

DEMOS

**ONLY WE CAN
SAVE THE STATE**

LESSONS FOR NATIONAL
GOVERNMENT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE
REFORM IN BARKING AND DAGENHAM

CHRIS NAYLOR

JUNE 2024

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THIS ESSAY

As part of Demos' work on public service reform and building a more trusted democracy, we are publishing a series of essays from external thinkers throughout 2024.

Through our Public Service Reform pillar, we aim to liberate citizens and public servants, and prevent problems.

First, we need a new operating model for public services which liberates professionals and communities to work together to build services that work for their local circumstances. Second, we need to rebuild the social, civic and cultural foundations that create the social capital and strengthen relationships which are the bedrock for our health and wellbeing.

To enable both of these reforms, we need a new way of funding public services. We need to create a 'third pillar' of public spending which is earmarked for long term preventative investment which enables a shift away from reactive services.

True public service reform will put citizens at heart of decision making, encouraging the participation of everyone alongside the expertise of community groups, charities and the private sector. It will create a new type of state, liberated to strengthen communities and prevent problems before they happen.

We are also working to bring about a Collaborative Democracy, in which politicians, experts and citizens partner to tackle the challenges facing our country.

SECTION 1

BARKING AND DAGENHAM - A PLACE THAT COULD BE EVERYWHERE

This is a story about crisis, reform and renewal in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, but it could be about the many different places that have been grappling with challenge and complexity, while trying to make a difference and balance their books.

It should be a story about a positive future for Britain.

It describes a manifesto for public service reform - why reform is necessary and what it might mean. It describes the difference it makes to centre people and their power. To understand how personal agency becomes diminished or amplified, the consequences of its loss, and the role public services play in both challenging and perpetuating these patterns of harm and opportunity.

Inevitably there are implications for leadership and politics. How we summon the means to reimagine the Welfare State, from one designed to respond to problems, to one that is equipped from first principles to avert them. How we clarify actions that could be necessary to build a Preventative State that cherishes the formation of relationships. How we build relationships that create the partnerships that can overcome the problems we face, before they metastasise into a far deeper set of crises. How, ultimately, we respond to a future that demands we all play our part in a reflexive relationship where progress is made together.

This is urgent and necessary work.

As we approach the quarter way mark, the 21st Century is proving far more complex than we might have imagined when we ushered in the new millennium. For local leaders, the task has not been the relentless replication of the 'ideal authority'¹- the New Public Management equivalent of Fukuyama's 'End of History' – but the daunting job of determining who public services need to be for, and how best to deliver. At the heart of these debates are profound questions about a 'good life' and the power to achieve it. These questions are structural but also political, and in their answers, we glimpse the shape and character of public services and their leadership necessary to deliver them.

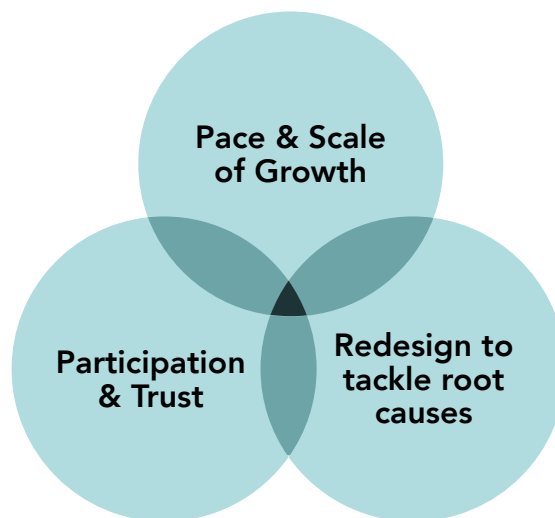
Local authorities have been at the sharp end of this complexity, exposed as they have been to permanent austerity; unsustainable rises in demand for services, conceived for different times, that are now struggling to deliver; vast changes in expectations; and the erosion of trust, driven in part by new technology, but also the rapid decline of old world power paradigms. Also in the mix: environmental degradation; rapid and unpredictable demographic change that challenges prevailing patterns of cohesion and identity; and an economy that is not working for too many people.

¹ In the early 21st Century, the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government defined the benchmark of an ideal local authority as the basis for scoring the leadership and performance of Councils.

Barking and Dagenham is a place that exhibits all these characteristics and in many respects is an 'ideal type' representation of many places in modern Britain. For reasons that we will explore, over the last two decades its leaders, community activists, civil servants and key players in the private sector have been forced to confront these challenges head on. In their response, there is the opportunity for us all to learn.

In simple terms, the Council's response was a threefold, intersecting agenda for reform designed to enable people to exercise personal agency and address the Council's budget gap:

- Public sector interventions to increase the pace and scale of growth designed and delivered to focus on those that need growth the most, while capturing the resulting fiscal and commercial benefits for the wider public good.
- Fundamental re-design of local public services so they work from first principles to address the root cause of why people need help (rather than to episodically 'treat' a prevailing need) supported by the adoption of data, insight, predictive analytics and deep 'relational practice'.
- And finally, in support of both these agendas, an unequivocal commitment and requirement to re-establish trust between people, and between people and civic institutions.



The response was not perfect, the work is not complete, and the improved outcomes are fragile and susceptible to loss. But there has been demonstrable progress. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the Council's new stance has had a pivotal impact on the local economy and in supporting people to live better lives.

Housing delivery has tripled, and a quarter of all affordable homes being built in London are being built in Barking and Dagenham.

While elsewhere homelessness and rough sleeping grew, in Barking and Dagenham it fell.

For the first time the Council was able to track the social progress of residents.

Measures to co-opt and unleash the power of the community and voluntary sector - thousands of volunteer hours - and of data, insight and predictive analytics were not an 'add on' to existing services, but the basis upon which those services were redesigned. While many people still faced real and complex challenges, more residents found work, fewer required our more expensive support, and thousands of additional lives were saved during the pandemic, because the Council was already on crisis footing and able to target those most at risk.

Moreover millions of pounds have been saved. The horizontal integration and consolidation of services so they worked in a holistic and relational manner to prevent, rather than cure, yielded a day one saving of 35 percent on baseline costs of 17 million pounds. This was delivered through fewer assessments, integrated case files, better conversations that quickly got to the heart of the matter, targeted outreach, and a much leaner management structure. Meanwhile, 'Be First', the Council's wholly-owned growth and regeneration company, delivered over 10 million pounds per year in revenue returns to the Council. All of this in turn drove better economic outcomes for residents as well as financial returns to the Council equivalent to a 15 percent increase in Council Tax.

In 2024, the Office for Local Government named Barking and Dagenham the best performing planning authority in the Country.

Results at the ballot box would also suggest that reform yielded political advantage too, with Labour locally defying national polling trends, with one hundred percent Labour Councillors and the ongoing re-election of Labour MPs.

The change agenda in Barking and Dagenham was a bold and ambitious transformation of the whole Council.

No part of the organisation, no relationship with a partner, no engagement with residents or service users was left untouched. Our approach leaned heavily on the pioneering ideas of others. Our innovation was to operationalise these concepts so that they became the default practice of the Council and partners, rather than a bolt-on additional service, or side-experiment. Given our challenging operating environment, we soon recognised that tinkering with institutions designed by our great grandparents' generation to address early 20th Century problems was not going to cut it as we addressed the profoundly different circumstances of today. It was also apparent that injecting so called 'systems leadership' and new 'missions' into a system that was designed to achieve the opposite of our agenda, was a fool's errand. What was needed was a mission to deliver root and branch change to the system. That in turn required leadership, investment and time. If this is true for local government it will certainly be true for national government and other public services too.

Almost everyone who encounters these reforms finds them compelling and the status quo feels increasingly bleak and bankrupt. But we have not seen their widespread adoption.

Why aren't these new ideas breaking into the mainstream? Why haven't they been captured by one or more of the major political parties as the centre of their manifesto? Why aren't they the basis for a national reform agenda, challenging not only Councils but all aspects of the public sector from health to criminal justice, education to work and pensions?

The answer lies, in part at least, in the relentless logic and popular appeal of the 'needs led' paradigm. An approach that has defined and captured the design of post war public services and is baked into the accountability framework of ministerial portfolios, the wider architecture of Whitehall governance and the prevailing mindset of regulators and inspectors.

Who wouldn't want more of something that people need? More hospitals, doctors, nurses, police officers and prison places. That's what we all imagine people vote for. And perhaps we do – thereby unwittingly contributing to a profound and remarkable immunity to change that holds our public services in aspic.

It is into this context that innovation - new or emerging alternate models - appears. First to be welcomed and cheered and then gracefully ignored. Consigned to prophetic 'good practice' guides or the focus of conference fringe evangelists, while never actually breaking through. Never materially altering the pattern of public services, leaving them as familiar – and frustrating - to the generation who first conceived them, as they are to us who use and lead them today.

The prospect of a new government in Downing Street, facing challenges that will only become more acute, makes now the time to ask: What will it take to break the stalemate?

That it took a catastrophic political shock - the election in 2006 of far-right British National Party councillors - to catalyse and galvanise the case for public service reform in Barking and Dagenham is both illuminating and concerning.

The challenges posed by that election were clear and could not be construed as anything less than a call to action. It was a political problem that demanded a political response. And so, the conditions were created to provide the momentum and political space to innovate and act.

In that moment, the team at Barking and Dagenham experienced a kind of public policy weightlessness akin to being shot into orbit – and the kind of perspective that can only be achieved as though looking down at the Earth from space. And this is the crux of the problem-solving process: The problems we face today are so big that we struggle to comprehend their scale. So we try to resolve them by making them small, by viewing them as separate things that can be contained and resolved, piecemeal. But we can only solve them when we take in the whole view. For these are big, complex and interdependent forces that require big, complex and interdependent responses.

In 2006, on the streets and in the homes of Dagenham the scale of the problem was vividly revealed and rendered in all its dimensions and complexity. It broke from its constraints and demanded local intervention that was both political and then professional. For this reason, the Barking and Dagenham story is worthy of understanding. It is not just a tale of confronting and defeating the far right (important though this was) but a vivid illumination of the political context within which public service reform was required, demanded and executed. It's a story 40 years in the making and has relevance for anyone curious about conceiving and delivering what must happen next for public services – not just in a corner of East London, but across the nation as a whole.

SECTION 2

POST-FORD (ISM) AND THE LOSS OF HOPE

The London-Essex border communities of Barking and Dagenham were 20th Century success stories. In the early 21st Century their tale became a chronicle of despair. If we are to learn anything from the last 25 years, it is that people don't passively accept their despair. For good or ill, they act on it.

For over 50 years, from the 1930s to the 1980s, this area was a place of aspiration, where families who once endured the slums and squalor of Victorian East London found a new home, work, certainty, identity and a sense of solidarity and community. Even when life remained hard, these were the conditions for a good life.

Following Addison's 1919 Housing Act, the London County Council built the Becontree housing estate – then the largest council estate in the world. Between 1921 and 1935 26,000 affordable “homes for heroes” were created, with social infrastructure built on compulsory purchased land and all achieved in the blink of a public policy eye.

Not by coincidence, in 1931, the Ford factory opened its doors in Dagenham. At its height of production it employed 58,000 people, mostly men but some remarkable, reforming women too, and went on to build 11 million cars and 39 million engines. This was not just a factory. It was an institution that anchored social solidarity and shaped 20th century expectations. People expected to do the same job, in the same place, for almost all their life, and life itself was as predictable as a production line. What it meant to be a man and breadwinner and what it meant to be a woman and homemaker was clear and codified not only in the workplace, but in the assumptions that guided the design of public services they used and to which they contributed.

Ford shaped the expectations of the local council too. Not least because the path from trade union shop-steward to being a Labour Councillor was so well trodden that, in time, there became no other route. This culture was well-meaning, but it was also paternalistic. Henry Ford said you could have any colour of car you wanted 'as long as it was black', while the local council prescribed the colour of your front door and the frequency with which you were required to wash your curtains and scrub your front step.

These were the ideal conditions for the post-war Beveridge welfare state. It was founded on the assumption of a perpetually growing industrial economy, full male employment, unpaid female care-giving, basic needs in terms of income and housing secured and a collectivised professional suite of public services to treat and support people for short periods of time if things went wrong.

But those conditions did not last. Things started to change. Slowly at first, then suddenly.

Changing global patterns of production led Ford to dramatically reduce the number of staff it employed from close to sixty thousand people to under 5000. Today it employs just 2000 people in Barking and Dagenham.

Globalisation didn't only change the local economy, it catalysed acute demographic change too. In 2001, 89 percent of the borough population identified as being of a white British origin. Just ten years later that number had fallen to 48 percent.

Meanwhile other key features of the post-war welfare state started to collapse. The sale of council houses under the 'Right to Buy' saw the loss of over 20,000 social homes, in the first instance as sales to tenants, but increasingly as sales to private landlords building property rental portfolios. Today the private rented sector is the largest form of tenure in the borough. Reform brought agency and wealth for some, delivered insecurity and a loss of power for others.

Moreover, as has been well documented by the King's Fund, the temporary and occasional need for health and social care services envisaged by Beveridge at the creation of the NHS, was replaced by a near-permanent reliance by vast swathes of people on the welfare and benefits system and on health professionals working in silos to meet that need. Today more than 60 percent of health expenditure is spent treating incurable long-term health conditions and their co-morbidities, many of which were initially preventable.

Back in Barking, this trend was stark. In 2015, just 25 minutes from the centre of London, at a time when the country had never spent more on the provision of health and social care services, the average healthy life expectancy of women in the borough was just 53 years. The financial cost to cash-starved local public services of these catastrophic health outcomes was huge. The human cost, unbearable.

It was becoming obvious that the biggest existential threat to the NHS was less the means to fund it, and more our collective means to address the root causes of the unfettered rise in demand for its services.

There was something else. The negative impact of these changes was not distributed equally. The popular image of Dagenham as one of the birth places of modern workplace feminism thanks to the women's factory strike of 1968, airbrushed a far darker reality of sex-based discrimination and disadvantage. For women and girls, this was, and too often still is, a catastrophic place to live.

The borough has the highest recorded domestic abuse of any place in London with a staggering 1 in 4 female residents reporting abuse to the police. Heath Ward in Dagenham (in the heart of Addison's Becontree Estate) has the highest reported abuse of all 679 electoral wards in Greater London. When surveyed in 2017 and 2019, 26 percent of young people in the Borough's schools expressed support for the view that it was "sometimes acceptable to hit your partner". Just under 1 in 30 women have suffered female genital mutilation.

That it took a radically reformed Council to see and respond to these features of the Borough, hidden in plain sight for decades, is an indictment of the prevailing failure to understand causation and the Council's inability to represent the community it was supposed to serve.

And then, in 2006 - before the crash of 2008, before austerity, before Twitter or Facebook shaped us, when New Labour spending was at its height and when Barking and Dagenham Council was rated by inspectors as 3 star out of 4 and "improving well" - 12 members of the far right British National Party (BNP) were elected to the Council. The party stood 13 candidates in total. Had they run a full slate, polling suggests they would have taken the Council. Imagine - a fascist-led borough.

Overnight, the borough was dubbed the "race hate capital of Britain". Such was the collective shock that the dominant narrative immediately became one of devious far right forces duping ignorant, latently racist working-class people for their own ends. Surely this was an aberration?

There was little room for deeper reflection. The task in hand was to get the BNP out, and in the elections of 2010, that is what happened.

SECTION 3

RELATIONAL POLITICS AND THE DEMAND FOR CHANGE

Accounts of the political response to the BNP election often centre on the mobilisation of an anti-fascist movement, with hundreds of activists making the trip along London's District Line to Dagenham. These are stories focused on Hope Not Hate, the non-partisan organisation led by Searchlight Magazine and supported by trade unions, that organised what Barking born singer-songwriter Billy Bragg described as a "forensic campaign that identified and then got out the anti-BNP vote."

Commenting the day after the election in May 2010, Bragg wrote in the Guardian: "Those of us who have campaigned hard against the BNP and what it stands for can begin to believe that, with the loss of their stronghold in east London, we have passed the postwar highwater mark of the racist right. For this generation of antifascist activists, Barking and Dagenham is our Cable Street. No Pasaran!" It was without doubt an important political victory. But a number of local Labour activists, MPs and Councillors saw something deeper, more nuanced and troubling. And those who saw it most clearly weren't Labour's traditionalists - the ex-Ford assembly line workers who had worked their way up - but a younger generation of small business owners, recent migrants and workers from the community and voluntary sector. They saw the events of 2006 as a wake-up call for a local Labour Party that had taken its support base for granted and still wasn't looking closely enough at what had changed.

This Labour cohort saw it as their fault that the BNP had secured a foothold in the borough. They saw the contributory factors - the loss of jobs, changes in population, changes to housing availability, falling living standards and a public sector that felt unresponsive and professionally distant - that created the conditions for the BNP to spread its message and garner support. In time, they came to see what had happened in their Borough as less an abnormality and more of a warning of what could come elsewhere.

Barking and Dagenham was not unique. It was the canary in the coal mine.

At the heart of Labour's political response was the simple notion of reconnection and rebuilding trust. In the years before the elections of 2006, the Labour Party contact rate (the measure of canvassing and doorstep conversations) across the borough was less than 10 percent. By 2010 that rate was more than 90 percent and, I am reliably informed, has remained above that rate ever since. As Darren Rodwell, now leader of Barking and Dagenham Council but then agent for Barking MP Margaret Hodge once told me: "Now we knock on every door we can, and we say to people - I can't do much about the government, the weather, or West Ham, but is there something else I can help you with?"

The information yielded by these conversations demanded action. It soon became obvious that the Council was not as a neutral bystander, but a fundamental part of the problem. It had become an organisation that was difficult to engage, that gave the impression of professional arrogance, of having little or no time for the contribution of the community and voluntary sector. To locals, the Council lacked the wit or leadership to insist that all of its functions talk to one another in order to help the complex needs of residents. Furthermore, it seemed unable to fully countenance its role in both causing and resolving the challenges the borough faced. If the borough was to change, the Council would need to change too.

Austerity added fuel to this fire. Like many places in the period 2010 to 2014, Barking and Dagenham's initial response was to incrementally cut back existing services in a process known as "salami slicing". But by the time Rodwell became Leader in 2014, this approach was starting to run out of road. Services were at crisis point, the Council's financial resilience was low and, by the end of the decade it was going to need to save £79 million. By 2020, the Council would have half as much to spend on the provision of services as it had had in 2010.

This was a catastrophic prospect for a community already under considerable stress. Services pared back to their statutory needs-led minimum, with rising thresholds for support, would mean pushing away the very people Labour had pledged to reconnect with and support. There needed to be a different plan.

To this end, a Local Government Association Peer Review of the Council was undertaken in the summer of 2014. It concluded that: "The traditionally paternalistic approach from the council will need to change. Only by genuinely revising what it does and how it operates can the council seek to address the financial, social and economic challenges being faced".

I was appointed Chief Executive in November 2014. We then set out to do precisely what was needed.

SECTION 4

DESIGNING A NEW KIND OF COUNCIL

In 2015, with only modest political caveats, senior officers of Barking and Dagenham Council were given a clear mandate to plan a radical transformation of the Council. There was consensus on the need for growth. The political instinct was for the Council to be more communitarian and less paternalistic. Intuitively we all felt the need to focus on tackling the root causes of why more and more people needed help. We also knew we had to find better ways to meet that need more efficiently when it materialised. And we knew our plan had to close a budget gap of £79m.

The biggest question was where to start.

Our answer was to build a data and insight capability of a kind not seen before in local government. Developing root cause analysis enabled us to understand at a household level and in real time, the association between the need for expensive council services (such as children's social care and homelessness) and the social and economic risk factors that if addressed or mitigated could help people before their lives tipped into crisis. In this way, we could strategically assess the extent to which Council services were designed to address these causes, - or understand in which cases they were making matters worse.

The results were as startling as they were perhaps obvious.

For example, we found that households living in private rented accommodation, in low-paid work or unemployed, in debt (particularly where that debt was rising) and where something else big was happening such as a mental health issue or domestic abuse, were eight times more associated with children coming into the care system than if the risk factors were not in play.

Moreover, we could now pin-point precisely which households in the borough were living with these risk factors and how many of them were known to the Council. We modelled that 3500 households held the combination of risk factors most associated with the causes of expensive demand for children's services. Of these 3500, just over 1700 were known to the Council and were being helped, but 1800 were not. It followed that a more proactive approach to prevention should start with reaching out to the 1800 households with whom we didn't have a relationship, but who were most at risk. Were they ok? How might we or someone else help them reduce or mitigate one or more of the risks and issues they faced?

In time we were able to layer predictive analytics on top of this basic segmentation, enabling us to track and know the extent to which the pattern of risk factors was changing and be more proactive in our strategy and response.

From this analysis, three immediate conclusions could be drawn:

First, that we had a problem of design. It was not going to be easy to task Council services that were organised and managed by professional silos focused on a response to need, with working instead in a joined-up manner, across disciplines, to respond to causes.

As an example: early help teams in children's services would only be mobilised when a problem or need became manifest in a child that could be assessed. This was often too late to address the underlying problem. From the perspective of a preventative state, this was the wrong kind of help, delivered insufficiently early.

Likewise our homelessness service, based in our housing department, was organised only to see the need directly in front of it and assess whether a presenting individual met the threshold for homelessness support. If they did, the job was to find and help pay for their accommodation needs - often a poor-quality home, often some way away from the borough. If the threshold wasn't met, the person was sent away. But insight told us that the top two reasons for homelessness were debt and domestic abuse. Both were concerns for staff elsewhere in the Council, but those teams and individuals didn't imagine their job to be about preventing homelessness. This was frustrating because the Council was often one of the first organisations to know that people were having money problems.

Our data told us that people tended to stop paying their council tax before defaulting on other payments. But this was a matter for the finance department, which only saw the debt in terms of money owed to us and not as a vital sign of distress. The Council simply did not have the 'all-in' approach required to see this data as an early intervention trigger that could tackle the cause of the debt early and at far less cost than the resulting crisis we often ended up having to solve.

Meanwhile, five years into austerity, with domestic abuse rates soaring and contributing to so many other household problems, the Council employed one member of staff out of 3000 to understand and address the issue.

It soon became obvious that while data and insight was helping to reveal the problems and solutions to those problems, the Council was not going to be able to respond adequately – if at all – without service reform.

It was also becoming obvious that working in a more joined up and integrated way was necessary both to counter distrust and frustration for local people for whom engagement with the Council felt like pinball – bouncing from one department to another. Every time a fresh Council team took on the same family – separately documenting their circumstances, running assessments, filling out forms etc – it was hugely expensive for us, as well as being a terrible experience for them.

On top of all of this, we had an economic development problem. Our root cause analysis demonstrated that all household circumstances would improve if they were able to become more financially resilient in terms of both income and costs, particularly housing costs. But by 2014, the Council's economic development function had been cut to the bone and there was no growth strategy or capability worthy of the name. Efforts to help people into employment consisted of administering welfare to work programmes. These activities often focused on helping unemployed people nearest the labour market into work, rather than understanding the structural barriers and risk factors in front of the people who needed work the most. While attention was paid to the claimant counts, no one was asking why almost twice as many people were "economically inactive" – neither in work or looking for it - and consequently no one was doing much about it.

And so, efforts to help households at risk of tipping into crisis and from there into expensive public services were not understood to be a part of work elsewhere in the Council - to the extent it existed at the time - to grow the economy or help people into decent jobs that could help them shift their material well-being. It's as if there were two Councils existing in parallel universes with only the 1000's of desperate households being left behind by both that could glimpse their co-existence and the devastating consequence of the lack of join up on their lives.

Meanwhile, Barking and Dagenham should have been growing but it was not. Its eastern edge was just 25 minutes by train to the centre of London and it had space to build up to 70,000 new homes. The borough's low density industrial footprint and relatively low land values presented huge opportunities for new businesses and with that, the prospect of thousands of new jobs. Yet private housing developers were building fewer than 700 new homes a year, most of which were unaffordable. And the fastest local development trend was for large logistics sheds on plots of land once used to employ thousands of working men and women. The borough that built the Becontree estate in less than two decades would wait a century before the private

sector could build all the homes that the land could supply, whilst its new warehouses offered only a handful of low-wage, low-skilled jobs handling parcels bound for better off households elsewhere in London.

All of these were bad public policy outcomes that engendered a profound sense of injustice. Private speculators appeared to be making money in the borough, but residents couldn't see the benefit to them. Why couldn't the Council make money from the growth potential too, and then to use these proceeds to help those who needed help the most? That question soon became a challenge the Council answered with remarkable results.

But first we had to solve our relationships problem. Or rather – work out the kind of relationships a preventative state needed to form, which were profoundly different from those we had had to form in the past.

In a traditional welfare model, the dynamic is clear. People perceive they have a problem, and they approach the state for help. This need is assessed by a professional expert who discerns a solution. This relationship comes under stress and breaks down when the professional in question is not able to understand or respond to the whole circumstance of the person before them. The problem is exacerbated as responses are rationed or reduced. There follows a negative loop of one-dimensional relationships and a loss of trust that then primes all future engagements to be negative.

In a preventative model, we imagine that the dynamic is inverted. The person who knows the whole of their life the best is the individual themselves and sometimes their family. The role of the public servant is to listen and probe. What may be the presenting problem might not be the real cause or causes. In some cases, people may not be aware of the risks they are carrying and so the dynamic becomes one of the public servants reaching out (as well as responding) to make first contact and check that everything is ok. As might a trusted friend.

The solutions, in so far there are any, will be multi-faceted and will need to be developed or co-produced with the individual in question if there is to be any prospect of success.

Donna Hall, former CEO of Wigan Council and one of the innovators behind the concept of the 'Wigan Deal' has described this as moving from a "what is the matter with you" approach to public services engagement to a "what matters to you" approach.

It centres the agency and power of the individual, not the agency and power of the state. It sounds simple but is so very different to how many of our public services and their professional bodies have been developed and codified over decades. Furthermore, in many incidents, the person or organisation best placed to form a relationship of trust is not the Council, but a community or voluntary sector organisation, or an extended friendship group or network of people who were experiencing the same issue.

This is particularly the case where the state is both there to help, but also where it has the power, when necessary, to step in. The most obvious example of this being in social care – where the fear of having a child removed can often mean that Council staff are the last people that local folk will want to be open with, given their power to intervene in lives in the most intrusive, upsetting and disempowering of ways.

For all these reasons and given the political imperative to act, our reform agenda took shape in two clear and related ways. First came the development of a new service we called Community Solutions, designed to understand then tackle root causes, to form positive relationships with people in support of this, and to unleash the power and capacity of the whole community in support of these objectives. Second, we created a wholly owned growth, regeneration and development company Be First, which was designed to turbo-charge the right kind of growth in the borough and deliver significant financial returns to the council too.

SECTION 5

COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Launched in 2017, Community Solutions was a new directorate drawn from functions across the Council that were then horizontally integrated and re-designed to work with people to understand then tackle the root cause of problems in their lives with a view to preventing longer term harm.

It was also designed to save money, doing so in two key ways. First, through the functional consolidation of multiple assessment, case management and operational leadership arrangements. Second, by reducing demand.

There were four key elements to the Community Solutions design:

- Designed around lives, not professions
- A platform for new relationships
- A platform for the generation and application of data and insight
- A platform for participation and engagement

Designed around lives, not professions

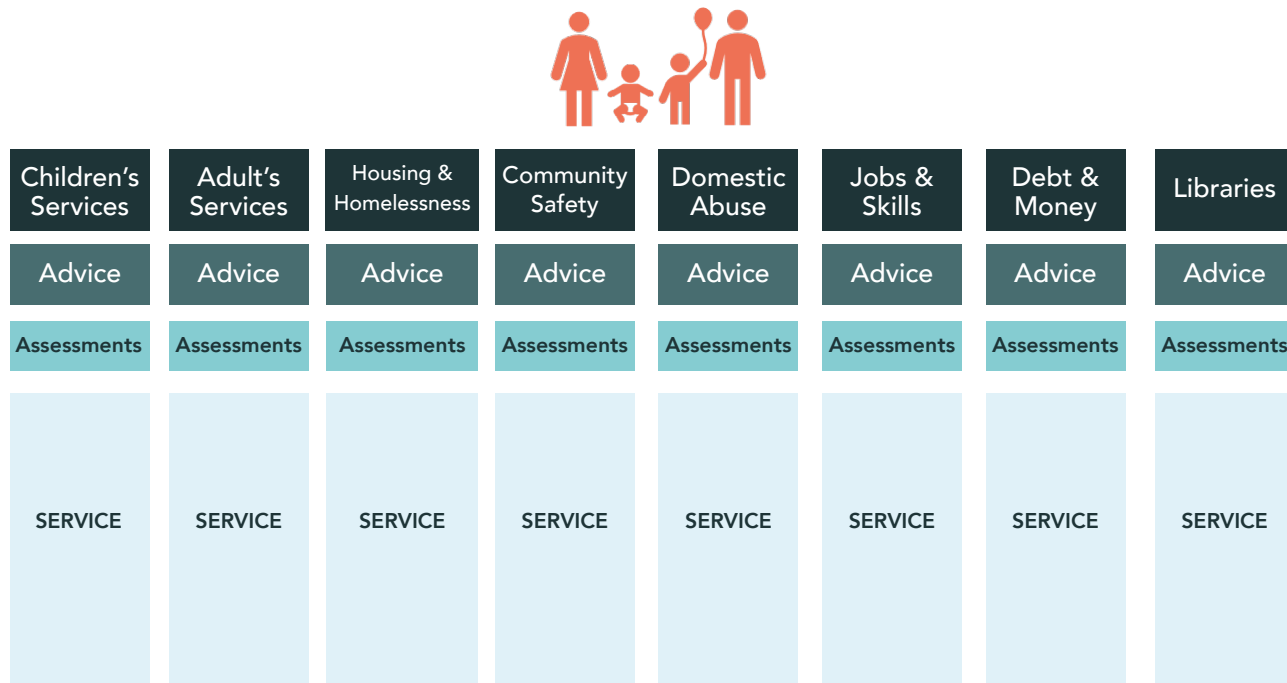
In 2015, the Council was organised around professional silos. We knew this had to change if we were to work in a more joined-up and relationship-focused manner.

In practice this meant the horizontal integration of services previously organised separately. Community Solutions brought together the 'front door' for children's and adults social services, housing allocations and homelessness, drug and alcohol services, domestic abuse, debt and money advice, employment support and job readiness and libraries. This unlocked the opportunity for different kinds of conversations and the prospect of significant savings.

In traditional, vertically integrated arrangements, there tend to be common elements: A form of triage and general advice, then an assessment possibly followed by a referral into either a basic service offer, or deeper specialist support. This model centres the power of the professional as both gatekeeper and authority, creating a potent inhibitor to a more relational way of working. It places a burden on those without power to

navigate, understand and influence those with power. It requires them to understand their own needs and circumstances through the fractured lens of how we organise ourselves and to do so when they are at their lowest ebb. Little wonder that many of those who need our help would describe their experience as a battle or a fight.

FIGURE 1
SERVICES DESIGNED AROUND PROFESSIONS



The Community Solutions model sought to invert the power paradigm.

Without needing to make an appointment, residents could come to one of our two main Community Solutions hubs. These were open plan, warm and accessible places including a library, children's play areas, comfortable seating areas and places that enabled more private conversations without a fuss. No security glass, answerphones, screwed down tables and chairs or gatekeeping receptionists with a skill for avoiding eye contact. This was meant to feel different.

In these spaces were co-located and deeply integrated groups of generalist staff, volunteers and professionals, organised in a manner that sought to understand the totality of an individual's immediate and underlying needs as well as their capabilities and aspirations. The task: to help them make progress and as far as possible avoid the need for expensive statutory services.

To achieve this required a fundamental redesign of services. Simply co-locating disparate teams under one roof wasn't going to work. We had to consciously remove the vertical silos and, in their place, create three new teams.

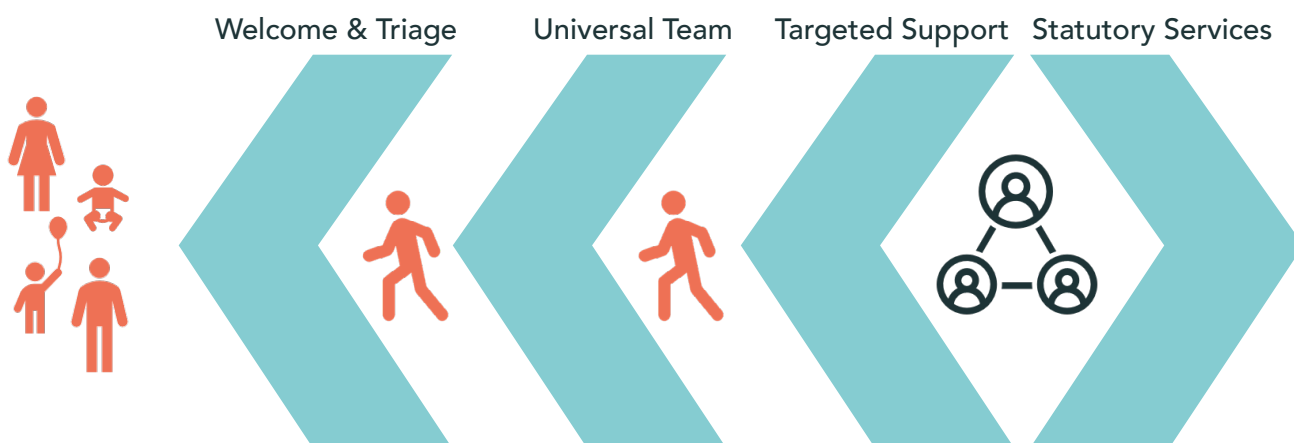
A Welcome and Triage function consisting of super-user staff who could hold wonderful conversations with people across the range of the most common issues that individuals and households presented as they walked through the door. If they could resolve matters, there and then, they would.

In support of this, a Universal Team, who could work with residents, perhaps over a more extensive period, on a range of issues without the need for deep professional expertise. So much of what we saw was relatively mundane and straightforward to address. Once done, this created the space to enable deeper conversations about what was really making life tough and the prospects and plans for addressing those things. Rapidly working through matters, while adopting an "account management approach" became the superpower of the universal team. In periods of high stress and anxiety, they understood that people wanted to feel 'held' and supported. This in turn created trust. Colleagues would describe this process of supporting people as liberating and the reason they had come into public service. If necessary, the Universal team could call

upon help from the Targeted Support Team of integrated professionals able to provide more specialist support – perhaps in relation to domestic abuse, early help children’s services, or support with community safety matters. Crucially, these professional teams worked together under a single leadership structure, with common case files and management.

If necessary, and at any juncture, safeguarding or other referrals could be made to statutory services by any one of the teams. Safeguarding practice throughout the department was assured through training, governance and day to day supervision and management.

FIGURE 2
DESIGNED AROUND LIVES, NOT PROFESSIONS



Working in this way was not only better for those who needed help, but also significantly cut the cost of multiple assessment, referral and case management functions across the Council, and with that, the associated management overheads. Indeed, the baseline costs of the new Community Solutions department were 35 percent less than the prevailing traditional service silos. This meant from day one, Community Solutions delivered a £5 million per annum saving to the Council. A preventative service design was cheaper than a reactive one.

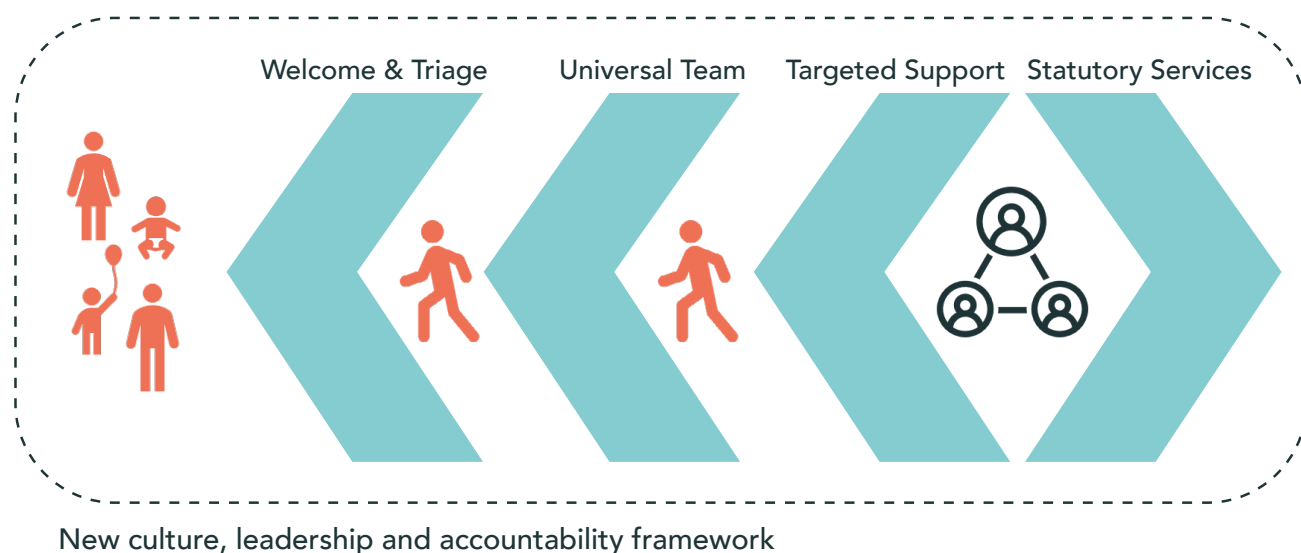
The new ways of working also had an immediate impact on demand - nowhere more so than with homelessness services. Rather than starting with an assessment, we started with a conversation about why the applicant was homeless or felt at risk of becoming so. The teams then set about addressing these issues first. While many people still required accommodation, for a significant number the alternative support helped secure a better outcome. Sometimes this help consisted of short-term financial aid, or support to restructure debts. In others we were able to mediate with landlords or in some other way help folk through the immediate crisis.

A platform for new relationships

The development of Community Solutions wasn’t just about a new structure, pathways and joint team working but a deep change in culture too. The process of reform and the resulting new arrangements provided the perfect vehicle for changing how we behave with people.

From the start we involved staff deeply in the redesign process. Many weren’t happy with the prevailing ways of working. They were also frustrated that they could only act within tight boundaries. Community Solutions provided the latitude they craved. Job descriptions and person specifications emphasised new professional capabilities: empathy, trust-building, warmth, deep understanding of services and networks, the ability to appropriately signpost and advise. We underpinned all this with a new leadership and accountability framework.

FIGURE 3
NEW CULTURE, LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK



A platform for the generation and application of data and insight

Community Solutions was conceived as a service that would generate and utilise data and insight with the intention of targeting those most in need of help and support, often before they recognised themselves that they had problems which could get worse.

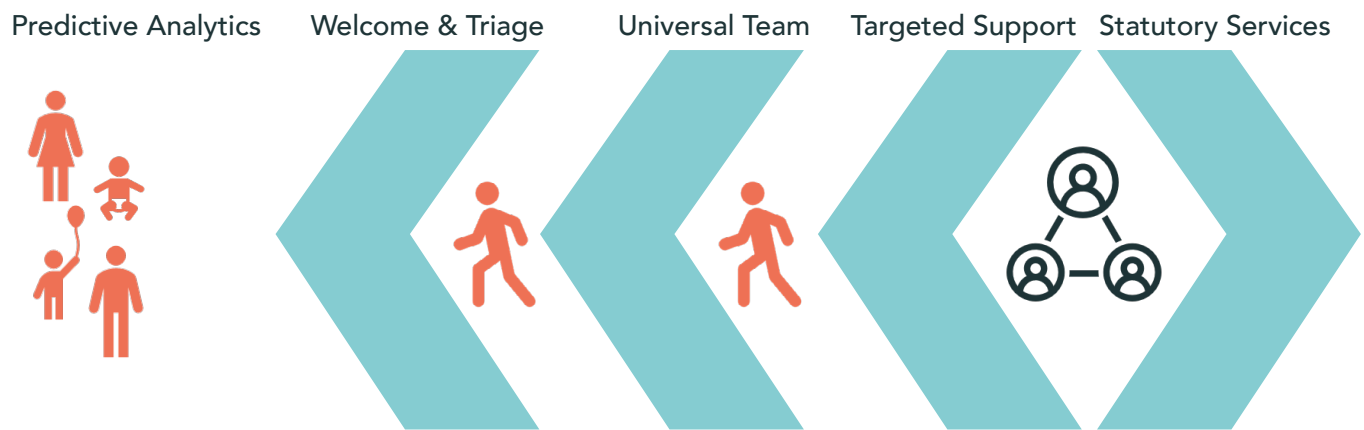
Like many places, we had attempted to deploy data and insight in the past to help inform services, and encourage them to take a more preventative stance, but to little impact. Too often it felt like the data team worked in isolation from those who might use the information they provided. Service teams would politely listen, and then go back to doing what they did before. We came to realise this was a problem of design – services built to react to a particular problem found it difficult to respond to data that informed them that multiple activities beyond their purview would be necessary to truly change the lives of their clients. The application of data and service redesign had to go hand in hand.

Accordingly, the directorate became home to a new data and insight function that deployed a number of tools to both inform decisions about individuals and households and support wider strategic decision making. Chief amongst these were:

- **Ward level adoption of the Social Progress Index (SPI).** Developed in conjunction with the Social Progress Imperative the SPI allowed us to understand the social wellbeing of our residents and their progress through time, and in comparison to others. This provided us with the most up to date data about trends in those underlying root causes of need (such as domestic abuse, fuel poverty etc.) and their prevalence in localities.
- **One View - a single view of Council data about households** – focused in the first instance on household debt but broadened in time to include a range of relevant data. Not only did this help us to understand the totality of risk factors in a particular household but also the best way Community Solutions teams might respond.
- **Predictive analytics** - Once up and running, One View provided the raw ingredients for the use of predictive analytics, both in terms of identifying households at risk and helping frontline staff make judgements about the correct course of action to take when working with them. This proved invaluable in almost all circumstances, not least at the start of the pandemic. In early March 2020, One View was deployed to build a predictive model of individuals and households at risk from Covid 19. Weeks before the national government shielding list was developed and provided to the Council, One View provided a list of vulnerable households that was 93 percent accurate. As a consequence the Council was able to begin targeted shielding support immediately. This proved pivotal in reducing harm, with Barking and Dagenham residents recording far lower incidence of death through Covid in those early months than either the national or London average. This was despite the borough having a population profile that elsewhere would have seen a far higher levels of mortality. Community Solutions and its use of predictive analytics saved lives.

Community Solutions remains a largely reactive service, but as it matures the scope of its proactive work grows. For example, applying predictive analytics and machine learning to analyse the debt profile of residents is helping to target those who might benefit most from support to maximise the access to benefits. Meanwhile, hospital discharge social workers are being supported in case work decisions by AI tools that are helping reduce the occurrence of return visits to hospital for frail elderly patients most at risk of falls.

FIGURE 4
DESIGNED TO GENERATE AND USE INSIGHT



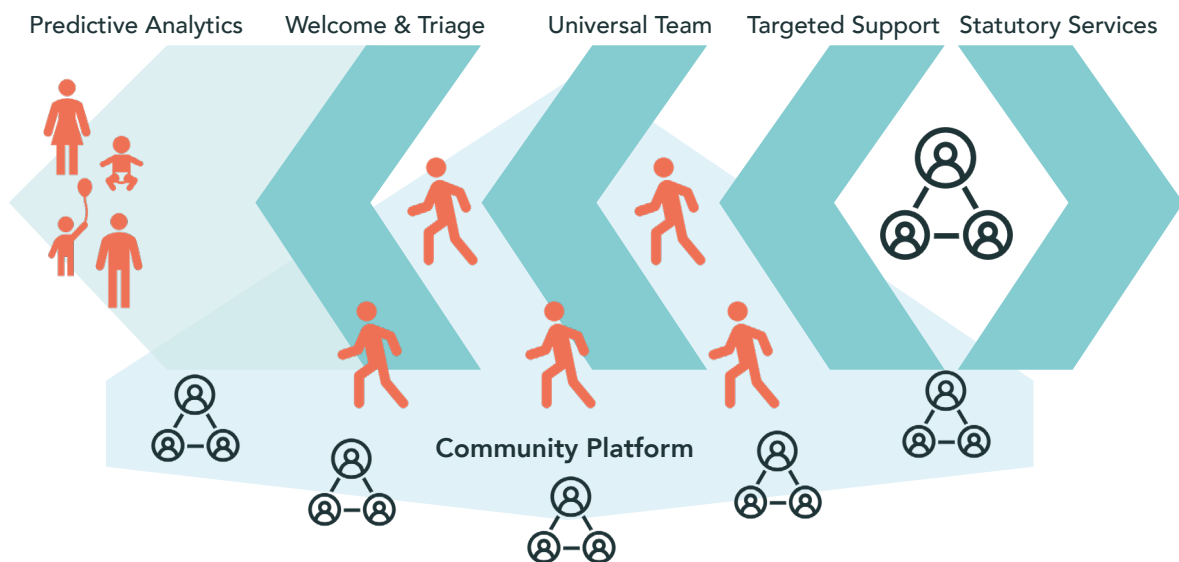
Platform for participation and engagement

Perhaps the most important feature of Community Solutions was the role it was intended to play in catalysing, co-opting and making it simple for the community and voluntary sector to work with those who might benefit from their help and support. By this we meant organised charities and volunteer organisations, including religious institutions, but also informal networks of people who felt a desire, from time to time, to help their neighbours.

In so far as they had ever valued the contribution of the third sector and the agency of others, traditional Council services, hollowed out as they were, found the task of engagement increasingly difficult to do. With that loss came the loss of the collective energy, enthusiasm, trust and empathy that local non-state actors could bring to the task of help and support.

A central tenet of the Council's new approach was to reverse this trend and then go further - building a more resilient community by creating the conditions that enabled the community to support itself.

FIGURE 5
A PLATFORM TO ENGAGE EVERYONE



This effort took many forms including:

- **Encouragement and support to develop the BD_Collective** – a ‘network of networks’ or organisations, big and small, thematic or geographic, short or long term, coming together to make the borough a better place to live. The Collective arose out of a dissatisfaction with the traditional mechanisms in England for connecting the ‘social sector’ organisations funded to respond to disadvantage. That dissatisfaction stemmed from commissioning procedures designed to drive up efficiency but which led to organisational competition rather than collaboration – and a loss of expertise as smaller organisations were pushed to the brink of failure.
- **Co-creation with residents of a Citizens Alliance Network**, designed to empower residents to control and determine issues for local debate and to propose and agree local projects the Council would support through the use of a Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy charged on developers. By 2023 £7 million of funds had been deployed in this way.
- In support of this, a **single digital engagement platform** brought together in one place the ability of residents to share their perspective and comment on live consultations.
- **Supporting the foundation of B&D Giving**, a community led vehicle for social investing in Barking and Dagenham, with funds which were then distributed via an approach that centred equitable, democratic and community-driven grant-making.
- **Incubating and co-funding what at the time was the world’s largest mass public participation programme Every One Every Day (EOED)**. Funded by the largest-ever grant from the Big Lottery Fund, EOED was founded on the simple notion of providing people who had lost hope, confidence and agency with the prospect of something meaningful to do. Hundreds of community led initiatives were mobilised, from basket weaving and batch cooking to community gardening and knitting, singing, and playing board games together. If someone had an idea, then the EOED was there to help bring it to life. This was the very simplest form of participation – the opportunity to leave the house, do something positive and then do it again the next day too. EOED was not without critics who said it followed a perhaps too rigid set of operating principles that disconnected it from other organisations. Its funding was huge – raising questions about how the model could ever be replicated and sustained. But its basic premise and way of working with anyone who wanted to imagine their life differently brought joy.

Of all the deeply communitarian impulses of the Council, Community Solutions was by far the most important and had the biggest impact.

It wasn’t perfect and it was sometimes messy, but it helped to collectivise and apply the wisdom, insight, and compassion of a great many people united by the endeavour of supporting others to live better lives.

Some of this engagement was carefully curated and embedded in formal pathways. More often than not, it was organic and deeply human. My favourite example was the WhatsApp group established by a member of the triage team to support young single mums who were in debt. This colleague had noticed that some of the mums were starting to offer each other support. On asking them more, she learned that for many young women, talking to another young woman who had had a similar experience and had found a route to successfully manage her debt was one of the best sources of advice and support. The young women were naturally empathetic towards each other, trusted each other, could pool their learning and were willing to help each other. And so a group was formed and it made a difference.

Within a very short period of time Community Solutions delivered some remarkable results:

- From the day it was launched it delivered a **£5 million per year**, 35 percent reduction in baseline costs
- In its first 3 years of operation it delivered a **significant reduction in households living in temporary accommodation** from a peak of 2000 in 2017 to 1470 by 2021. In fact Barking and Dagenham was one of just five London Boroughs to reduce its reliance on temporary accommodation. During this period, across London as whole, its use rose by 14 percent whilst in Barking it fell by 17 percent.
- This was in part due to successful prevention work to help people avoid becoming statutorily homeless – a process known as being ‘owed homelessness duty’. **This number dropped from 525 households in 2017/18, to 346 in 2018/19 to 156 in 2019/20.**
- By 2020, no Barking and Dagenham homeless families were accommodated in hotels. In the same year **rough sleeping in the borough was virtually eradicated** with fewer than 7 people per night sleeping rough on the borough’s streets.
- Every year Community Solutions delivered improved ‘Employment Outcomes’, a measure of whether folk had entered work or achieved an improvement in skills that would enable them to do so. Just two years after its creation the service delivered a **53 percent year on year increase in such outcomes.**
- Within 3 years of operation, Community Solutions **tripled the number of family lives turned around towards a positive future through the Troubled Families team to 3058 families in 2021** from around 700 per year when the service was first launched.
- Today Community Solutions benefits from **80 thousand hours of volunteer support every year**, with 1300 volunteers supporting frontline teams in the service’s main hubs. Volunteers work alongside Council staff and social sector employees to run food networks and social isolation networks – consortiums that support families in the early help system, older people experiencing mental issues – as well as a migrant network, a sports network, a youth network and women’s network.

SECTION 6

BE FIRST

Be First, the Council's wholly owned growth, regeneration and development company, was launched in 2018 with a mission to increase the pace and scale of growth in the borough and to do so in a manner that benefited those who needed that growth the most. It was also designed to generate fiscal and commercial returns to the Council to help it close its budget gap and provide headroom for much-needed investment in social infrastructure.

Thus Be First was conceived to address two key problems - a market failure to deliver the right kind of growth and a lack of capacity in the Council to lead and deliver economic change. It set out to:

- be the best planning and development authority in the UK, making it as simple as possible for would-be developers and investors to do business in the borough by providing clear and timely advice, giving them certainty and de-risking their investment, while also charging them an appropriate fee for this value and demanding the best of them in return
- exploit its deep knowledge of the local market to identify, shape and participate in the realisation of growth opportunities
- leverage the Council's balance sheet to invest in the borough to make money for the Council, but also to stimulate the wider market by crowding in private sector investment
- directly deliver development where appropriate, where risk could be mitigated and where there were short, medium, and long-term financial and wider benefits to the people of the borough
- capture financial returns for the public good at every stage of the investment and development cycle – on investment finance, on fees, direct development profit, on long-term asset appreciation and future rental income returns.

As with Community Solutions, Be First was built upon a strategic platform of data and insight - in this case, a model that generated an optimised understanding of the relationship between the supply of land and the demand (or potential demand) for development, be that for housing or employment use.

This meant understanding who owned what land in the borough, what their intentions were, the individual and collective development potential of all spaces, and then expressing all of this as both a financial model and as a vision for how places might change were new developments to occur. The resulting analysis could then be modelled and remodelled to develop a series of scenarios and options that in turn were tested and refined. Consequently, the council was able to make strategic judgements about the balance of financial return, risk, and a host of other social objectives including the development of affordable homes for rent,

affordable live work-spaces, new industrial or employment spaces and the funding of infrastructure.

This analysis provided the strategic space to understand, influence and manage the intersection between efforts to reduce demand and the potential of growth to empower people. We then translated it into a five-year business plan for Be First, constructed around the build-out of an initial tranche of 45 Council-led development schemes across the borough. Some of these schemes were on land in public ownership, some on land in private ownership. Some required intervention in the form of land acquisition, use of Compulsory Purchase Orders and other incentives to get developers moving. This was supported by a Council-backed investment and acquisition strategy that quantified the financial flows through the model and the long-term income return that would be delivered to the Council in the form of asset appreciation and revenue yield. Together this enabled a granular understanding of the wealth that would be captured for the public good and sequencing and phasing of when this money would arrive.

In the first instance Be First was given a target of tripling housing delivery from some 700 units a year to three thousand, including building more than a thousand affordable Council owned homes (at 50, 60 and 80 percent of market rents). The company was also tasked with achieving an annual net revenue return of £10.3 million.

At the end of its first five-year plan, Be First had exceeded all these targets.

To deliver all this required significant reforms – including again, the horizontal integration of professional functions sitting in different Council departments. From planning teams to highways and regulatory services to capital delivery teams, to strategic asset management functions and regeneration staff, and the strategic investment team. Ensuring a total of 45 development schemes delivered to time and budget required a degree of cross-profession working of the kind not previously seen in the Council. This in turn required significant change in both culture and operational leadership.

Additionally, the scale of activity and the distinctly commercial approach of Be First demanded a much larger team and one with significantly more leadership capability. Within three years, Be First had doubled in size and was employing over 1100 staff. It was rapidly establishing itself as one of the UK's largest affordable housing developers, its growth in capacity funded by the returns from development.

To support this growth, we needed to attract staff from the private as well as public sector. This meant we had to consider what terms and conditions of employment would make us competitive.

There was also a need for Be First to be a risk-holding organisation, capable of entering commercial deals and private partnerships.

Consequently, Be First became incorporated as a wholly owned company. The Council was its only shareholder. Council staff were transferred into the company, new staff were employed by the company and its work was overseen by a company Board, chaired by the late Lord Kerslake, supported by a team of non-executive directors with a strongly commercial portfolio of experience.

To put the scale of all this into perspective: within a couple of years the management team of Be First was larger and more costly than the entire leadership team of the residual Council. Given the scale of its work, it needed to be. This imbalance of leadership would have been completely impossible to countenance had we attempted to create Be First as just another department within the Council.

To support, manage and govern Be First, the Council had to change too. Careful consideration was given to the operation of the shareholder board, to how the company was commissioned and held to account and to how investment decisions were properly appraised and risks evaluated. In the latter respect, an investment panel was formally constituted, with members drawn from relevant professional backgrounds. Their advice was sought, and recommendations offered and incorporated into all cabinet decisions on investment and funding.

Within a few short years, Be First delivered some remarkable results:

- It exceeded the **£10.3 million per annum** revenue return to Council envisaged in the first 5 year business plan. These returns were equivalent to a 15 percent increase in Council tax.
- It more than **tripled housing delivery from 750-1000 properties per year to 3000-4000 properties per annum.**
- It delivered **2000 affordable Council-owned homes** in its first three years of delivery with a further 2000 in the pipeline to 2028. The Council is now building more affordable homes than it was losing to the right to buy for the first time in 40 years.
- In the period 2020 to 2024, **1 in 5 of all affordable homes built by councils in London were built in Barking and Dagenham**, making Be First one of the largest affordable housing developers in the UK.
- Since 2020, Be First has been one of the **best performing planning teams in England and Wales**. In 2024, OFLOG (the Office for Local Government) named it England and Wales top performer for planning decisions.
- It delivered the borough's **first university campus in partnership with Coventry University**. Further collaboration enabled the relocation of UCL Pearl (Person-Environment-Activity-Laboratory) facilities from central London to a purpose-built facility in Dagenham.
- It built and part owned London's largest film and TV studios in Dagenham, with 12 sound stages, post-production facilities and office accommodation, bringing **1800 new jobs together with an endowment to fund apprentices in relevant trades**.
- It successfully negotiated and facilitated the relocation of London's historic markets of Smithfield and Billingsgate from central London to a purpose built £1 billion 'mega market' in Dagenham dock, bringing almost **3000 new jobs to the borough and providing the means to de-carbonise significant elements of the London's food supply chain**.
- Co-development of 'Industria' – a new state of the art multi-story industrial development in Barking that significantly improves the use of space to provide **additional employment accommodation with an A+ EPC energy rating**.

For many, being involved in the creation and delivery of Be First was career-defining. Building homes, delivering anchor institutions into a borough that sorely needed them, standing up to the big forces of development capital and working with them as equals felt brave and exciting.

It was also a very tangible and visible demonstration of the Council's renaissance. Children walked past a university for the first time in their lives. Young people saw a local film studio as an exciting skills centre and job prospect. Everyone knew the Council made these things happen. Around the borough billboards heralded the arrival of new homes, but not with identikit glossy images of developer photos. A simple message rose like a banner instead: if you earn the living wage, you can afford to rent these houses.

There was a glimmer of hope. And signs that politicians were keeping their promises.

SECTION 7

WHAT WE LEARNED – LESSONS FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEADERS

Back in 2015, as we embarked on a plan to overcome the challenges we faced, we didn't set out to light the way for others. We had our backs to the wall, so we came out with everything we had. It felt as though we had one shot to make a difference and we had to make it count. Some of our work will be directly replicable, some may not. But I'm certain there are things that can be learned and shared. And one thing many Councils and political leaders may be feeling right now too is that they also have one shot to make a difference - to overcome low resources, low trust and frighteningly high need.

For local leaders I would offer three reflections in particular:

- 1. Be bold, because no one is coming to the rescue.** It is unlikely that fiscal restraint will be loosened in the coming decades to the extent that rising demand could be met through our current institutions and ways of working. For local leaders the only options are to play a leadership role in fostering growth that changes the material conditions of those who need growth the most, and to adequately prevent or resolve risks people are holding before they manifest into crises. Both of these options require reform, and that reform will require investment, time and political capital. Don't waste time hoping this won't be the case. We might imagine that we are immune to the big forces that are shaping our world, and it is possible that a handful of places, their impact may be far enough away that current leaders can calculate that they can afford to wait. But for most, this is not the case. The data is against us and without action so might results at the ballot box too.

Barking and Dagenham is only one example of what reform might mean. The ideas and principles that guided our work were far from unique. They found their origins in that movement of thinkers, practitioners, and reformers who have recognised for years that there must be change. I refer specifically to activists like Hillary Cottam and her seminal work "Radical Help"; New Local's advocacy of "Community Power"; CLES and the New Economics Foundation and more recently the RSA City Growth Commission with its demand for bolder local investment and Demos' 'liberated public services' vision which it is developing through its Future Public Services Taskforce, which I am delighted to be advising. These brilliant proponents of inclusive growth and pioneering places as diverse as Wigan and rural Wiltshire, Camden, Salford, Liverpool, Kent, Gateshead and recently Middlesbrough provide experience and evidence that a new blueprint is needed if you are to improve lives and save money by changing the way you work.

In this context beware the impulse for incrementalism. It brings with it risk of organisational failure and an on-going erosion of trust. Don't succumb to 'silver bullet' thinking that suggests you can help everyone by helping just one group in need. Barking's big money savings came from the 'once and done' way of working. Had we progressed with baby steps or hidden behind 'pilot projects' the moment would have been lost, savings snaffled or evaporated, and the collective impact muted. The logic of the prevailing state would have won, and the people of the borough would have lost.

These observations echo those of James' Plunkett's recent article 'What has changed since 1997? – enough to change the way we govern'.² There, he describes a new 'practice of production' in the wider economy, one aspect of which is 'an operating model in which the unit of delivery is an autonomous, multidisciplinary, outcomes-based team' – also referred to as 'product working' – or 'agile working' – or 'internet-era methods'. He contrasts this with the state, which he describes as 'being left behind in the era of industrialism, since its default way of working...is still industrial (linear, hierarchical, siloed) and in centres of governance like Whitehall internet-era methods are still treated as the exception.' Seen in this way, innovations like Community Solutions or Be First are examples of switching away from industrial methods towards the practice of production, albeit one adapted for public service outcomes.

- 2. Strategic place leadership and strategies to reduce demand are the same thing but councils are organised as if they are separate.** Stimulating growth and tackling the root causes of demand are two sides of the same coin and need to be equally covered in your strategy. If in doubt leaders should start by asking the question "who must growth be for"? It is a question that can only be answered if there is a deep understanding of the root causes of demand, how those root causes manifest as risk factors in people's lives, and the prevalence and association of them in households. The more this is understood, the better able local leaders are to deliver outcomes at the intersection of their economy and endeavour to work with people to live a better life. This will be easier in some places than others. Helpfully, in Barking and Dagenham the principal growth opportunities aligned closely with our civic boundaries and so we were able to crack on. In many cases this won't be the case – the big economic moves may need to be made at a city wide, county or regional level. This presents challenges both politically and organisationally, in some cases may mean ceding power to ultimately gain it. But it's a leadership proposition that becomes easier to manage when illuminated by evidence, data and shared understanding of those cohorts most at risk.
- 3. If people can't join your relationship as equals, there can be no relationship.** We may not have recognised this from the start, but it soon became apparent that our efforts in Barking and Dagenham to create a more symbiotic relationship between citizen and state, founded on mutualism and solidarity, demanded that we centre equality at the heart of everything we did. Tackling root causes meant tackling structural inequality and that in turn meant designing for the furthest first. Data and insight and working in a more empathetic way of working was key. Both were important. These tools and ways of working enabled us to see features of our economy and society that had been hidden in plain sight, that once revealed demanded urgent attention.

As an example, as Be First began designing new 21st Century homes and places, research told us that girls felt 10 times less secure in public spaces than boys. Further probing revealed that public parks were used 80 percent of the time by boys and young men and very rarely by girls and young women. For a borough where the structural inequalities facing women were the causes of so much harm and demand, addressing this disparity was at the core of our 'design for the furthest first' mantra. So, at a formative stage of their plans London-based Swedish architects White Arkitekter handed over control to local teenage girls. The girls led workshops and were given Go-Pro cameras so they could document their movements around their local spaces, how they felt as they moved around, and what they would do differently to make things better for themselves if they were given the chance to lead. None of this cost more money – but the impact was huge. Year 11 student Susanna Bapary wrote afterwards: *"The space currently is absolutely spectacular. I believe we all did an incredible job in transforming this space to become a more friendly, thriving place,"*

For National Leaders, the implications and potential learnings from our work are similar and urgent on a far greater scale.

Post-General Election, an incoming progressive government will face the most acute pressure to deliver change at pace. Innovations like Community Solutions and Be First have the power to generate growth, raise

revenue, save money and improve lives quickly. The question is how to replicate and scale?

The key lesson of Be First by this measure is the extent to which it was able to harness the power and impact of recapitalised local institutions to drive inclusive growth and crowd in private sector investment to the same end. This chimes with the recent analysis of growth policy by Ed Ball et al in their publication “Growth Policy To Close Britain’s Regional Divides” – a paper to which I was glad to contribute. This research points to practical steps an incoming government can make to stabilise the position of local government, combined authorities and other tiers of regional government so that they can properly play their part in the nation’s economic renewal. In this context, the success of Be First points to what good could look like.

Growth can’t be left to chance. In those places where accelerated growth is possible, the Treasury, Cabinet Office, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing should together find a means of ensuring that local capacity, leadership and delivery mechanisms exists to drive that growth forward. These mechanisms must be capable of capturing financial benefits as well as generating them. The form and function will be different, depending upon whether growth proposition sits neatly within a borough boundary (as it did in Barking) or at a combined authority or regional footprint. Either way alternative delivery vehicles may need to play a part. Be that Development Corporations or company structures like Be First.

The case for directly replicating and scaling Community Solutions is compelling. In recent years I’ve helped numerous local places develop similar propositions and without exception a new blueprint for delivery is required, almost always with the same dimensions, and brings with it every time the prospect of very considerable savings.

For government, one option is to develop and enhance mechanisms for the sharing of best practice. But given the scale of our challenges, I don’t believe this is sufficient.

Labour has, in the past, recognised the need to go beyond advice and support. For example, Sure Start was established in 1998 as an initiative that originated in HM Treasury and was then rolled out locally. It had the aim of giving children the best possible start in life through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development. Children from deprived backgrounds often required a more joined-up and intensive kind of support to enable them to have the best start in life. But it required a nationally led programme, delivered locally to achieve that goal. The challenge of course with Sure Start was that it provided extra capacity as an addition to prevailing services, rather than being the model to transcend them.

This is where Community Solutions differs. Yes, it also recognises the need for a more joined up and integrated response, focused on supporting those tens of thousands of households in any given place that are holding multiple risk factors in their lives, any one of which could tip them into crisis and place a burden on the state. But it achieves this objective by spending less public money, not more.

So here’s an idea: an incoming government could introduce a national **New Start Programme** aimed at supporting working age young people and adults to get back on their feet and help them stay afloat, over time building their confidence and providing the foundations for them to live better, more fulfilling lives. Achieving this while also saving money would require a horizontal integration of key functions from Local Government, the Department of Work and Pensions, Primary care and Mental health services into a new locally led offer. This could be a neighbourhood-based manifestation of a preventative state, underpinned by data, insight, predictive analytics and relational practice - then designed as a platform for a renaissance of community support, mutualism and community power. These neighbourhood settings would be **New Start Centres** located in those places where preventable root cause risks were most prevalent and acute. In time the offer could pivot to digital channels to facilitate two-way communication optimised for smart phones or other mobiles devices. To be comprehensive, and to reflect the most common clusters of root causes, it should include the following public sector services:

From local authorities

- General Fund Housing allocation responsibilities including homelessness
- Debt and money advice including hardship funds
- Access to Council Tax and Housing Benefit
- Step down early help support for children and families
- Dedicated support to post 18 young adults in the care system

- Domestic abuse
- Community safety
- Drug and Alcohol support
- Community development and third sector grant funding
- Public participation
- Job readiness, employment and skills

From DWP

- Job centre plus teams
- Access to in-work and health related benefits
- Co-commissioning of work and health programmes
- Co-commissioning of mainstream employment support

From Health

- Primary care including the ability to directly employ GPs
- Community diagnostic services
- NHS therapy and counselling service

The New Start Centres would be designed in partnership with the local community and voluntary sector with the expectation that in time these were public sector facilitated, rather than public sector led.

To achieve this would require the creation of new public sector entities. It would be a mistake for any one part of the current state apparatus to claim them. But it would make sense for them to be aligned with unitary or upper tier council geographies and with the relevant local authorities acting as host and accountable body.

The New Start Programme would be locally commissioned by the Councils, the Integrated Care Partnership Board, and by colleagues in DwP together with community voices of all kinds. In this way the programme and delivery would be governed by **New Start Programme Partnerships** but with day-to-day delivery entrusted to the new entities. In due course these organisations could also become vehicles for delivering other public policy objectives such as support for the integration of asylum seekers.

Creating a new organisation, with staff transfers, would bring the prospect of significant savings through the functional consolidation of management, processes such as assessments and referrals and the use of local assets. Based on the experience of Community Solutions in Barking and Dagenham and other pioneering places savings from this activity could be as high as 15-20% of baseline costs, may be more. Across the country, this could yield billions of savings.

It should be a requirement for local New Start Partnerships to establish **Local Data Observatories**, supported by national and possibly regional observatories. Using anonymised data, with access to personal information restricted to only those for whom the data was intended, the observatories would be tasked with developing a single view of risk at a household level. This single view would support the day-to-day delivery of service in the New Start Centres, equipping staff and volunteers with a single perspective on everything that could be happening in the lives of those they are seeking to help. In due course, it could provide the platform for developing predictive models, machine learning and other tools that help identify those at risk of harm, before their problems manifest into deeper crises. This combination of integrated data, coupled with behavioural insight and emerging artificial intelligence brings with it the prospect of huge strides in the ability of technology to support the development of trusting relationships with people via the platforms they use in everyday life.

Such a New Start project could be a flagship, first-term deliverable for the government. It's simple, compelling and based on established, functional models. It offers vision and ambition for better lives. It would be hard work to deliver - but not as hard as the consequence of not delivering. It would bring immediate improvements. And it could be a precursor for wider reform in demonstrating clearly that reform is an action, not a conversation piece.

POSTSCRIPT

ONLY WE CAN SAVE THE STATE

I called this essay Only We Can Save the State in order to convey the jeopardy we face, and to stress the part we all need to play in demanding then designing and delivering a different kind of public sector - one that is complicit and active in shaping our economies, and one that works differently as we all support each other overcome the challenges we face then thrive.

The only question still to answer, is who needs to make the first move?

In Barking and Dagenham, reforms would not have happened had politicians not created the imperative and political space for action. They didn't conceive Be First or Community Solutions, but they gave those of us who did the mandate and backing to do so. Moreover, they understood that these reforms were about a redistribution of power away from professionals and away from traditional forms of political governance, that their job was to lead through strategy and commissioning and not through day-to-day supervision; by passing control of funding and decision making to community led forums; and by using new technology and engagement methods to allow the public to shape what the Council should debate and prioritise.

This brought with it huge political risk but also, in time, significant political benefit. Since 2010 Labour in Barking and Dagenham has defied trends, returning 100 percent of its Labour councillors and Labour MPs even when national polling projections suggested this should not be the case. Labour locally can claim a successful, if fragile, reconnection founded on relationships and action.

The events of 2006 revealed that political control counted for little if the supposedly powerful institutions, in fact, lacked the capability of delivering change for people. The subsequent journey arguably demonstrated that a political determination to make others more powerful brings with it greater power to lead. It's a positive paradox that helped to free local politicians from the doom-loop of holding power and being accountable, while themselves trapped in a system that made them powerless to act. The more they gave, the more power they received.

And as the local state once again became associated with creating the conditions for a better life, so its legitimacy returned. Fragile, contested, loved and loathed – but a glimmer of hope nonetheless. The state reset and re-established as a 21st century force for good, fit to make a progressive impact in this complex and challenging world.

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