

COCKNEY

# The Modern Cockney Manifesto

Why you need to celebrate the  
culture, heritage, and shared future  
of 'non-posh Londoners'



**Steps to  
Togetherness**  
Scotland & England



**MORE IN COMMON  
NETWORK**  
MODERN COCKNEY  
INSPIRED BY JO COX



We challenge a narrative that 'Cockney is dying' by celebrating how it is an evolving community, containing diverse backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs, offering a powerful resource for overcoming adversity, tackling social prejudice, and building greater togetherness for anyone with an affinity with 'non-posh Londoners'.

## What do you reckon?



Photograph © Kevin Mallett

## Why you need to celebrate the Modern Cockney

Across the UK once powerful assets for ordinary working people - their cultures and shared sense of identity - of inspiring stories and narratives, underpinned by shared values of resilience and defiance, resourcefulness, all supported by an irreverent wit - now sit under-used or untapped.

Yet, these assets - based on positive inclusive values - can help individuals and communities stand up to adversity and tackle social prejudice, create a greater sense of community and togetherness to tackle the growing social polarization in our society, and be more open to understanding one another.

Cockney is a complex, fast-changing, and ever-evolving social identity. Most regional identities are explained by geography. Cockney is further defined by social class. It's also the most dynamically changing, with over the centuries a constant stream of new influxes of different cultures leaving their imprint and legacy on Cockney identity.

Some reject the idea of their being Cockney, with its non-posh associations. Others move out from its traditional heartlands through wanting better housing or environment yet still retain their attachment to their traditions and heritage. As a result, what is meant by 'Cockney' - or the 'non-posh Londoner' - is continually reframed, diluted, or even denied.

Yet, the underlying idea of 'Cockney' survives, even thrives. Usage of the word 'Cockney' increased by 40% over the last 50 years<sup>2</sup> Cockney continues to shape, act as a counterpoint to, and influence the wider culture, identity, and language of Southeast England - such as what is called 'Estuary English' and 'Multicultural London English'.

Cockney's powerful legacy however, although constantly regenerated with every new wave of arrivals from around the globe leaving their imprint on an evolving culture, along with its positive



stories and heroes - from the Matchgirls strikers to the 'Battle of Cable Street' - is not taught in our schools, while media stereotypes of right-wing racists with Cockney accents prevail, and social prejudice and injustice persist against working people's identities.

And it's not just a Cockney thing. It's a similar tale of woe for Brum, Geordie, Scouse, Weegie, and other local identities. Modern-day Britain can either sleepwalk into becoming an 'England' or we can wake up to recognising how our society and culture is richer, more confident through people having a sense of roots, accepting who we are, where we're from, and where we are going forward together.

We don't need an exercise in nostalgia celebrating a mythical past, nor do we need a 'Royal Institute of Cockney'. Rather, by providing emergent spaces like the Modern Cockney Festival (a month-long celebration in March) bringing people together - on or offline - enabling anyone to explore, discover, and celebrate their shared sense of who they are, while respecting the rights of others to be the person they ought to be - the world is a better place through celebrating the Modern Cockney.

1. A term first coined by comedian and broadcaster Arthur Smith in March 2023. 2. Source: GoogleNgram.

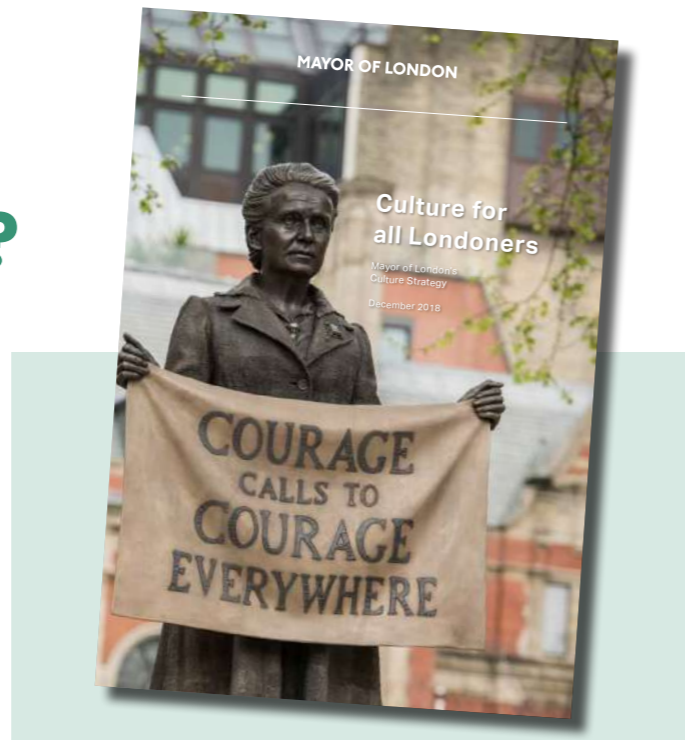
## Is this out of order?

The Mayor of London's Cultural Strategy Report (2018), entitled 'Culture for all Londoners' in its 180 pages and estimated 35,000 words featured zero use of the term 'Cockney'. **Cockney was not mentioned once**, nor did it mention the traditional London fayre of 'pie'n'mash'.

It's as if Cockney never existed, or at best, is being unconsciously airbrushed out of existence.

A study by Modern Cockney in March 2023 revealed over a twelve-year period - spanning the rule by both major political parties, the Mayor of London's web site featured 357,000 pages containing an estimated 375 million words.

The term 'Londoner' and 'Londoners' were used 179,000 and 180,000 respectively, while 'Cockney' was mentioned just 22 times - 18 of which were by third parties.



To put into context, the website used the terms 'Alaskan' 52 times, 'Peruvian' 142 times, and 'Samoan' 217 times, honouring so many other important communities in London, but not ours. All this at a time when general use of the term Cockney increased.

**Something is amiss.**

## In an era where social identities have become more complex

Over the last 50 years we've also witnessed, thanks to greater geographic and social mobility, more extensive global mass media, and greater self-awareness, how modern social identities are more complex, fluid, and multi-layered. People nowadays have a wardrobe of identities to define themselves.

It's a bit like supporting a football team. Some attend every match home or away, others may go less frequently, others may just feel good about their 'team' winning. All share being fans of the same club but have different degrees of intensity in their relationship with their shared identity.

Being a 'Modern Cockney' is not about being exclusively 'Cockney' but whether you're Bengali Cockney, Black Cockney, British Cockney, Chinese Cockney, Eastern European Cockney, English Cockney, Essex Cockney, Irish Cockney, Jewish Cockney, Kent Cockney, Muslim Cockney,

Sikh Cockney - or whatever rich tapestry of identities you connect with - all offer a cocktail of identity that can feature, where authentic, an affinity with the 'non-posh Londoner'.

In an age where people seek to celebrate their authentic selves, encouraging people to explore, discover, and articulate the Cockney dimension to their story of self adds colour, depth, texture, and intensity to fuel greater self-belief and confidence, to potentially feel more connected, together, and inspired as a result.

Our society faces major challenges of growing social division and polarisation, destroying the very glue that binds us together. By connecting with, and respecting our shared identities builds community cohesion, fosters a greater sense of togetherness, binding us closer together, to create a better world for future generations.

## Cockney 'baddies'?

Guess what accent is used seemingly all the time in modern children's movies - 'Matilda the Musical', 'Puss in Boots 3', '101 Dalmatians' and more - to portray bad characters?

As the cofounder of Modern Cockney was asked by his granddaughter, "Why do all the baddies speak like you?"

Dick van Dyke in 'Mary Poppins' is universally regarded as having the worst-ever Cockney accent on film. Yet at least his character Bert was a good guy.

While there has always been negative stereotypes when was the last time you saw a positive and affirming portrayal of a Cockney' in the media?

How can any child with a non-posh London accent or identifying with 'non-posh' expect to grow up not facing social prejudice or disadvantage?



# And the idea of 'Cockney' has become more complex

We are researching how what is called 'Cockney' is made up of four main groups, all linked by an affinity with the 'non-posh Londoner'.

## Old School Cockney

Characterised by being working-class from a traditional inner London heartland, stereotyped by language, use of rhyming slang etc.



## New School Cockney

A more globally-influenced culture of the latest iterations from incomers from all parts of the globe to the traditional Cockney heartlands, leaving their imprint, like previous generations, on the ever-evolving Cockney identity and culture.



## Cockney Diaspora

Living outside the traditional heartlands yet possessing characteristics of 'Old and New School Cockney' and retaining an affinity with its heritage, language, and identity. Typically found in a region nominally called 'Cockneydom' (defined by the core spread of Pie'n'Mash shops across Southeast England).

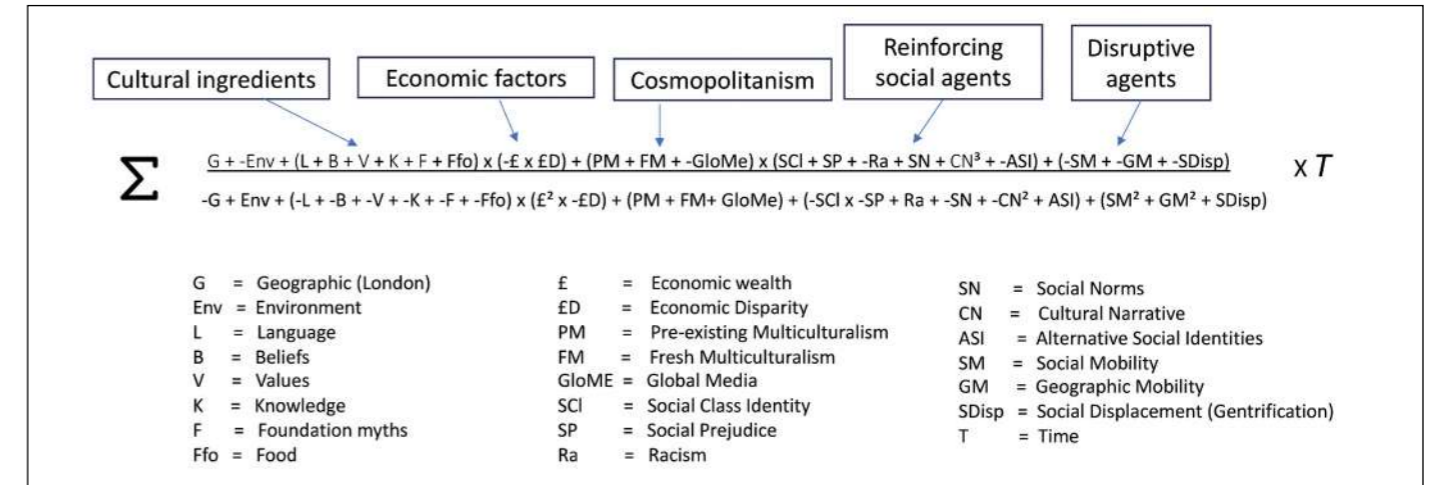


## Ancestral Cockney

Separated by generations, although no longer identifiable as a 'Cockney' by social class, language, or other cultural indicators. Yet still draw inspiration from their Cockney ancestral roots like the actors Charles Dance, Keira Knightley, and Dame Helen Mirren.



# Modern Cockney identity is both complex - and simple



To help explain the complexity, even contradictions within contemporary Cockney identity, Modern Cockney created a tool, the 'Modern Cockney Formula'.

Some may be proud of the Cockney identity and heritage with their character - even primarily defined by it. Others, might be perceived by others as talking and acting like a 'Cockney' but may themselves be in absolute denial of being defined as one. While others may not sound or act like one but think of themselves as 'Cockney'.

The multitude of different variations and shades of what is known as 'Cockney' can be understood by appreciating its complexity. The 'Modern Cockney Formula' is a simple overview of the different dynamic elements at work.

The formula contains 52 different variables interacting with one another to help explain and understand how the different dimensions create what we call the 'Modern Cockney'.

Such is the complexity of modern identity that even this complicated formula could be regarded by some as simplistic.

A common myth associated with Cockney identity is 'being born within the sound of Bow Bells' (what anthropologists call a culture's foundation story).

The idea of 'Bow Bells' as a metaphor to describe an area around Cheapside, London where non-posh Londoners resided was conceived in the late 16th century, when London's East End was largely unpopulated. Yet 'Cockney' existed 250 years before Bow Bells were even cast.

The Bells' audio boundary is somewhat vague (affected by wind direction, sound pollution, and didn't even chime between 1941 to 1961 because of war damage),



Modern Cockney celebrates the myth as 'Bow bells are heard through the heart' more accurately recognising its original meaning as a metaphor and signifying an emotional connection for any non-posh Londoner.

# And Modern Cockney is worth celebrating

Being Cockney **helps you do the right thing**. In September 2022 David Beckham received widespread accolades for his decision to queue for 12 hours to pay his respects at Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. His decision to queue was inspired by the memory of his East End grandparents. It was what they would have done, he said. What they would have wanted him to do.

Being Cockney **offers a potent sense of 'Britishness'**. In a divided, post-Brexit Britain some may feel a sense of being uncertain, detached or even alienated about what it means to be 'English' or 'British'.

Celebrating local identities like Cockney provides a positive way forward for connecting with an authentic sense of British identity.

Being Cockney **connects you to a powerful legacy** - from the Matchgirls strikers to the 'Battle of Cable Street' - of a proud, inspiring past, of values of resilience and defiance, resourcefulness, and a stoic and irreverent wit. A potent resource to contemporary challenges, to overcome adversity and be more purposeful today - and tomorrow.

Being Cockney celebrates **a native wit**. In his book 'Autobiography of a Supertramp' W H Davies wrote in 1908. "Cockneys make good beggars. They are held in high esteem by the fraternity in America. Their resource, originality and invention, and a never faltering tongue, enables them to often attain their ends where others fail, and they succeed where the natives starve."

Being Cockney inspires **subversive creativity**. Music like Lovers Rock, Soul II Soul, Grime were born out of sound systems and pirate radio, a DIY state of affairs flourishing outside the mainstream and evolving to define their own communities rather than please music business executives. Extolling Cockney values of resilience, defiance, resourcefulness with an irreverent wit.



# Celebrating Modern Cockney tackles social class prejudice

At a Modern Cockney Festival event in March 2024, wellbeing expert Professor Vincent Deary spoke of the need for 'self compassion', to be tolerant and understanding of who you are as a foundation stone for a positive, confident self-image, and self-belief.

An authentic respect and pride for your wider social identity, like being a Modern Cockney, can make you feel better about yourself. It also punctures one of the main drivers for social class prejudice - confidence.

A prime benefit for those who discriminate is gaining greater confidence. It provides a rocket fuel to sustain discrimination. A sense of superiority and entitlement over those you regard as your social inferiors can make you feel better about yourself, and if shared in wider society can be a powerful tool for suppressing others.

Anyone facing social discrimination, if they allow it, can face however, a vicious cycle of declining sense of self-worth, status, and confidence if

they start believing the agenda and story being imposed upon them of being inferior because of their social identity.

By challenging negative social stigma around a Cockney identity can puncture the prevailing narrative of discrimination. Deflating the very weapon used against you by celebrating and being proud of an authentic social identity making you feel better about yourself while taking away the stick others beat you with.

Pride in being a Modern Cockney fuels your resilience and defiance, resourcefulness, along with an irreverent sense of humour, make what you are to face up to whatever adversity, life, or snobs, throw at you.

And when faced with a social bigot who looks down upon you, we draw inspiration from Elise Hoskins, the mum of Cockney Hollywood actor Bob Hoskins, who once advised her son, "If people don't like you, f--- 'em! They've no taste!".



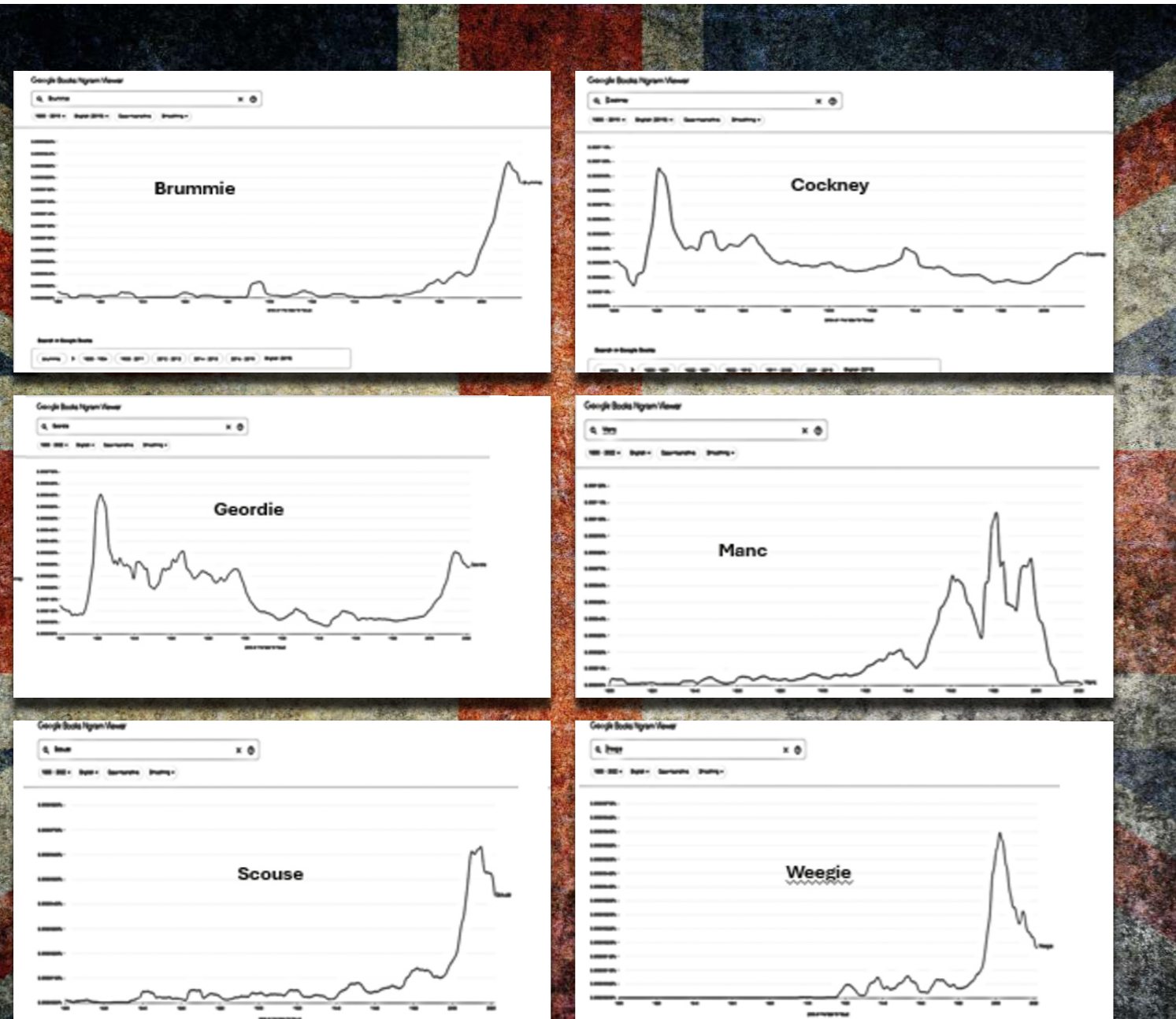
# Along with other UK local identities challenges the rise of England

A common complaint about modern-day Britain is the rise of uniformity, where every high street in every town or city centre looks increasingly alike, with the same shops offering a bland urban landscape, creating what can be called an 'England'.

Similarly, with regional cultures, there's evidence of a pattern of profound decline in some cases, how usage of the very names of these identities is declining (See Google Ngram charts below).

The Modern Cockney provides a catalyst and template for other local communities, to assert, celebrate, and enjoy their identity and sense of who they are, their distinct qualities, and how they can add to a rich tapestry of modern-day Britain.

A celebration based not on nostalgia but authentic, relevant and vibrant living values. But we need to act now to arrest any further decline and build them up to realise their greater potential.



## Who we are

**How do you change your world?**

**Can ordinary people make a difference?**

Anthropologist Margaret Mead observed how, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Media stories of 'Cockney dying' prompted an online event where two East Enders met, an old white guy Andy Green, originally from Poplar, and now a director of social enterprise Grow Social Capital, and a Bengali artist and community

activist, Saif Osmani, cofounder of the Bengali East End Heritage Society.

They talked and talked, discovering a common passion for their respective Cockney identities and created a community partnership, 'Modern Cockney'.

Over the last three years, their community partnership, with scant resource, is moving mountains. Imagine, with your help, and from others what greater things can be achieved.

**What little thing can you do?**



# We're already making a difference

Our campaign gained the first-ever formal recognition of Cockney as a culture in its 660-year history. We successfully petitioned Tower Hamlets Council to recognise Cockney as a community language. We're now encouraging other public bodies to follow suit.

We created the first-ever 'National Pie'n'Mash Week, celebrating the traditional Cockney cuisine (check out our campaign film of the first-ever generic promotion of Pie'n'Mash featuring the comedian Arthur Smith). It challenges a narrative of 'Pie'n'Mash is dying' with the reality of a food that is evolving and finding new ways to delight its legions of fans,

We're campaigning, with the support of celebrities including Danny Dyer, for the traditional Cockney

Pie'n'Mash to be granted Protected Food Status - like Cornish pasties, Bramley apple pie etc . We lobbied for the first-ever debate in the House of Commons on Pie'n'Mash.

Through the Modern Cockney Festival's 'Cockney Conversations' events we create a platform for discussing Cockney culture and issues around tackling social discrimination and injustices.

We are an active member of the More in Common network, established by the Jo Cox Foundation, working to tackle polarisation in modern society.

Our work has received global media coverage and featured in BBC, ITV, and Sky News and other national media.

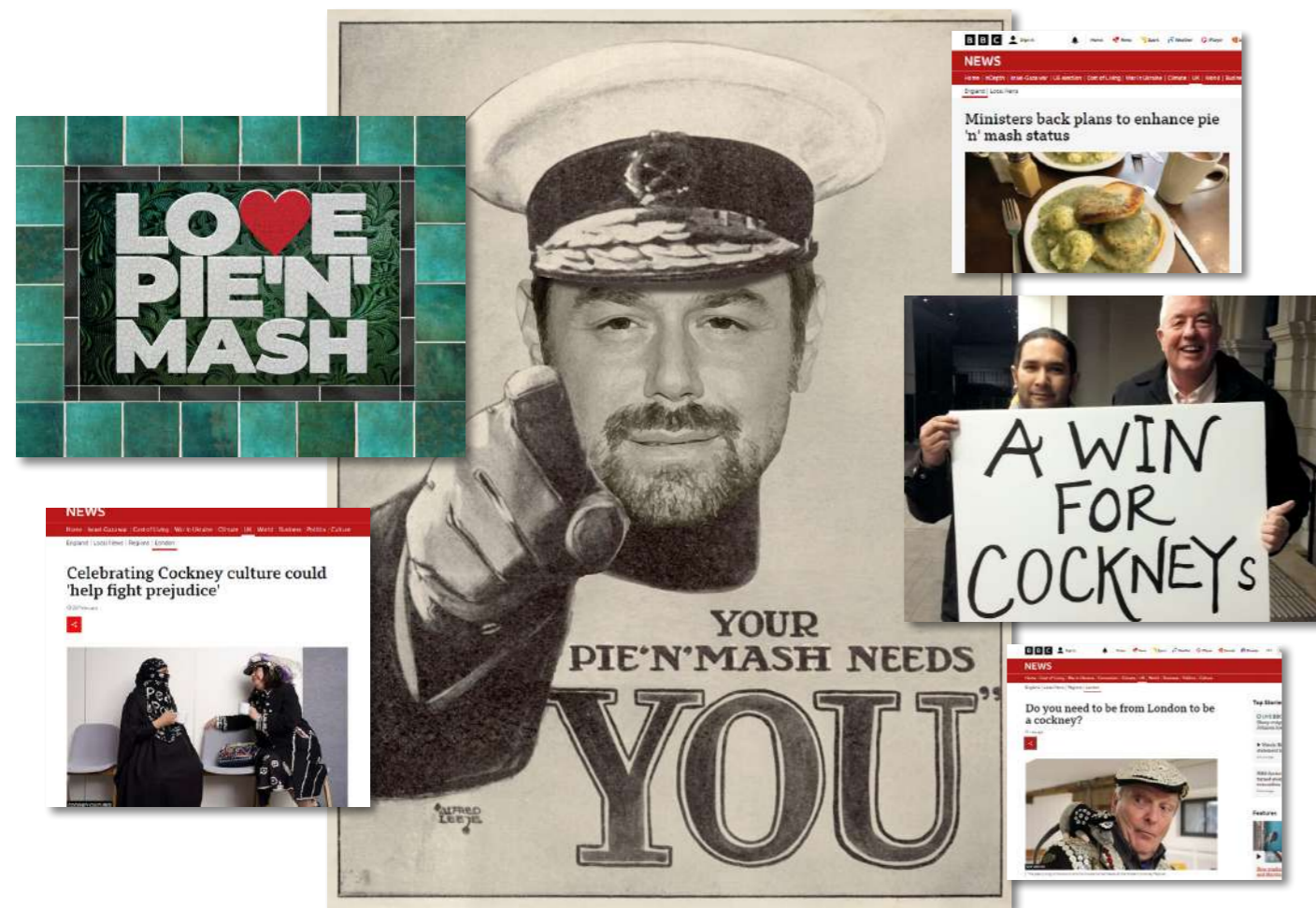
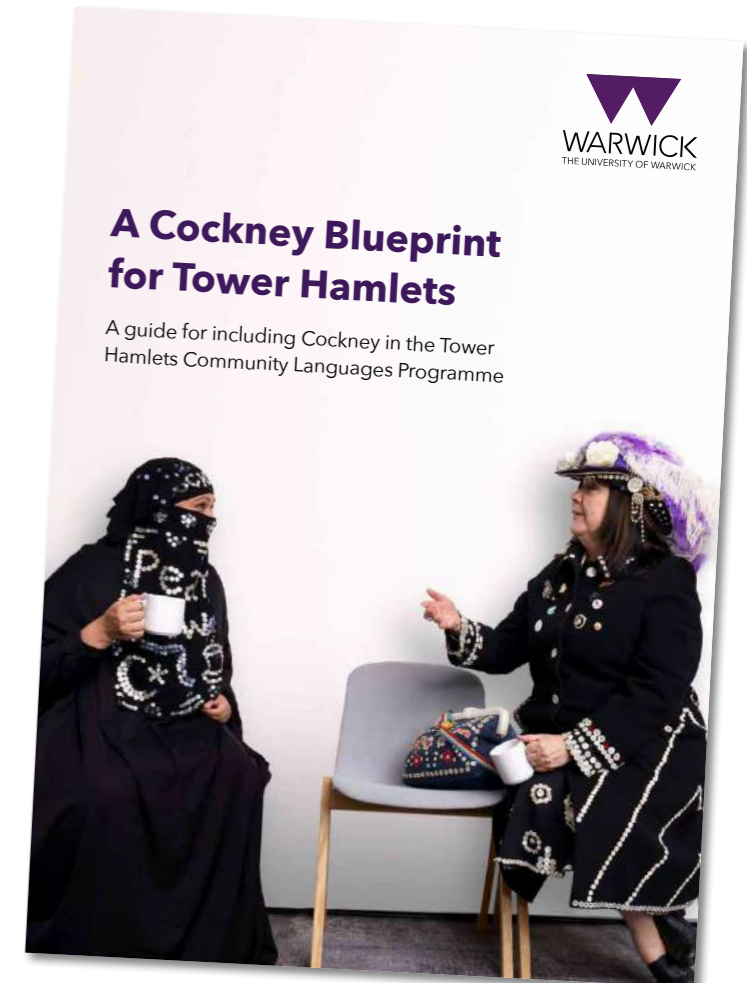
# We're creating strong foundations for Modern Cockney identity and culture

We're working with the Universities of Warwick, Queen Mary, and Westminster in the UK, and Kiel University in Germany, and the British Library to establish a sound intellectual base, based on robust academic study on 'what is the Modern Cockney?' using our 'Cockney Chat' research tool.

We co-produced with the University of Warwick, a Blueprint report for public bodies showing how Cockney can be included in future policies and delivery of public services, enabling Cockney communities to be fully engaged and connected with decisions affecting them.

Our teaching materials are currently being used for English Language A' Level students and are working to develop a full range of support for all ages across the curriculum.

We co-created and co-produced a 'pocket museum' - a deck of cards telling 'The Story of Cockney in 50 objects' (with each of the 50 cards telling a story). We have plans for creating a family of 'pocket museums' for different Cockney identities and stories, offering fun, engaging ways to share our stories.



# We're creating engaging events

We create the month-long **Modern Cockney Festival** to provide a space to explore, discover, and reflect on what does 'Cockney' mean to you.

We created **Modern Cockney Kids Festival** working with the Museum of London Docklands and the Whitechapel Art Gallery offering fun ways to engages future generations in their identity and heritage.

The first-ever **National Pie'n'Mash Week** celebrated the traditions and future of Cockney cuisine seeing shops hold special events, evening offering oysters (a common food staple of Victorian working classes).

We are working with the East London Music group to celebrate our heroes, with plans to create

'*Nellie - the Opera!*' sharing the inspiring story of Nellie Cressall, one of 30 local councillors In Poplar, London, sent to prison in 1920 protesting against social injustice - despite being 8 months pregnant who refused to be pardoned unless her fellow prisoners were released too.

We celebrate London's street markets as precious cultural spaces for vibrant communities.

We encourage everyone to join the celebrations of modern Cockneys and other non-common Englishes and regional identities, to become more powerful voices and telling their stories of their shared heritage and identities for a better future together within our communities

# Why not have your own 'Cockney Chat'?

Ask people 'Are you Cockney?' or 'What does Cockney mean to you?' can result in blank or faltering responses.

Working with the University of Warwick and the British Library, Modern Cockney developed a pioneering research tool called the 'Cockney Chat'.

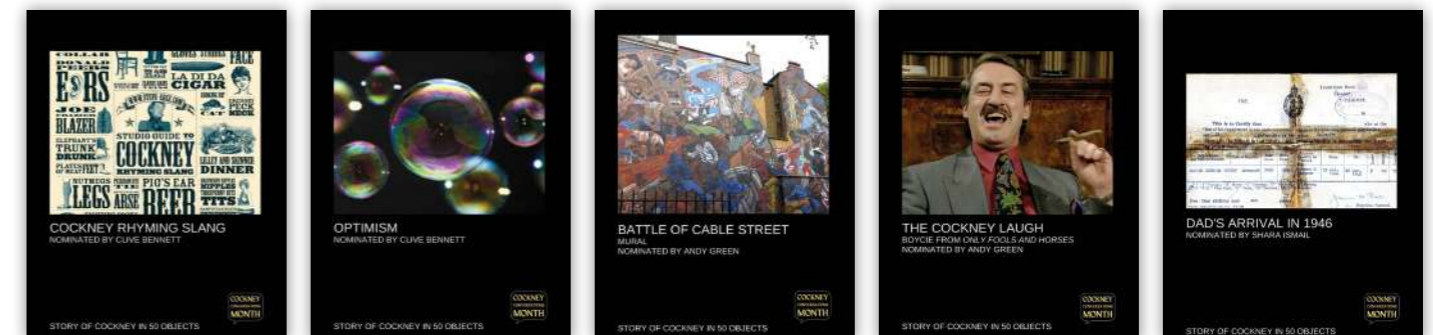
It features two packs of cards - one celebrating positive qualities of Cockney identity, culture, and

heritage, and one featuring negative stereotypes sometimes associated with the idea of 'Cockney'.

The cards are used to prompt conversations around what is meant by 'Cockney'. They trigger fascinating memories, perceptions, and ideas, as well as candid views on negative stereotypes.

Can you help us arrange a 'Cockney Chat' with your school, community, workplace, or trade union group?

## 5 cards of the positive, evolving story of Cockney



Do you know any Cockney rhyming slang?

Optimism - is that a Cockney characteristic?

The Battle of Cable Street, what does the fight against fascists say about Cockneys?

Is there a 'Cockney laugh', a response to other's misfortune?

'Dad's arrival to UK certificate' - what are the stories of Cockneys and their background?

## 5 cards of negative stereotypes about being Cockney



Are Cockneys of low intelligence or lesser educated?

Does being a Cockney mean you are of low social status?

Are all Cockneys racist?

Are Cockneys untrustworthy?

Are Cockneys lawbreakers?



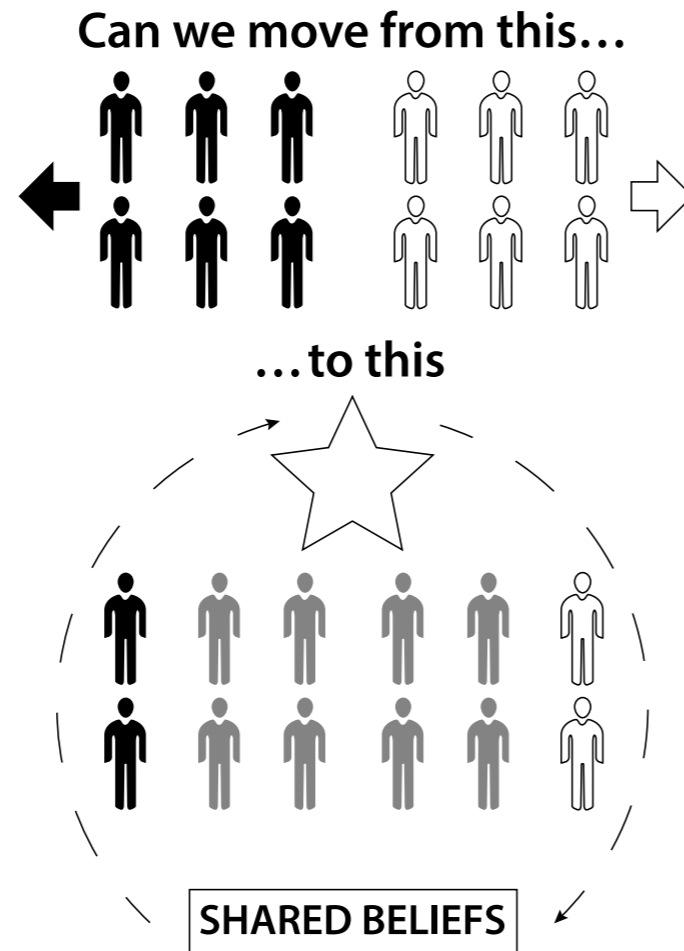


# What does a better future look like for modern Cockneys?

Our ethos is about celebrating our culture in all its rich diversity, uniting where there is division or the potential for it, and in so doing, delivering a greater sense of both social justice and the ability of the individual to play their part in achieving it - however modest that may appear to them.

## A better future is where...

1. People and their communities feel more confident, capable, and connected through a shared sense of pride and togetherness in connecting with a Modern Cockney identity, whatever shape or form that takes. A confidence that inspires overcoming the efforts of others to make them feel second-class citizens, looked down upon because of their postcode, the way they speak, or lack of privilege.
2. Our schools and colleges inspire future generations elevating their education through celebrating a rich Modern Cockney heritage.
3. Public bodies and cultural institutions recognise Modern Cockney as a community language, a shared culture, to offering a greater sense of inclusiveness, being listened to, and valued as part of a bigger community.
4. Modern Cockney traditions, like the traditional Pie'n'Mash, are properly respected, recognised, and revered.
5. The story of Modern Cockney is not mis-told, negatively stereotyped, marginalised, or airbrushed out of existence.
6. Cheap negative media stereotypes of 'Cockneys' are rightly challenged and pilloried.
7. Communities can stand up with greater resolve to the impacts of hyper-gentrification or challenging unwanted, or unsympathetic development of their neighbourhoods.
8. In a future of bland, robot-generated AI culture, the authenticity of our regional identities



9. Heroes like Nellie Cressall are rightly revered and celebrated.
10. Where we tell a story of non-posh Londoners' proud identity, rich heritage, and a confident future.

**That's what a better future looks like. Can you help make it? Get stuck in!**

# Our Plans for 2025

We need to build upon our successes, reach out even further, and create a sustainable resource to tell our bigger story.

Extend our **research** working with the University of Warwick Queen Mary University of London, Westminster University, Kiel University in Germany, and **lobby more London public bodies and cultural institutions** to support the *Cockney Blueprint*.

Celebrate the **second National Pie'n'Mash Week** and secure it **Traditional Status Guaranteed (TSG)**.

Co-create a **family of 'pocket museums'** telling the stories in 50 objects of 'Bengali Cockneys', 'Black Cockneys', and 'Jewish Cockneys', and more. Use our research tool 'Cockney Chat' to inspire your sharing of your Cockney stories and wear a 'Cockney Chat' badge to show your pride.

'**Nellie - the Opera!**' collaborating with the East London Music group and others celebrating the life and inspiration of Nellie Cressall, the Poplar councillor who in 1921 was sent to prison fighting for social justice despite being 6 months pregnant.

**'Dick van Dyke is innocent OK!'** challenging media bias and prejudice against Cockney social identity. (Although Dick van Dyke's Cockney accent in the film 'Mary Poppins' is regarded as the worst-ever in cinematic history, at least his character was a 'good guy').

Extend the **Modern Cockney Festival** encouraging others to do their own thing to celebrate and promote the culture, identity, and future of the 'non-posh Londoner' and extend the **Modern Cockney Kids Festival** into more of London's museums, galleries, and other places, and extend our celebration of **London's street markets**. Encourage the Cockney Diaspora to create their own '**Cockney Bubble**' to celebrate their pride.

Would you love to see the Festival's iconic image of the '**Pearly Burka**' symbolising our positive, inclusive values on the **4th plinth at Trafalgar Square**?



# Support the Modern Cockney Charter



1. Celebrate and promote Modern Cockney **culture, identity, and community languages** of 'non posh Londoners'
2. Support a Modern Cockney self-identity based on **positive, inclusive values**
3. Challenge **social class prejudice** and **negative media stereotypes**, while promoting **positive self-images** of Modern Cockneys
4. Encourage more **research, learning, and studying** about Modern Cockney culture, identity, and heritage
5. **Enjoy yourself...**  
life's too short



# Open your mind. What you can do now...

**#1** **What's your take** on the Modern Cockney debate? Reflect upon your own social identity. What affinity do you have with the non-posh Londoner? Do your own 'Cockney Chat'. What do you think of the different 'tribes' of Modern Cockney - Old and New School Cockney, the Cockney Diaspora, Ancestral Cockneys - do you have an affinity with them? What's your Modern Cockney perspective?

Does the idea of *Engblond* - a failure to celebrate and nurture Britain's rich regional identities - feel you with dread and you should do something about it?

Or do you feel social class prejudice is wrong and you need to act against bias and discrimination?

**#2** **Check out** 'The Story of Cockney in 50 objects' at our website. What object would you add to the Museum of your story of the Modern Cockney?

What other ideas do you have about celebrating the Modern Cockney?

**#3** **Connect** with us. Get in touch to tell us what you think. Can you spend an hour helping our campaign, or make a small donation to our crowdfunder appeal (details on our website)? **Get stuck in.**

For organisations and businesses find out more on how you can support the Modern Cockney Charter

Why not organise an event - online or offline - during the Modern Cockney Festival (March 1st -31st 2025)

Visit: [www.moderncockneyfestival.org.uk](http://www.moderncockneyfestival.org.uk)

Contact: [hello@growsocialcapital.org.uk](mailto:hello@growsocialcapital.org.uk)

## The 32 Steps to Togetherness:

**THINK WELL:** 1. Assume the best 2. Accept other points of view 3. Be honest with yourself 4. Make peace with awkward moments  
**CHANGE YOUR HABITS:** 5. Say 'Hello' 6. Use TV and screens as an opportunity to connect 7. Be aware of how you influence yourself by choosing who to follow on social media 8. Go somewhere you wouldn't normally go or encourage others to 9. Volunteer for a cause that you care about 10. Get involved with youth initiatives 11. Socialise with older people 12. Help out at a food bank or food poverty project  
**JOIN SOMETHING:** 13. Join a club 14. Join a class 15. Start a book group or film club 16. Visit a place of worship 17. Lower your boundaries with your neighbours 18. Share your food with your neighbours 19. Ask for and give help to your neighbours 20. Use seasonal holidays as a chance to connect  
**OPEN UP YOUR WORKPLACE:** 21. Make sure your team is diverse 22. Encourage connections between your teams 23. Broden your reach 24. Unionise or join a professional body  
**SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL STATE SCHOOL** 25. Help out at your local school 26. Involve children in community action 27. Ask about school linking 28. Encourage your local school to teach civic participation  
**GET POLITICAL:** 29. Write to your local politicians 30. Write to your representatives in Parliament 31. Use your vote, and vote with your wallet 32. Understand the politics of all social interactions and share these ideas.

The Modern Cockney Manifesto was published with the kind support of Steps to Togetherness England & Scotland. Check out more about the 32 steps for greater togetherness within and between communities at

[www.civilsocietyconsulting.co.uk](http://www.civilsocietyconsulting.co.uk)



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COGNITIVE