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DEMOCRACY 4 ALL

A restorative justice Action Research and Democratic Innovation Project

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Carmen Costa
Edited by Dr. Theo Gavrielides

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary ***4***

Project background and impetus ***7***

Project philosophy **7**

Project delivery **8**

Project context: Building the world's first restorative justice postcode **8**

Research Approach ***10***

Working in partnership **10**

Activities **10**

Participants (in-person & online) 11

Demographics of our target groups 11

Project outcomes and Methods **12**

Project results and findings ***16***

Project activities and Outputs: results **16**

Project outcomes: findings **17**

1. Improvements in the knowledge and understanding of democracy, especially at the local level including Voter ID rules and online registration. 17
2. Confidence to participate in democratic processes (local and national) through restorative justice based power-sharing processes, and trust-building within communities. 20
3. Likelihood of under-registered groups to vote and engage in democracy, including through voice and empowering action. 26

Processes, challenges & lessons ***28***

Conclusions and Recommendations ***30***

Appendices ***31***

Appendix A – Leaflets and posters **32**

Appendix B: Online material **35**

Appendix C: E-newsletters **35**

Appendix D: Restorative Justice based Speak up event/ circle **36**

Appendix E: workshops **37**

About the project team ***38***

References ***41***

Executive Summary

This e-book presents the results of "The Democracy 4 All Project" carried out between 1/1/2025 and 31/3/2025. The project was designed in response to the Electoral Commission's Call for "Partner led action research projects: engaging under-registered groups in democracy".

The project was drawn from RJ4All's belief and evidence that restorative justice can empower the individual and communities to meaningfully share power and thus engage in civic life more equally. RJ4All strongly believes that the root causes of societal problems such as poverty, community tensions and inequality are found in the abuse of power, whether this resides within individuals, institutions, or governments. We also have evidence to believe that public trust in public services is declining and that a new social contract between communities and governments is needed. Communities need and want to be empowered!

At RJ4All, we view restorative justice as more than just a criminal justice or educational concept. Restorative justice for us is an ethos and a way of living. The project was developed and delivered within our larger strategic programme of building the world's first restorative justice postcode. The RJ4All project aimed to support the Commission's aim to promote greater consistency in democratic education, increase knowledge and understanding of democracy, and increase voter confidence to engage in our democratic system.

The project set off to deliver the following outcomes:

- √ **Outcome 1** – Knowledge and understanding of democracy, especially at the local level including Voter ID rules and online registration.
- √ **Outcome 2** – Confidence to participate in democratic processes (local and national) through (restorative justice based) power-sharing (processes) and trust-building within communities.
- √ **Outcome 3** – Likelihood of under-registered groups to vote and engage in democracy including through voice and empowering action.

The key target groups that we engaged were:

- √ underrepresented youth (up to aged 26)
- √ individuals with BAME background
- √ older people (ages 55+)

- √ those with mental health challenges
- √ those with low digital skills.

The project was carried out in partnership with the independent FRED youth-led campaign covering the youth related elements of the project in a truly power sharing restorative justice method.

The activities that were delivered and measured against the outcomes were:

1. Producing flyers, posters and other print materials related to voter engagement
2. Online outreach and dissemination of knowledge through the FRED youth-led campaign
3. Youth-led democracy restorative justice based workshops
4. Holding weekly digital drop-in Voter ID sessions with 1-1 support
5. Running a series of intergenerational restorative justice based gardening sessions and wellbeing circles relating to themes of democratic agency and confidence
6. Disseminating materials to network and partners
7. Holding one restorative justice based Speak Up! circle with a focus on democratic competence and confidence

In the end, the project engaged a total of:

- √ 132 individuals through our in-person activities
- √ 11,442 individuals through our online activities.

Key findings

- Volunteer-led, community discussion-based activities which highlight the political experiences of underrepresented groups serve as a valuable resource in rebuilding the trust, agency and motivation required to greater involve these groups in democratic processes both locally and nationally.
- Participants responded most positively to our co-designed formats which gave power and voice to underrepresented groups. For example, our restorative justice-based wellbeing and Speak Up! circles, built on the format of equal power distribution through the use of a talking piece and preestablished ground rules around safety and respect, created a safe space for exchanging democratic concerns as well as solutions.
- Community dialogue that is founded upon the restorative justice principles of power sharing, equality, dignity and involvement in decision making, creates trust and breaks down barriers to participation.
- We noted several barriers to participation, whether due to poor political representation as seen during our Speak Up! Event, limited digital, English or

vision/hearing skills as seen during our digital drop-in, lack of respect and attentive listening to peers as noted in our circles, or fears around ballot tampering as noted during our gardening workshop.

The leading implication of this research is that it provides some strong, though interim, evidence that **statutory bodies and the Electoral Commission have much to gain in achieving their democratic mandate from creating long-term partnerships with voluntary and community-based organisations**. This report gives evidence that voluntary and statutory agencies can affect greater democratic participation among underrepresented groups by curating more restorative justice based, community-led discussion spaces which effectively share power, build back trust, and bring to the forefront relevant concerns and solutions from and for these groups.

Following the results of this action research project, our recommendations include:

- √ **Commission more activities promoting democratic participation through volunteer and community-led discussion spaces,** which empower diverse and inclusive perspectives around democratic issues as well as practical and relevant solutions.
- √ **Promote the restorative justice model of circles/ Speak up events** in engaging communities and under-represented groups both at the local and national level.
- √ **Work with local voluntary and community partners** who have the buy in from under-represented groups to act as a broker between the Electoral Commission and other relevant statutory bodies; develop multi-year and sustainable partnerships as well as a long-term evaluation framework that can provide a stronger evidence base.
- √ **When it comes to young people, adopt the youth-led model of democratic engagement**, allowing for an organic and bottom up structure of participation, one that is led and shaped by young people and not dictated (in terms of its form and method).
- √ **Voting and democratic engagement are neither targets nor "ticking box" processes.** They form the core elements of a healthy and accountable system that holds decision makers and the powerful to account. This requires partnership work with young people, and long-term investment with youth-led initiates.
- √ **Restorative justice as defined in its maximalistic sense can be the bio power that can counter power abuses (Gavrielides, 2021b), and enable democratic participation through dialogue.** Connecting democracy and restorative justice practices should be a strategic aim for the Electoral Commission and other relevant bodies aiming to promote democratic participation especially of those who tend to be excluded the most.

Project background and impetus

Project philosophy

This e-book aims to provide an analysis of our Institute's action research project for democratic innovation "The Democracy 4 All Project" during the period from 1/1/2025 to 31/3/2025. The project was designed in response to the Electoral Commission's Call for "Partner led action research projects: engaging under-registered groups in democracy". The Electoral Commission is the independent public body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. The RJ4All project aimed to support the Commission's aim to promote greater consistency in democratic education, increase knowledge and understanding of democracy, and increase voter confidence to engage in our democratic system.

The project was drawn from RJ4All's belief and evidence that restorative justice can empower the individual and communities to meaningfully share power and thus engage in civic life more equally. At RJ4All, we view restorative justice as more than just a criminal justice or educational concept. Restorative justice for us is an ethos and a way of living. According to the literature: *"Restorative Justice is an ethos with practical goals, among which is to repair harm by including affected parties in a (direct or indirect) encounter and a process of understanding through voluntary and honest dialogue. Restorative justice adopts a fresh approach to conflicts and their control, retaining at the same time certain rehabilitative goals"* (Gavrielides, 2007b).

We use this concept not only in relation to the context and aim of our projects, but also how we run our organisations, make decisions and govern our internal and external affairs. By viewing restorative justice as an ethos, we tap into its potential as the bio-power that can face and indeed eliminate power abuses. This approach also allows us to focus on producing project results that view issues such as community cohesion, violence and conflict in a holistic way overcoming the isolated and monolithic ways and thinking.

This project gave us the opportunity to collect data that would test our hypothesis of using restorative justice methods (e.g. circles) and values (e.g. power sharing) to help achieve the Electoral Commission's Tender objectives.

Project delivery

Therefore, we used the project time to deliver a range of democratic engagement activities aimed at improving local knowledge and understanding of democracy, confidence to participate in democratic processes, and likeliness to engage in them among the underrepresented groups we serve at the RJ4All Rotherhithe Community Centre.

The target groups that we identified falling into the underrepresented categories are: youth (up to the age of 26), individuals with a BAME background, older people, and those with mental health challenges or low digital skills. To assess the impact of our project, we created an Evaluation Framework, using multiple evaluation methods, including surveys, observational methods, a focus group and interviews with project participants. Our evaluation also includes learnings around our processes and which activities achieved a greater impact over others, highlighting their effectiveness and suitability for similar community-based organisations promoting democratic engagement among underrepresented groups.

The Evaluation Framework was put in the context of a very tight delivery period (1/1/2025 to 31/3/2025) which was imposed by the Commission. The findings of this project are therefore limited, and as part of our recommendations, we propose that a longer study is engaged to allow for richer data.

Project context: Building the world's first restorative justice postcode

The project was developed and delivered within our larger strategic programme of building the world's first restorative justice postcode.

RJ4All strongly believes that the root causes of societal problems such as poverty, community tensions and inequality are found in the abuse of power, whether this resides within individuals, institutions, or governments. We also have evidence to believe that public trust in public services is declining and that a new social contract between communities and governments is needed. Communities need and want to be empowered!

Designed through a user-led methodology and by involving our local community from the outset, this pioneering project is built on the principle that sustainable community

cohesion and resilience require structural and systemic changes at the local level. Key principles of the programme include empowering local communities to take part in decisions affecting their lives and ensuring service delivery is community-led through power-sharing and decision-making. It utilises the restorative justice ethos as a methodology of community empowerment and voice.

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RJ4ALL INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
30 PLOUGH WAY LONDON SE16 2LJ
+44(0)7708758600

WWW.RJ4ALL.ORG

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CATALOGUE

This e-book presents the results of "**The Democracy 4 All Project**" carried out between 1/1/2025 and 31/3/2025. It was commissioned from the UK Electoral Commission. The project was drawn from RJ4All's belief and evidence that restorative justice can empower the individual and communities to meaningfully share power and thus engage in civic life more equally. The key target groups that we engaged were: underrepresented youth (up to age 26), individuals with a BAME background, older people (ages 55+), those with mental health challenges, and those with low digital skills. In the end, the project engaged 132 individuals through in-person activities and 11,442 individuals online. The leading implication of this research is that it provides some strong, though interim, evidence that statutory bodies and the Electoral Commission have much to gain in achieving their democratic mandate from creating long-term partnerships with voluntary and community-based organisations. This report gives evidence that voluntary and statutory agencies can affect greater democratic participation among underrepresented groups by curating more restorative justice based, community-led discussion spaces which effectively share power, build back trust, and bring to the forefront relevant concerns and solutions from and for these groups.



"We are thrilled to launch this timely ebook in partnership with the Electoral Commission. At a time when democracy is being threatened at the international level and its value questioned especially by under-represented groups, we present evidence that restorative justice can act as the method and a philosophy for stronger communities. Democracy requires power sharing, and this ebook presents some evidence that when engaging in community-led, dialogue-based methods that are founded upon the restorative justice principles no one is left behind. Terms such as "under-represented groups" and "marginalised" perpetuate a defeatist approach to engagement. Empowerment through bottom-up methods such as youth-led campaigns and citizen-led circles is an alternative that this report suggests has much potential. I am grateful to the team at RJ4All and the young volunteers at FRED for all their hard work, as well as the Electoral Commission for entrusting us with this innovative project".

Prof. Theo Gavrielides, PhD (Founder and Director of the RJ4All International Institute.

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