passionate about democratic processes and having actively participated in them in the past, the collective lack of trust and participation in these processes has unexpectedly impeded their individual participation and trust in the process.

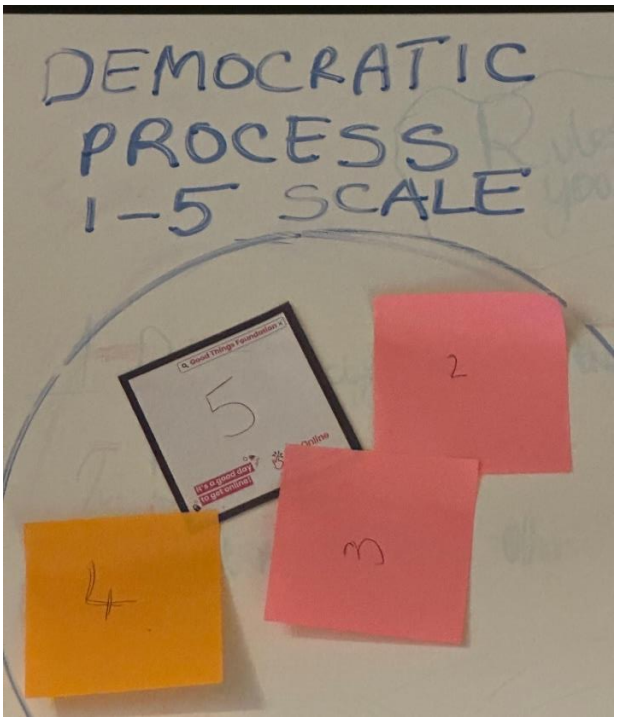


Figure 1: Participants' answers on a 1-5 scale on their confidence to engage in the democratic process

What do you believe are the factors that undermine democratic engagement?

- ***"Lack of faith and confidence"***: One major barrier to democratic engagement was the absence of trust or belief that people's participation would influence the result and their future. This was especially true when participants expressed the view that every candidate now appeared to be making similar promises during their campaigns, showing concern that their focus was on being elected rather than bringing about real change.

- ***"Lack of transparency"***: One participant highlighted that individuals in positions of power who misuse their authority negatively affect the trust placed in future candidates. An absence of full transparency among those in authority hinders the trust extended to them and progressively results in disengagement.

- ***"Little to no representation"***: Several participants expressed concern about "representation", noting that those in power do not adequately represent the population. If people feel unrepresented, they are unlikely to trust those in authority to make important decisions on their behalf.

- ***"Lack of clear, accurate information"***: Another point raised was the widespread presence of disinformation at a national level, where individuals are often left with ambiguous information to make the right decisions. Without clear and accurate information, participants feel as if they lack all the necessary elements to make a choice.

- ***"Lack of awareness"***: Alongside the accurate information comment, a further concern was raised about the lack of awareness of current events, who to contact, and where to find relevant resources. When individuals are unaware of these matters, their chances of participating in democratic processes decrease.

- ***"Feeling of not being heard"***: Some participants noted that even if they engage and raise a common issue with their candidates, if this issue is not addressed or if no significant changes occur, people are more likely to feel discouraged and disconnected from the process.

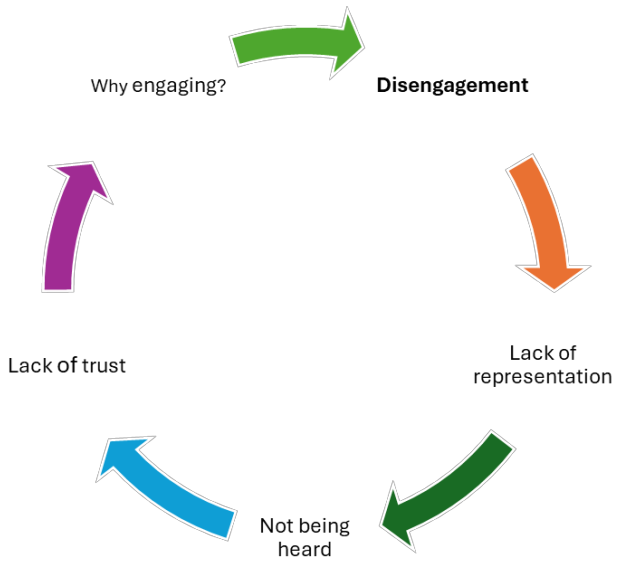


Figure 2: Democratic engagement vicious circle

Figure 3: Participants' answers to the barriers to democratic engagement

How do you think at the community level, we can improve democratic participation?

- ***"Raise awareness"***: One participant suggested that the community should focus on raising awareness among local residents. Awareness should be raised regarding people's rights, what they can do, and how to connect them to the power they need. Providing them with the knowledge necessary will empower them to make decisions that will impact not only their own lives but also those of others.

- ***"Community power"***: Building on the key point above, the strength of the community and its potential impact were highlighted. While communities currently undertake roles that the government should fulfil, they possess the power to raise awareness and create spaces for assembly and discussion, all without media intervention, which has been deemed detrimental to the proper conduct of meetings or consultations.

- ***"Improve democratic engagement"***: Participants have commented that the image meetings and consultations conveyed in the country are not attractive. One of them explained his experience of viewing a consultation in Greece, where each topic of interest was addressed separately, engaging only the people with such interests. While heated debates still occurred, it appeared that discussions were insightful, with people able to voice their opinions.

- ***"Presence of people with power"***: An increased presence of local authorities at events such as Speak Up circles was suggested as a means of improvement. Their involvement would facilitate direct communication between local people and local authorities. Furthermore, this would remind the community that those in power share common traits with them, fostering a sentiment of "how we can help them".

5. Discussion

5.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

This section should have been the analysis of our quantitative data. However, we believe that the small sample size of 3 participants is a serious limitation for any proper and relevant analysis. For this reason, we won't provide further quantitative analysis for this specific case, except for the data shown in the third part.

Special attention will be taken to the number of participants for the future Speak Up, where we will aim to have around 15 attendees, enabling us to provide a better representation of SE16 demographics.

5.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

This section will analyse different perspectives, comparing participants' accounts and opinions on democratic engagement. Additionally, this report seeks to identify commonalities and themes, tracing similarities to various concerns in previous Speak Up! circles.

This analysis will have four parts. First, we will examine our participants' confidence in engaging in democratic processes. Second, we will have a look at the barriers to democratic engagement and how we can address them. Third, we will examine the role of local organisations and communities in tackling the issue of low engagement in democracy. Finally, we will analyse our findings from this circle's discussion and compare them to those from previous Speak Up! circles.

5.2.1. Confidence to participate in democratic engagement

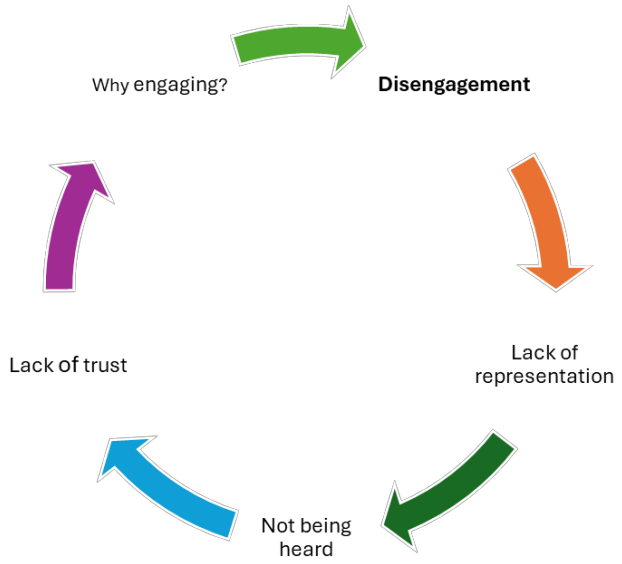
Our discussion began by defining local democracy according to our participants' own understanding and their confidence in engaging with democracy. Local democracy was broadly characterised as "having a voice" in the community and being able to use it constructively.

However, it was acknowledged that this voice isn't always heard and, as we will see later, its use is not always constructive, often perpetuating a negative perception of local government authorities.

All of our participants had previously engaged in democratic activities and were confident in doing so, or at least had been at some point. However, a subtle difference emerged between their confidence and their willingness to participate. While all of them expressed confidence in engaging, their willingness varied significantly, and this was where the vicious cycle of disengagement began. Their reluctance stemmed from a growing sense of a lack of representation and feeling unheard, which led them to question the purpose of participating. The recurring question was "What's the point?" and "What's the point of participating if I won't be heard, especially if I don't trust the person who will represent me?" It is essential to note that this concern came from individuals who had previously participated and are not estranged from the process, and, importantly, believe that solutions are possible. How can we expect our disengaged community members to feel optimistic, trust the process, and get involved when a sense of hopelessness grows among those who still participate?

In the next part, we will examine those solutions they believe could be helpful in detail, but before that, we will identify what made up the vicious circle mentioned earlier by exploring the barriers raised by our participants.

5.2.2. Barriers to democratic engagement and how to address them



Disengagement in democratic processes stems from various obstacles highlighted by our participants in the discussion. These barriers create a vicious cycle that requires collective attention.

Representation plays a crucial role in establishing trust. If your representative is noticeably different from you, it can be challenging to connect with them, causing feelings of being unrepresented. On the other hand, if your representative shares a similar background and appearance, it becomes easier to relate to them, encouraging greater trust in their ability to represent you on local, national, or even international levels. Naturally, our representatives can't meet all these criteria, such as having the same background and appearance. However, this aspect of representation should be considered when engaging with communities in greater need, who depend heavily on services from local organisations and government support.

This **lack of representation** intensifies feelings of 'not being heard' in society, leading to low trust and a sense of underrepresentation. For those who choose to participate in democratic processes, a major obstacle is the **absence of active listening**. Why bother to participate if my voice isn't valued? Why should I vote for someone who will ultimately ignore my current concerns

and needs? If this representative isn't someone you share common ground with or can easily identify, these feelings are only exacerbated.

Trust is also very important and necessary when participating in democratic processes. Without sufficient trust, we cannot expect individuals to vote or attend meetings after work or during their days off. This is our current challenge, affecting not only marginalised communities but also a large portion of the population. Our participants, who shared their previous experiences with engaging in democratic processes and their knowledge of them, expressed a degree of mistrust, especially regarding transparency and their belief in achieving change. Trust must be built and maintained consistently over the long term. For example, poor decision-making, lack of results, and a decline in quality of life despite all the taxes or funds provided to the government and local authorities erode their trust.

All of this leads to one question: Why should I engage? Why continue to participate if it seems to make no perceived difference? What if I am not listened to? Or if my representative's objectives differ from mine and my community's? One participant shared the challenge of distinguishing between all candidates' programmes: 'They all promise the same thing,' to quote. This makes engagement even less appealing, and participation feels less impactful.

As one of our participants noted, individuals currently prioritise securing jobs, attending work, settling bills, and meeting their needs over engaging with politics and democratic processes. They often lack awareness of current issues and have limited time to learn about their local councillors and government beyond what the media presents, which tends to focus on negative news rather than positive actions. And when people try to stay informed, the lack of easily accessible and reliable information makes it challenging. Disinformation is on the rise with the growth of social media, leading people to believe false information and share it with their acquaintances, who often assume it reflects reality.

As mentioned earlier, we are in a **vicious circle** that must be addressed. Although our participants have encountered both positive and negative experiences with democratic processes, they recognise the detrimental effects on the community and the country if these challenges remain unresolved. They have also provided some suggestions to help resolve these issues, which we will examine in the following section.

Furthermore, we discussed the **role of councillors**. Given the high expectations and often low outcomes associated with their positions, councillors face significant criticism and abuse that can lead to harassment, prompting our participant to question, 'Who wants to be a councillor?'. If the position becomes less attractive, it could result in a lower likelihood of good representation for society and the community, continuing our vicious cycle of disengagement.

5.2.3. Role of the community and local organisations

Local organisations have a distinct advantage that the government lacks: **community power**. They are typically more familiar with local residents, activities, events, and the specific needs and living conditions of their community. This closeness to the people allows them to engage more effectively than any government body. As a result, local organisations play a crucial role in addressing disengagement and supporting democratic processes. For example, the Electoral Commission supported our Democracy4All project, which was designed to raise awareness about democratic engagement.

Local organisations are essential for **raising awareness**. By better understanding our service users and community members, we can more effectively tailor activities and workshops to suit their confidence levels and knowledge of democratic processes. This also allows us to guide them towards trustworthy sources of information and teach them how to spot misinformation. Access to accurate information empowers them to make informed decisions they believe are in their best interests.

Additionally, community centres and local organisations often serve as **safe spaces** for open discussion and debate among participants. By hosting structured discussions, like our Speak Up circles, without any media interference, we can facilitate the exchange of information, correct misunderstandings, and raise awareness. This approach builds trust between the organisation

and participants and, ideally, with a local representative if present. Participants noted that the Speak Up circle broadened their perspectives, although they expressed disappointment that no local representative was present. For them, having councillors attend could increase the effectiveness of these circles and foster a positive relationship between local councillors and residents.

Councillors often face criticism, insults, and negative feedback. While some of this feedback is valid and constructive, participants have recognised that it frequently crosses into harassment. They suggest organising discussions between councillors and a small group of local residents, centred on specific topics, similar to our Speak Up circles. This format could foster more meaningful conversations and help restore a sense of 'normalcy' in interactions. When citizens feel disconnected from their local representatives, it becomes difficult to understand the challenges councillors encounter and to build trust. That is why sharing accurate information is essential. A clear understanding of processes and decision-making should positively influence the trust placed in their representatives and improve productive communication for better outcomes.

They also suggested enhancing democratic engagement by making **consultations more attractive and engaging for the public**. Participants, for example, expressed negative feelings from past meetings or consultations, which were often marked by unproductive and lengthy discussions, with frustrated individuals hurling insults as the media chased headlines. While this does not reflect all consultations, one participant did recall some positive and fruitful meetings, but it creates a negative perception that discourages future participation. Another participant recounted an experience in Greece, where he observed people gathering in small groups based

on shared interests to discuss specific topics. This setting encouraged both discussions and debates (sometimes involving shouting). Although we cannot assess the outcome of this particular consultation, it seems that the tendency for participants to engage only with those who share similar interests probably fostered more constructive dialogues and a more positive outcome than what our participants experienced in consultations in the UK.

In conclusion, local organisations at the community level are essential in raising awareness about democratic participation. This engagement can take various forms, such as organising workshops to share information on participation, providing registration assistance, and fostering discussions and debates, ideally involving local councillors or MPs. These activities usually take place in community centres or the premises of local organisations that are well-known and trusted by residents. The combination of events held in a safe environment and the direct presence of local representatives can greatly enhance community awareness, involvement, and trust.

Although these strategies focus on the community, it is also essential to pursue solutions that can be implemented nationwide. We should aim to raise awareness and improve communication about democratic processes at the local level, while also tackling disinformation spread through media and social platforms at the national level. Furthermore, we should facilitate easy access to democratic participation through straightforward registration processes and explore innovative methods, including online voting.

5.2.4. Links with the Year 1 and Year 2 RJ4All work

This sixth Speak Up circle on democracy marks the beginning of Year 3 of RJ4All's work on the Postcode Project.

As we noted in our previous reports, findings from 2023, the inaugural year, highlighted the need for community cohesion and empowerment, trust building, service expansion, as well as improved communication and accountability from public agencies. Similarly, in 2024, we

recognised the importance of addressing community disempowerment, feelings of insecurity, and increasing service funding and youth engagement (Chaustier et. al, 2024).

In our last Speak Up circle on democracy engagement, many of these findings were recalled, particularly regarding the reasons for non-participation in democracy. Lack of trust, accountability, and communication with local authorities were mentioned. The community felt unheard.

Communication proxies exist for people to engage with their MPs or Local councillors. However, they are either not well known or, in cases such as local meetings, are so chaotic and poorly managed communication-wise that they seem ineffective and not worth attending, as shared by our participants. This lack of effective communication has caused a decline in community involvement and interest in the topic. People do not feel empowered to communicate or share their opinions; it feels pointless because they believe it will not lead to any change.

Over the years, RJ4All has sought ways to empower our community in SE16. It began with the opening of our community centre in Rotherhithe, where we offer food banks, sports activities, workshops, and wellbeing circles to empower community members and combat social isolation through these initiatives.

Speak-up circles are also a key way for us to engage with our community on specific topics. We learn from them while sharing restorative justice practices through restorative circles. However, while we aim to facilitate exchange and empower our community to communicate and share their feelings with us, we cannot force participation if the topic does not resonate with them. Our community showed great interest in our previous topic on youth, but when it came to our focus on democratic engagement, we faced difficulties engaging our service users. The lack of trust, disempowerment, and disconnection between our community's needs and local government actions resulted in an unsurprisingly low participation.

While in previous Speak Up circles, we observed that people were willing to talk openly, share ideas for the community's future, such as the need to expand mental health services, create more spaces for voicing concerns, improve communication, and build trust with authorities. This circle demonstrated that these goals are still unachieved. It is a long and challenging process, and trust must be built not only with the authorities but also among ourselves. The space we have created may be safe enough for individuals to share personal issues, mental health concerns, and feelings, making it a refuge. However, they are not yet prepared to share their opinions or experiences on sensitive and easily judgmental topics like democracy.

Efforts should continue to **empower our people** and **foster a safe environment** for open discussion. We need to persist in **building trust and communication** among all members of society—from youth to the elderly, from the unemployed to local councillors. Efforts **to integrate Restorative Justice practices into debates and conflict resolution** should also be sustained. Debates should not become chaotic spaces where people are unheard, shouting, and miscommunication dominates. Instead, they should foster discussion, idea-sharing, and active listening, much like in restorative justice circles.

In the long run, we hope that Restorative Justice principles will foster effective communication and promote peaceful dialogue, thereby benefiting the well-being of our community and improving governance. Communication is vital for understanding, action, and results, and that should be our primary goal.

6. Critical Conclusion

The Speak Up circle in February 2025 was the sixth session of our community circle, part of our Postcode Project. It contributed to our ongoing efforts to strengthen relationships, enhance communication, and build trust with community members and public authorities, aiming to increase overall interest and confidence in democratic engagement.

This study aims to support the objectives of the Restorative Justice Postcode project by bringing together local community members, stakeholders, and public authorities to identify important unmet needs and gather community input on these needs. This initiative aims to empower our community, a primary objective of ours.

This session experienced an unusually low turnout, reflecting a potential lack of interest, connection, and trust in the process of democratic engagement. Already, while promoting the circle, some of our service users expressed concerns about the topic, with some seeming hopeless, while others felt a need to self-censor their voices. As we noted, these feelings mirror years of ineffective policies that have diminished community well-being. For example, issues of insecurity and negative social perceptions of youth, previously addressed in last year's Speak Up circle, may contribute to these feelings and the mistrust of public authorities.

Our research indicates that efforts must continue, and it should now be a priority to involve the local government more in our community activities. Our previous study found that greater involvement of young people is essential for the well-being of our community (Chaustier et.al, 2024). Clear communication is key to building trust and effectiveness. Consequently, our goal should be to enhance communication, leading to clear and open actions. For example, using restorative circles to foster peaceful dialogue between community members and local councillors during meetings and debates could be an initial step towards improving communication.

The outcome of the Speak Up circle is not limited to RJ4All. We aim to bring about positive changes in SE16 through collective efforts involving not only RJ4All but also our community members, public agencies, and local stakeholders. Therefore, after each study, we produce a list of recommendations outlining suggested ways to improve for the RJ4All teams, Steering Group, and also external stakeholders.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Encouraging the use of Restorative Justice practices to enhance communication between the local community and the local authorities:

We believe it is essential that communication between our community members and local authorities is significantly improved. Our discussion revealed that, although our community has several opportunities to meet with its local representatives, dialogue is often disrupted by a few individuals who express their displeasure aggressively instead of peacefully seeking discussion. The use of restorative circles could help restore the principle of peaceful dialogue, active listening, and equal voice. Circles could also enable a better understanding of urgent needs that must be addressed and foster collaborative efforts to resolve them.

7.2. Expanding the offer for local community spaces for peaceful and fruitful dialogue between the community and local authorities:

To follow up on our initial recommendation, it is crucial that these circles are held in safe environments where participants feel comfortable sharing their views and opinions with others, including local representatives. This is not an easy task and requires a significant amount of trust to enable open sharing. Being in recognised safe spaces, such as venues within local organisations where previous circles have taken place, could facilitate dialogue and debates among community members and local representatives. Moreover, if held in locations frequently visited by community members, a sense of empowerment can develop, encouraging greater openness. Additionally, this will also allow local representatives to meet and visit those involved in local organisations, gaining a better understanding of their work, needs, and potential challenges they face.

7.3. Make it mandatory to have the presence of a local councillor/MP or one of their representatives at future Speak Up circles relevant to them, to foster communication, empowerment and trust building:

You may have noticed that all the above recommendations include the presence of a local representative in the circle. During our discussion, the importance of having a local representative present was emphasised, as it can significantly help foster trust, encourage dialogue, and humanise the person holding the role of local councillors or MPs. People often hide behind usernames when sharing hurtful comments or criticism online. Being in direct, face-to-face communication with attendees who are actively listening can encourage individuals to modify their perspectives and become more open to others' situations. We cannot expect local councillors or MPs to attend every circle; however, we should make it mandatory for at least one of them to be present at topics that are relevant to their roles. In other circles, their presence might be compulsory, but efforts should be made to ensure at least one of their representatives attends the circle to facilitate later direct communication and feedback to the public authority.

7.4. Increasing the awareness of democratic engagement through the tenure of workshops and training for all ages:

Another important issue revealed by our discussion is the lack of awareness about democratic engagement. Raising awareness is crucial. Our community needs to know what's happening in their local area, as well as how they can engage with their local representatives when a need arises. Organising regular workshops and training sessions for all age groups could be a solution to increase awareness while fostering community cohesion. Workshops and training could cover topics ranging from "how to contact your local councillors" to "how to recognise official sources of information on the internet".

For younger age groups, a focus can be placed on the fundamentals of democracy and the importance of community voices. These activities should help empower our community by increasing their understanding of democratic processes and encouraging participation to make their voices heard. The earlier we start raising awareness, the better informed and prepared they will be to take part in democratic activities wherever they go.

7.5. Increasing the awareness of democratic engagement through the tenure of workshops and training for all ages:

Finally, it is important that we, as local organisations, actively monitor and communicate our local government's actions to enhance their visibility. It is hard to expect our community members to be more involved and aware of local government activities if we are not ourselves informed. Therefore, our staff should be trained and receive monthly updates on community developments and the various actions taken by the local government. This initiative will not only increase awareness but also help combat the spread of false information within our community.

8. Acknowledgment

Rotherhithe Consolidated Charities supports RJ4All's restorative justice circles and Speak-Up circles and is a member of the Restorative Justice Postcode Steering Group. Website address: www.rotherhithecc.co.uk. This circle was also part of our Democracy4All project, supported by the Electoral Commission.

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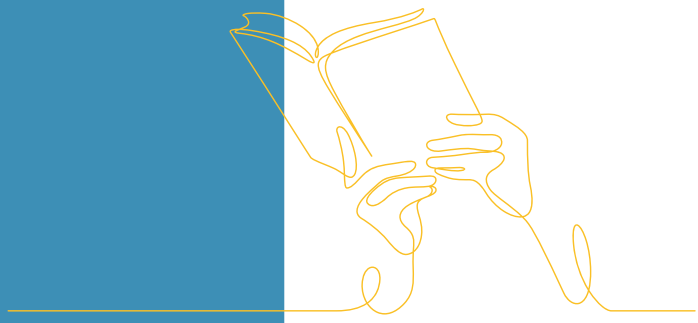

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