

# **FROM PATERNALISM TO PARTICIPATION**

**How one London borough  
dealt with the Covid  
crisis and built a new  
collaborative institution**

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Published September 2020 by Compass

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**About the author:**

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**Acknowledgments:**

This report is made possible by the support of the Barking and Dagenham Council and Darren Rodwell the Council Leader. The author would like to thank Rhys Kline and Monica Needs from the Council, Hannah Anderson from Collaborate and Avril McIntyre from the BD Collective for their time discussing what happened over the immediate Covid 19 crisis period.

The author didn't get to meet the hundreds of people from the Council and Civil Society who really made this story happen, but it is to them that this report is dedicated.

All the faults lie with the author.



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### **About Compass and this project**

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

# Introduction

The Covid crisis has tested everyone. It certainly tested the Council and the community of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (B&D). Based on interviews with some of the key players in the borough, from both the Council and the civil society, this short report tells the story of what happened, why, and how. It then goes on to ponder the learnings, lessons and implications of the crisis and what it revealed.

Not least the experience begs a series of key strategic questions:

- How participatory placed-based change happens, and whether and how it can be sustained and scaled?
- What is the role and nature of leadership within both communities and councils?
- What is the nature of the cultural relationship interface between councils and communities – one that fosters a spirit of co-creation and then co-production?
- What is the role of intermediary organisations and institutions between councils, communities and the citizens that allow the best culture to flourish?
- How is the capacity of the community - its resourcefulness - recognised, built, and sustained?
- How can growth, inward investment and development become inclusive and equitable in a sustained way?
- In all this complexity how do councils, communities and institutions become places to learn, share and develop? Places to say ‘I don’t know’, or ‘I need help’? Places to deal with disagreement?

The energy, vitality, relationships, and learning from this moment have been incredible, not just in East London but across the country. Something big and important has taken place in nearly every community. New capacity and new cultures have been lived. A better future for our societies has been tasted. The danger is that outside of the crisis these lessons and advances will be lost.

To avoid that fate, one of the most important pieces of thinking and design is around the institutional architecture to build a new collaborative culture and the capacity of civil society. In B&D the focus will be on something they are calling the Citizens Alliance Network (CAN) as the platform to help drive a new and very different synergy between the council and the community. The story recounted here is a building block to understand what happened and why, and what needs to happen next to start to embed the CAN as the platform to permanently transform the borough and perhaps be a model for other places too.

# The backstory

'All politics is local', USA Democrat Tip O'Neill famously announced. Everything happens in a place, and every place comes with a history and baggage, both good and bad. The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham is no exception. Indeed, its past casts both a shadow and a light over the borough. This is one moment on the journey that the people and politicians of B&D are making, it's a snapshot. But it may be a significant moment.

To understand what is happening now, we have to briefly go back, and then go back some more. Because what happened over the last four months wasn't an accident and didn't come from nowhere. Something deep had been at work.

Barking and Dagenham is a proud and particular borough in East London. It has nearly always had a Labour council, with a huge stock of public housing, and it played host to the historic Ford factory site by the side of the Thames. Its recent past has seen 'Right to Buy' diminish public housing as a critical service, the loss of secure factory jobs, and the identity and meaning that went with them. Secure work meant safe, secure people – the loss of those jobs and the pay and purpose that went with them pulled the rug of confidence from under the feet of the borough.

Deindustrialisation had political and not just personal consequences. The loss of economic certainty, in part, led to the rise of the BNP who won 12 seats on the Council in 2006. And then came austerity after the 2008 crash. All the time the borough was undergoing waves of demographic and cultural change as new immigrants sought out some of the cheapest homes in the Capital.

In all this, the community sector in the Borough had been historically sparse. It's also not unfair to say the culture of the Council had been one of well-meaning paternalism – change would be done to the people, not with them. Maybe an under-cooked civil society is linked to this paternalism?

From Fordism to fascism, with austerity and huge churns of immigration thrown in, is quite a rocky ride. But since 2014 the Council, under the leadership of Darren Rodwell but with a host of other key players, has steadily laid the basis for a different kind of relationship between Council and community to emerge. It is still emergent, but big strides have been made and, while more are needed, it put B&D in a good place to deal with the Covid crisis.

In its response to the BNP, and then austerity, the Council embarked on a process, not just to provide better services but to see them decided on and delivered in a different kind of way. Probably just as well. In 2016 the Borough saw a massive vote for Brexit as the desire to 'take back control' swept many left behind parts of the land. Could this desire for control be

made really meaningful and not just exploited by the populist Right?

Over the last few years the Council have worked to change their structures and culture in order to work with and support the community like never before. Services have been made user friendly and integrated through an initiative called Community Solutions. The community and voluntary interface has been strengthened through the creation of the BD Collective to act as an independent platform for local civil society. And new forms of engagement have been piloted and developed, not least through [Participatory City](#). Others such as [Collaborate](#), supported by Lankelly Chase, have guided and coached on place-based change.

There is never a single thing, but the creation of the BD Collective feels critical. [BD Collective](#) is the independent civil society collaboration – a network of networks – that had won the contract in 2019 to provide the Borough’s social infrastructure support. This infrastructure in the community, and the relationships it made possible with the Council, enabled the Council and local civil society area leads to move quickly when the crisis hit.

Along the way, and critically, an Inclusive Growth Strategy has been implemented to get new investment into the Borough, to make up the shortfall of austerity, but to do so in a way that benefited everyone, and especially those in need of more help.

Of course, no one knew the crisis was coming. But the foundations, fortunately, were being dug.

At the same time Compass was developing the concept of [45° Change](#) – how emergent civil society initiatives, much of it triggered by new networked technology, could and should be accelerated and aggregated by the power of the vertical or designed state, nationally and locally. 45° was the fault line of new ways of practicing and making change happen between formal politics and informal citizens.

Thus, think tank theory had already met on-the-ground practice in East London.

And then Covid-19 hit.

## What happened?

Everyone knew a storm was coming. On the second weekend of March 2020 it broke. It was clear then the Government were going to announce some kind of a lockdown. Nothing like this had happened in the borough since the Luftwaffe tried to bomb the Ford plant over 70 years before.

On the Friday 13th (of course) Monica from the Council spoke to Avril from the Collective. They agreed that both sides should meet together on the Monday – not separately. The situation worsened over the weekend. The Leader of the Council rallied for the cause. On Monday, all sides were raring to go. Everything that happened after stemmed from the Council and the community being joined at the hip. It wasn't always a smooth ride – but it worked.

It worked in a way that everyone said would have been impossible only a year before. Because of the creation of the BD Collective, and the relationships fostered between the Council and the community, the magic ingredient of trust was already in play. This, combined with the adrenalin rush of the crisis, allowed the partners to tap into a strong volunteer base, rapidly growing in response to the crisis, and orchestrate an alliance of the Council and voluntary and faith organisations from nine locality hubs covering the whole of the Borough. This was the community support system they called [BD Citizens Alliance Network, or BD CAN](#).

Almost overnight the job was to protect and provide for the most vulnerable people in the Borough. Given lockdown, that meant getting them food, medicines, and eventually wider social support at pace. And through constant communication, this led to a distribution system being put in place at speed and scale. It sounds easy to write but the complexity was enormous: names, addresses, numbers, needs, payments, call centres, referral mechanism and more. A challenging new infrastructure at the best of times but a nightmare in lockdown.

If the job had been outsourced to one of the big contractors then it would almost certainly have failed, as it would it was left to just a council. But a council working hand in hand with the community unleashed purpose, speed and agility.

One of the biggest symbolic and practical moves was that each of the nine area hubs of the CAN were given a grant of £5000 to cover immediate expenses and overheads. But unlike some Council contracts and grants there was no onerous bid proposal or accounting process hoops to go through. The money was given fast because it was needed urgently and would be accounted for later. The money was vital, but the trust it showed was more valuable still. The local state showed it trusted the community. A system based on a belief in the best of people, not the worst.

As a result, people were fed who otherwise would have really struggled.

First it was shopping for them and then it was food parcels. Prescriptions were delivered too. The vulnerable were cared for. The most vulnerable were referred to the people or organisations that could help them best. There have been nearly 2000 cases handled, with approximately 1400 food requests fulfilled and 550 medication requests supported. There were constant meetings to sort glitches, and to ensure every call was picked up and no one fell through any gaps.

There are no comparative yardsticks - at least not yet - to measure the performance of B&D against others. And anyway, it's not competition. But everyone you talk to in the Borough says the crisis was handled better than they could have imagined.

In all this there is much to examine and ponder for the future.

## What needs to happen next?

Covid-19 presented a sudden and profound challenge to keep people safe and fed. But how it was done and what it reveals will hopefully shape the future of the Borough for decades to come.

The crisis could have been the moment to impose a kind of 'Martial Law', to lock down not just people and homes, but any notion of cooperation, collaboration and negotiation. The historically strong and well-meaning paternalism of the Council and the Labour Party could have come to the fore. The danger was a jump to top-down, imposed solutions - just like the Fordist production line that shaped the culture of a whole era. People told what to do on a production line, this time of services and not of cars. There would have been some, but little, opposition to this in the crisis circumstances.

But top down delivery would have only offered so much, when what was needed was agility and responsiveness that only a participatory and respectful culture based on trust between the Council and the community could offer. The need of the moment wasn't the cold hand of the state but a human, warm, responsive and empathetic approach - emotional not just transactional. The response, if it was to be agile, had to be negotiated not imposed. This takes time, but it is time well spent.

Both the Council and the community worked from largely their best instincts. Small slights were overlooked in the name of deep and extreme collaboration. This was 45° Change in action. Not just the State doing what only the State can do, or the community playing its unique role, but the synergy between the two different cultures creating something new and dynamic. They were brought together through an urgent shared purpose and mission; ensuring community support was available for residents who found themselves vulnerable in a difficult time.



Centralising power is easy. Dispersing it is difficult. The former means ticking boxes and treating people like cogs in machine. Telling them what to do and what's good for them. A certain level of efficiency can be gained in this way, but it is limited because it limits the most precious resource and asset any place, sector or organisation has: the imagination, energy, and autonomy of its people.

Ross Ashby, an early cyberneticist, came up with the Law of Requisite Variety which simply states that governing any entity requires a system of governance at least as complex. Thousands of people and families at risk and in need in Barking and Dagenham all had very different needs. It wasn't a Ford factory assembly line-like machine that could help them but a rich eco-system of the local state, civil society and citizens, each playing their different but mutually supportive part.

Dispersed organisation is difficult because it demands we know when to lead and when to give space to others. Someone has to create the spark, define the problem, call the meeting and suggest the direction of travel. The spark can't always be co-created because everyone would then wait for everyone else to make the first move.

But once there is a call to action, ensuring that everyone has a voice in defining the nature of the problem and co-creating the response is key. When the project is shared and people are engaged, so much more is possible.

All of this takes a mixture maturity of vulnerability. To know when to speak softly and when to listen deeply, when to go beyond the silo, the ego and the logo, to avoid stepping on each other's toes, to know when and how to use the tools at our collective disposal, from statutory instruments to new forms of collaboration. The Council as enabler not controller. Civil society as a strong independent actor, not a supplicant.

In all this there are naturally real concerns. The Government will have seen the potential that has been unleashed through the crisis and may look to replicate it on the cheap: a rerun of the Big Society which failed to recognise the need for the local state to have the resources to invest meaningfully and provide the necessary infrastructure for civil society engagement. Participation can't be done on the cheap but the returns from it, with the right investment, can be big.

Another danger is that things spring back to a broken mirror version of how they were before the crisis. The adrenalin rush cannot be maintained at the same high-octane level. But can the spirit of deep collaboration be built on? In the face of the economic crisis to come the ability to learn, adjust, change, develop and scale will be critical. To achieve this means the Council must keep on letting go and building a virtuous cycle of trust, begetting more trust. It also requires an institutional basis for future cooperation, this is why getting the design of the CAN right is vital.

And in the looming crisis the capacity of civil society must not be allowed to wither but rather its resourcefulness and independence grown.

The deep-rooted problems of the Borough are still there; for example, child poverty and domestic abuse persist. Complex issues such as food provision and social care will get more complex and pressing still. And if there is a big squeeze on resources and large scale unemployment then the return of the far right cannot be excluded.

The shift from 'war time' like crisis urgency to 'peace time' prolonged culture change will be long and hard. The only answer is for Council, community and citizens is to keep doing what they've been doing – to trust each other and work together. Both sides being generous and forgiving of each other. This, and more innovation - which may be unsettling - is essential.

Now that BD CAN has been established, what's next for supporting community organising and democratic participation? How can the Citizens Alliance Network, and the wider recovery from the crisis, harness the power of resident participation? What role is there for citizens/residents assemblies or panels, randomly selected from a representative sample of local people? Could the wider use of these methods act as a source of invaluable ideas, accountability and legitimacy; another big step in trust building? Working with other councils, can the BD CAN model become an institutional model for council and civil society engagement?

The BD Collective can grow as a network of networks, an ecosystem or organisations with the capacity to expand and avoid being entirely reliant on the Council, with assets and networks that build confidence, and long-termism that comes from independence.

In all this a key issue is, how is the resourcefulness of the community to be developed? The day-to-day nuts and bolts of turning from community volunteers' meetings ad hoc in front rooms to institutions, such as social enterprises, with muscle and assets that aren't dependent on the Council but instead interdependent. People need help with the mundane but the essential, like opening bank accounts, legal status, governance and so on. How can the inclusive growth agenda be used to build local strength in perpetuity?

The challenge for the community and the Council is, how do the emergent and the spontaneous fit with the statutory and the designed? Both are necessary, so how are the strengths and weaknesses of each them to be expanded and mitigated respectively? And how do they impact on each other?

And two more final Hows. First, how is the efficacy of participation to be measured? What metrics are to be used to assess quantitative and qualitative success?

And second, how do places like Barking and Dagenham go beyond their bubble and make connections to other councils doing similar things? At the moment so much of the effort is despite the system, but across the country councils, mayors and metro-mayors are also trying different things and struggling with the same issues. Indeed, across Europe a Municipalist network is emerging that is combining radically different ways of doing democracy and participation. Places like B&D need to be a part of a much bigger venture to tip the balance to a new paradigm of localism.

It is important to learn from and talk about case studies like this. What worked in Barking and Dagenham won't work in exactly the same way in other towns across the UK, because there is no one-size-fits-all solution out there. Collaboration will look different in different contexts. However, the principles of the approach taken in B&D, of openness, trust and collaboration, are translatable and tell us a lot about how we can go about making big change happen in the 21st century.

## Conclusions

This is the story of four months in the evolving life of the Council, civil society, and citizens in B&D, and what was possible because of four years and more of work and change that came before it. It marks a staging post, an important one, in a journey that is far from complete. The journey will continue to be messy. Traces of well-meaning paternalism will remain, they are such a big part of the historic culture of the place. But what matters is the predominant spirit of the 21st century; and that is the ethos and practice of participation. The work to date was tested by a global pandemic and the borough and its people responded as they always do – with solidarity and determination.

Now to build on it.

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