



Summary

In response to increased social isolation exacerbated by the pandemic, Barking and Dagenham Council adopted a radical collaborative and community-centred learning approach. They formed the 'Connect' network, comprising over 30 local organisations to work together on iterative funding programs and workshops to address diverse community needs by developing tailored interventions, fostering trust, and building community resilience.

The approach emphasised adaptive learning, flexibility, and ongoing collaboration, transitioning from a council-led to a community-led model looking at how to design a system community resilience approach. Partnerships with local organizations like BD_Collective and Care City helped sustain efforts, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, local knowledge, and iterative learning. This Human Learning approach aims to create sustainable solutions through scaled and pooled funding to enhance social connection across the borough



A New Approach to Social Isolation at Barking and Dagenham

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

Social Isolation and the Connect Group

The last few years of decreased social contact due to the pandemic has increased social isolation across the country – cutting people off from regular face to face contact and increasing factors which can lead to social isolation such as unemployment. Barking and Dagenham Council have adopted a collaborative and neighbourhood-focused approach with our partners to tackle this issue. We wanted to disrupt, innovate and take a radical new approach, working together with commissioned services and programmes to do something different. This work was only possible because of the relational approach that we had already been taken to work together through the Social Infrastructure locally: [BD_Collective](https://bdcollective.co.uk) | [All About Collaboration](#) (bdcollective.co.uk).

We formed the network 'Connect' in 2021 to respond to the increase in social isolation caused by the pandemic. The Connect Group has developed into a healthy network of over 30 organisations in the Borough, from both the Social and Faith sectors, that supports residents who might be isolated, and who come together on a regular basis to share their experiences, learnings and help each other deal with any challenges. This has become the main forum through which we discuss tackling social isolation – working in collaboration to define and shape responses.



The development of Connect was facilitated by Collaborate CIC and co-designed with partners across the system. The first workshop was the beginning of a longer-term collaborative approach and participatory funding programme, through which 5 key funded partners developed, tested, and iterated innovative approaches to social isolation while sharing the lessons through focussed learning groups.

Overview

The Participation and Engagement Team at Barking and Dagenham Council took a relational council approach, where we worked in collaboration to find ways to support the emerging needs with residents most at risk of isolation.

Our ambition and goals were both clear and broad:

To make Barking and Dagenham a healthier, happier place to live with resilient and thriving communities

By increasing the quantity and quality of social opportunities for people to build confidence and connections

Through actively working together on an ongoing basis, to bridge groups together that support people who are experiencing isolation and/or loneliness.

| HLS Approach

| Human

What is 'Human' about how you work ?

We know that one organisation alone cannot tackle the complex issue of social isolation – it will take collaboration across the system to define and shape responses. We are committed to an iterative neighbourhood approach that is informed by community-based decision-making processes that can reflect the changing needs of the community.

We take a person-centred approach which recognises the unique and complex social, physical, and emotional needs of residents. Through working with our partners to best understand residents' priorities to tackle social isolation, holding various workshops to create a shared understanding of Isolation and Loneliness. We organised focussed listening groups across our community of people hardest to reach and developed a holistic understanding of people's experiences in Barking and Dagenham.

We wanted to build a highly collaborative approach that taps into the local knowledge and provides greater support and capacity in identifying priority areas to co-create solutions to begin testing.



Some key principles that guided our approach include the following principles:

Understanding:

- Recognising and understanding the feelings and experiences of individuals who are socially isolated in Barking and Dagenham and meeting them where they are in settings that they are comfortable in.

Not a one-size-fits-all model:

- Acknowledging that each person's experience of social isolation is unique.
- Tailoring interventions and strategies to meet individual needs rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Taking time to build trust:

- Focusing on creating authentic and meaningful connections between individuals.
- Encouraging open communication, active listening, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Build Community Resilience:

- Taking a strengths-based approach, looking at how to support individuals with the skills to navigate relationships, manage emotions, and build positive connections.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts:

- Support community-based and community-led initiatives that encourage social interaction and collaboration.
- It takes a collective effort – “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Learning approach:

- Outcomes can be unexpected so adopting a flexible approach with learning and adaption at its core, recognising this will be an iterative approach.

| Learning

How have you enacted Learning as a management strategy ?

Our approach puts learning and adaptation at the core, to manage an agile programme where everyone involved can continuously learn, test and build. It has had three main phases. We began with a Council-led approach, followed by a community-led approach where the Council acted more as a steward. We are now in the final stage, where we have commissioned a larger scale programme with Care City and the BD Collective (the providers of our social infrastructure support locally) who are working on a System Community Resilience programme, which focusses on adults who have been discharged from hospital.



Each phase has taken approximately one year, building on the momentum, energy, evolving gaps and needs. We have started each phase with an initial collection of data and insights from different parts of the system to inform the collective understanding of social isolation in B&D. Through various qualitative and quantitative data, we wanted to understand what makes people feel less connected, what people said was helpful and supportive to tackle isolation and how their experience of living in Barking and Dagenham makes them feel less connected. We then used that information to build connected communities.

Phase One: Council Led

Quantitative Data (insights and learning)

We used our Borough Data Explorer and other research techniques to extract valuable insights related to the evolving COVID-19 situation from national databases. These served as a foundation for informed decision-making so that we and our partners could address emerging challenges promptly. This data was used continuously through mapping workshops, facilitated discussions, focus groups and more.

Social Isolation in Barking and Dagenham

Social Isolation refers to a lack of contact with family or friends, community involvement or access to services. It is different to **loneliness** which is described as a feeling associated with lack or loss of companionship. Social isolation can be a predictor of loneliness.

Loneliness and isolation increase with age and among those with long-term health problems



Loneliness is associated with an increased risk of developing **coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure** and can impact the body's capacity to restore itself.

Social Isolation and loneliness are associated with **increased mortality by 26%**

7% increased likelihood of developing diabetes

Loneliness is a strong risk factor for depression.

3.8% Adults in LBBD have a lower prevalence of depression than London (4.8%).

Women in the 65-69 age group are more likely to experience depression (JSNA, 2015)



64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia

Twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's as those experiencing a lower degree of loneliness (Red Cross, 2016)

Relationships and social contact are essential in preventing isolation and loneliness

58% of LBBD residents are single, separated, divorced or widowed. This is lower than London (60%)



15%

of service users saying they had little social contact with people and feel socially isolated, and a further 25% saying that they had some social contact with people, but not enough. (Delivery Unit, 2018)

8.3%

of the total population we're **shielding** during the pandemic as they were Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, above the London average (7.4%)

Housing tenure and composition is a contributory factor in social isolation

The amount of time spent alone is a predictor of loneliness

27% of people live alone in a 1-person household

10% are aged 65 and over (Census, 2011)

19% are of Lone Parent Households, higher than the London average of 12%.



Domestic Abuse in the Borough has the highest rate of offences across London.

Unemployment and low wealth can contribute to social isolation.

"Being in good employment is protective of health; conversely, unemployment contributes to poor health - therefore, of critical importance for reducing health inequalities." Marmot Review

12% of residents are Unemployed (2015) and has consistently been above that of London and Great Britain over the past decade.

Periods of transition impact loneliness at all ages

Transitions or circumstances in life can often lead to social isolation and loneliness. LBBD experiences a high degree of population churn. 'Churn' refers to the population inflows and outflows from the Borough.

1/4 of residents come and leave the borough



Between July 2012 and July 2014 approximately 50,000 new residents came to the Borough and roughly the same number left. (Growth Commission, 2016)

Between 2001 and 2011 the non-white population

(BAME) of the borough grew from **14% to 42%**

with significant increases amongst the Black African and Bangladeshi populations during the same period

Ethnicity and language barriers

Language is essential in interacting with a community.

79% of residents have English as their main language higher than London (74%) and lower than England (92%).



51.4% of pupils in Barking and Dagenham said the main household language was not English (LBBD School Census January 2020).



Ecosystem Mapping (HLS Workshop) facilitated by Collaborate (February 2021)

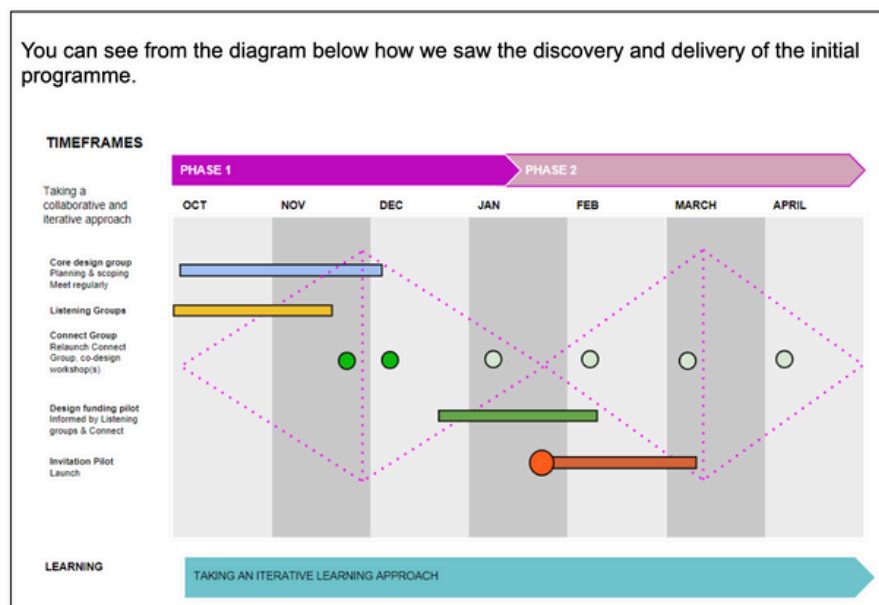
In March 2021, we conducted Human Learning Systems workshops facilitated by Collaborate and brought together Commissioners and VCSE groups. We scoped out different barriers and enablers to Social Isolation and its solutions. We designed an Ecosystem Mapping exercise to surface a broad range of activities and solutions.



The Connect Group

The Connect Group has developed into a healthy network of organisations in the Borough, from both the social and faith sectors, that support residents.

With £100,000 of funding from the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) grant, we worked with the Connect Group through a series of workshops throughout 2021. We relaunched the network as a vehicle to help us design an applied learning approach to pilot programmes that address social isolation through a bottom-up funding process. We wanted to test how we could work with community partners and align with future Council Commissioning structures and processes with the potential scale.





Working with the Connect Group, we identified a clear need for organisations to access funding to launch new projects. In some cases, these organisations needed to launch projects or extend their capacity to replace other contributing work, which had not been possible to restart after lockdown, or because demands and needs had changed. There were many vibrant programmes, including a gardening space for elderly people who identify as LGBTQI+, a programme for young people to travel to across the borough safely and a counselling service for asylum seekers.

The learning space gave the group a chance to see each other's programme, share experiences, be supported and get feedback. Partnerships between groups developed through a deeper understanding of each groups programme and the learning that came out during the delivery. Through this learning space we collected learnings on the impact of Social Isolation on residents, informing future strategies, supported connections within and across the council, discovering what works well together and having the ability to share this council wide and with partners.

Community Learning Partner and Listening Groups:

In October 2021, Sally Dixon from a local organisation called Community Resources was appointed to develop the approach and design how to spend the grant with the Connect Group.

To further our insights and gather qualitative data from people with lived experience of social isolation, Sally led a series of nine different listening groups with existing community groups. This inclusive approach captured the nuances of the community's experiences and provided a comprehensive understanding of how residents were supported, what barriers they experience and how they were able to overcome isolation and chronic loneliness.

Co-designed Funding

Through a series of workshops sharing all the learning and discovery with the Connect group, we aimed to create a space to ideate, test and shape initiatives together to design new approaches, share best practice and learn together. Our goal was to foster a participatory approach and co-design priority areas to test our assumptions and learnings in addressing social isolation. These workshops facilitated a shared understanding and identified urgent areas, which informed the decision-making criteria for funding allocation, resulting in the establishment of the Connect Fund. This approach effectively tapped into local knowledge and provided enhanced support and capacity in priority areas within Barking and Dagenham.

What made this fund different?

- **A Neighbourhood approach:** that considers the specific needs and existing strengths, opportunities, and assets available in the Borough's neighbourhoods.
- **Collaboration:** working with wider partnerships across the Borough, including the Connect Group, to take stock of the existing offer, address barriers to accessing the offer, hear the experiences of our residents and people in contact with them. This builds on the ongoing work with the VCSE sector over the last few years and particularly since Covid.

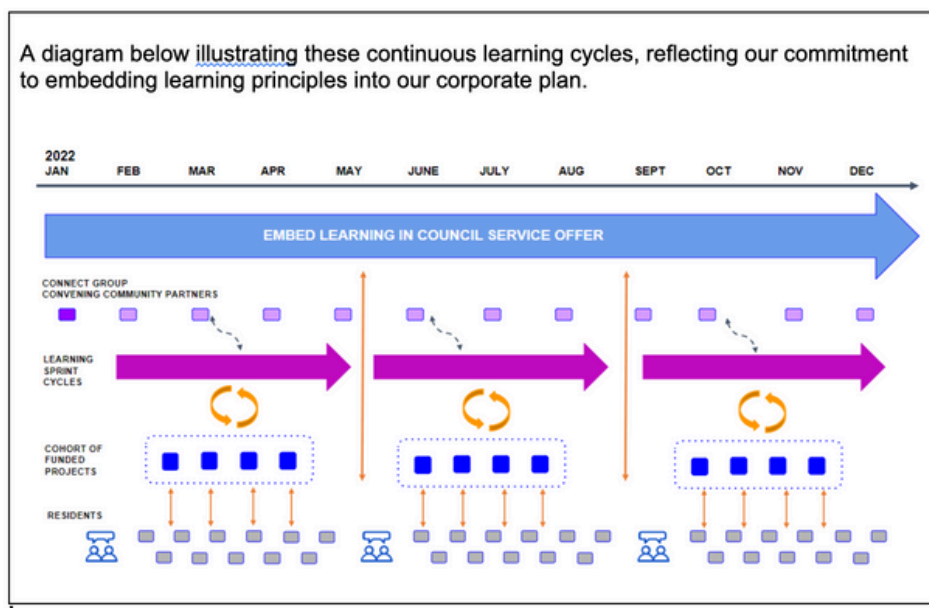


- **Learning and adaptation:** We understand that activities focused on connection can produce unexpected outcomes and that trust takes time to build with people. This funding programme will adopt a flexible approach that will embed learning and adaptation at its core. Fund recipients will be part a learning group, who will convene regularly, supported by a facilitator to share learning and collect impact as we go.
- **Impact:** Delivering should not be a tick-box exercise. We will favour interventions that have positive, lasting impact on supporting communities to connect, build relationships and create sense of belonging, rather than specific outputs.
- **Connect the dots and legacy:** Taking a collaborative approach, the organisations' initiatives will be connected to Council services and areas – helping to link across the system. Our ambition is that this learning and evidence informs how we shape future commissioning as a Council.

A Learning Space

We established a space for generative learning and best practice in addressing barriers to social connection within the community. We designed a programme whereby learning cycles were core to those funded groups.

Our funding program placed a strong emphasis on learning and adaptability, with a flexible structure aimed at incorporating these principles into its core. Funded groups participated in a learning group, meeting regularly with facilitator support to exchange insights and collect real-time impact data.





The goal of the learning space was to provide a platform for the group's recipients to convene, share experiences, receive support for their initiatives, and provide immediate feedback to each other throughout the process. It was an opportunity to collect learning as a process of evidencing and monitoring on the following key areas:

- **Impact on residents isolated.** The impact on the residents supported by the initiative.
- **Inform future funding rounds.** Reflections and feedback from the organisations in receipt of funding about the process of the fund process to inform and shape future funding rounds.
- **Organisational learning.** How we drive more collaborative funded work in the future on cross-sector cutting issues

The funded organisations were able to participate in this facilitated learning which met up to four times over a four-month period to allocate the funds and feedback. Each learning session was facilitated by a learning partner in collaboration with the P&E team with a goal to collect evidence and learning as an ongoing process from the start, middle, and end of the funding cycle.

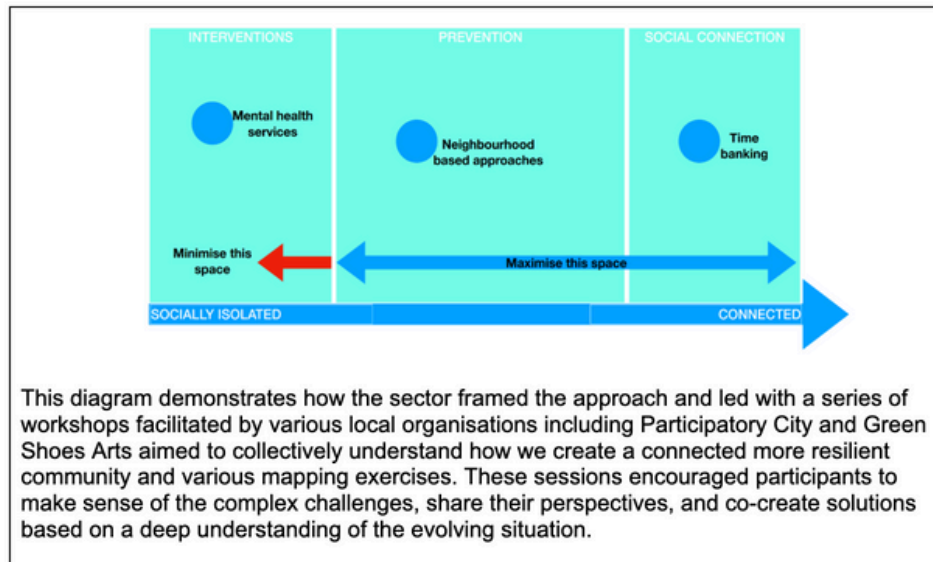
This resulted in partnerships being formed across funded groups, collaborations on live programmes and referrals between groups due to the connection and learnings. Groups were able to quickly adapt and learn from each other, despite all having different programmes the learning cycles were a space where groups can develop their ideas.

Phase Two: Community Led

Reflecting on the initial phase, we shared learnings both with Council colleagues and community partners and discussed how to move beyond a council approach with the remaining funding towards a greater participatory funding model.

The BD_Collective

The BD_Collective is a network of networks in Barking and Dagenham that encompasses the majority of local VCSE groups working collaboratively on various areas including Early Help for Adults, Children and Young People, Food and more. A new network was formed called Connect and so the remaining funding was commissioned to the BD_Collective to convene and lead the response. This marked a significant moment for us, as it redefined the Council's role and management style of the programme by acting as a steward and continuing to support and encourage the ideas and momentum from the community to address these challenges.



The BD_Collective opened a fund for community organisations to apply for up to £1000 to test a shared approach to social isolation in the Borough. The funding was broadly set but it was encouraged initially to bring groups together to work in partnership or in consortiums to test ideas that could be scaled up.

Prototyping Criteria for the new fund:

1. Must involve residents/service users in the design and development of the prototype.
2. Organisations drawing down the money must engage in the collective learning process.
3. It must be an idea that can be tested, adapted and modified.
4. Must be a clear way of testing the impact it is having on social isolation.
5. Collective approaches should be considered.

Collective Learnings:

Through this holistic, bottom-up approach, we collectively learned the importance of adaptive learning in navigating emerging challenges and embedding 'learning and collaboration' at the core to build on the strengths and ideas that were developed.

Building a learning culture within our organization and among our community partners proved instrumental to our development of an evidence base for new solutions and a new approach. Through accessible and inclusive design, many grass-roots and larger organisations were able to access grants who work with groups and individuals most at risk that the Council would unlikely reach.



Based on the conditions and the existing social infrastructure in Barking and Dagenham such as larger anchor organisations like the BD_Collective, we were able to create an evidence base and new way of working. This led to securing further funding from Adults Commissioning thereby creating a sustainable funding stream to continue to support and embed this new collaborative, iterative learning approach as a core component.

Phase Three: System Community Resilience

Building a longer-term sustainable system approach to Community Resilience that prevents Social Isolation in partnership with Care City, Ageable and the BD_Collective.

Building on the Phase 1 and 2, developed during the pandemic, this was rare opportunity to integrate commissioning to supporting a community resilience approach. This key moment enabled a larger scale of work due to multiple pools of funding and the potential for supporting ongoing efforts from the community since the pandemic. This opportunity also paved the way for Phase Three, where we applied the same approach, with a focus on hospital discharge.

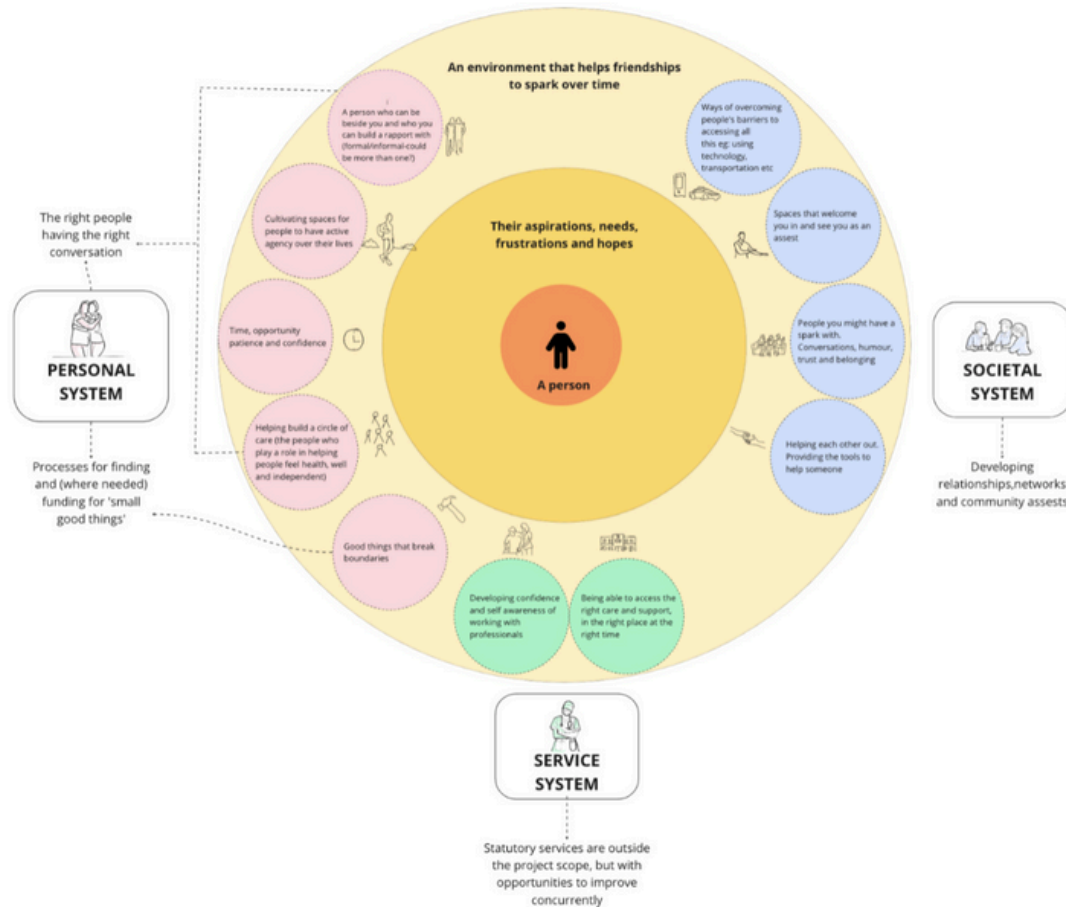
Within LBBD council, conversations with internal colleagues in Adults Commissioning led to an opportunity arising through additional funding from NHS England, The Better Care Fund (BCF), managed by Adults Commissioning, which shared the vision and ambition of the Social Isolation Approach in LBBD. This initiative explored how some of this funding could be utilised to support this radically new community-led approach in reducing isolation in our communities. Collaborating with colleagues in Commissioning and the VCSE, we designed how ongoing funding from the Better Care Fund (BCF) in addition to funding from the Aging Well, and the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Fund, totalling over £300k, would build upon current work and collaborations within the sector and across our community. A fixed amount of £100,000 from the BCF was ring-fenced to support work targeting social isolation focussing on hospital discharge, **with this amount recurring annually it is integral to embedding and sustaining this approach within our Council's processes for long term.**

Care City designed a programme using a learning approach to test whether an approach that organise the strengths of the B&D community so a person can access them easily to support their recovery can help. Our partnership included organisations from across the public, health and VCSE landscape, including Care City, Ageable, and the BD_Collective.

The aim is to design a pilot project with local groups to work with 100 people for 12 months:

- Building an easy-to-access network of community support to help people recover in their community
- Helping people build their confidence, relationships and networks so they can stay well in the longer term
- Gathering evidence to iterate as we go and to test the impact of the pilot

This piece of work is still underway and in 2024 is in its first year of design and delivery, for more information and to follow the journey you can stay informed through contacting us directly or by following Care City.



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Barriers and Tensions

What difficulties did you encounter? How did you respond to them?

Monitoring and Evaluations

Many of the traditional tensions and barriers exist when commissioning large scale learning approaches, due to the nature of contractual obligations surrounding monitoring and evaluation required from the start. Overcoming the barrier of traditional monitoring metrics requires a bold step in senior leadership willing to trust in the approach and explore innovative solutions for reporting outcomes and to be open to what they can be.

Funding

Another notable difficulty was the constraint imposed by funding which determines the allocation of time, resource, and scale of the opportunity ahead. Particularly in the current climate it is often challenging to create a compelling case or evidence base that highlights the need for the necessary funding for a new approach.



Uncertainty

Leading an iterative program through uncertainty presented its own set of challenges, particularly with no guarantee of future funding. The nature of the programme required agility, adaptability and constant reassessment and adjustment of the approach through each stage. It demanded a core focus of collaboration and building relationships with key stakeholders whose work had a bearing on social isolation to identify potential partnerships for the future with the aim of continuing to scale and sustain the work.

While barriers and tensions are inevitable our response was through the resilience and commitment of working with our community partners to overcome obstacles and drive forward our ambition of improving connections and wellbeing in Barking and Dagenham through staged learning-based approaches.

| Enablers

What were the factors/conditions which enabled you to adopt an HLS approach?

One of the key initial enablers was the way the council had worked with the local VCSE sector and communities prior to the pandemic. The relationships between the council and the sector were built on trust and dialogue and the development since 2019 of BDCollective and other social infrastructure organisations such as BDGiving with some associated funding had created an environment of trust, shared responsibility and learning.

COVID-19 and the pandemic created an urgent need to address social isolation, as lockdown and restrictions exacerbated feelings of loneliness and disconnection within our community. This heightened awareness and the energy to bring back community connections provided a compelling need for something different. It highlighted the limitations of traditional approaches, building on the agile approach to emergency response the system was ready for more innovative and holistic methods to work with the community.

Key individuals instrumental in supporting this change included visionary leaders within our organisation who championed innovative approaches and facilitated a culture of openness to new ideas. This leadership style, coupled with available funding and the collective ambition to rebuild community resilience served as the driving force behind this work.



|TopTips

What are your 'top tips' that you think others might find interesting?

Bravery: Be brave, embrace challenging conventional thinking and exploring new approaches. It takes courage to navigate uncertainty and adapt to fast changing situations and it takes a lot of bravery to admit you don't have the answers.

Energy: Where there is momentum and collective energy of the community, get behind them to support positive change.

Excellent facilitators: You would need people who can create an inclusive and safe space for different people where diverse perspectives can be heard and valued, having a skilled facilitator are key to supporting and fostering meaningful discussions and collaborations while navigating complex issues.

Good Leadership: Requiring taking a bold step and some element of blind faith to trust the process, the people and be brave enough to be led by a bigger vision, something so bold that can galvanise a community and something that together becomes bigger than the sum of its parts.

