Learning from the Second Year of BD_Collective

Barking and Dagenham is one of 32 London local authorities, and subject to the challenges faced by local government across England, the effects of austerity, major social change and the after effects of the pandemic. The Borough's residents have the lowest life expectancy in the Capital. The need for radical change is broadly accepted. The BD_Collective is one of several experiments underway in the Borough as it searches for a new settlement between public systems, civil society and residents. This paper summarises the birth and early development of the Collective.

The Collective is not an organisation. It is a network of networks of civil society organisations. The networks are values driven, seeking to connect, build trust and share accountability and power with the objective of making Barking and Dagenham a better place for its residents to live. It took time for the idea of the Collective to take hold but progress was accelerated by the pandemic and the practical need to rapidly mobilise civil society.

The networks have created multiple new points of connection in the Borough, and brought to the fore highly capable people and given them the opportunity to innovate and contribute to Borough life. This, in turn, has created a platform for innovation, with diminished focus on fixing problems one case at a time and more emphasis on creating connections that allow residents to solve their own problems. This progress has been enhanced by a wider package of experiments and the development of infrastructure organisations in the Borough.

All change comes with tension. These are structural at source. The competing needs of Barking, and of Dagenham. The imbalance between large and small organisations, and between formal and informal social sector organisations. The sense of distrust that can emerge between those who work *and* live in the Borough, and those who work in the Borough. The particular type of power of a Council comprising members from a single political party. When these structural barriers are felt personally, progress is stymied.

By one measure, the work of the Collective in its first two years is complete. It has disrupted the social sector, and created new and enduring relationships and opportunities. There is momentum behind the change process. By another measure, the first two years has created a foundation for wider -more networks and greater impact on residents- and deeper -dealing with structural challenges and building trust- change. The report ends with a theory of change rooted in connection and trust not power and resources; that uses the capability of sector members to disrupt relationships between public systems and civil society; creating a social sector that is greater than the sum of its parts.

THE COLLECTIVE AND ITS CONTEXT

Barking and Dagenham

Barking and Dagenham continues to rapidly change. It transformed in the post-war years as Londoners escaped the slums for better housing and stable jobs in manufacturing and chemicals. Declining well being of residents can be explained by the emasculation of these industries, and later by austerity that severely constrained services, benefits and social infrastructure. The Borough has the lowest life expectancy in London, and scores in the bottom three for healthy life expectancy.

The population grew from around 140,000 in 1941 to 185,00 at the turn of the century. It has become more diverse. Just under half are white British. Black Africans and Afro-Caribbeans comprise just under a fifth of residents. The population will continue to grow -to around a quarter of a million in 2026- and further diversify.

The Council has identified 'five giants' of domestic abuse, social isolation, unemployment, debt and neighbourhood crime as priorities for public policy. There will be an increase in income from taxation in the next decade but service budgets are unlikely to recover. Civil society continually emerges as a potential solution to these challenges but is too often viewed as auxiliary not core to human flourishing.

The birth of the Collective

Civil society organisations -also called social sector organisations- form part of civil society. They are numerous, and generally underestimated in number and variety. Konrad Elsdon's survey of local voluntary organisations concluded there are about 1,300,000 civil society organisations with 12 million participants in England, roughly 20 organisations for every 1,000 citizens. In Barking and Dagenham that would equate to around 5,000 informal organisations with about 46,000 members. The number is thought to be lower but there is no accurate data on which to draw.

All local authorities have a Council for Voluntary Services or CVS to act as an umbrella organisation for the sector. In London, each CVS has, on average, around 1,300 members. The role and function of the voluntary sector changed greatly over the last three decades in response to new public management processes in which a commissioner -for example the council or the clinical commissioning group for health- purchases services from a range of private, for profit, and voluntary, not for profit, organisations. These processes:

• seek efficiency by asking potential service providers to bid against each other on price, quality and quantity of outputs

• purchase outputs that matter to the commissioner not necessarily the provider of the service.

Many benefits have come from new public management techniques but there have also been unintended consequences. As social sector organisations embraced the competitive spirit and grew in size and influence, tensions emerged, particularly between larger and smaller, less commercial organisations. The discord was exacerbated in the austerity years as organisations chased an ever diminishing pot.

These tensions gradually undermined the ability of the Barking and Dagenham CVS, to bring social sector organisations together and advocate collectively on their behalf. When the VCS infrastructure contract came up for renewal in 2019, the incumbent BDCVS decided not to retender. Nine leaders of local social sector organisations decided to bid to advance a new, collaborative spirit. The Collective was born.

We know what it isn't but we do not know what it is

The consortium of nine civil society organisations called itself the BD_Collective. The leadership group knew what it was not. It was not the CVS. It was not an organisation -it operates as an informal collective. It was against unhealthy competition. It was opposed to the divide and rule of the social sector. But the rejection of past ills did not tell the Collective what it was.

Various options were entertained over the first year:

- Strengthening the perceived weakness of civil society in the Borough, both in size and its ability to stand up to commissioning organisations and work on behalf of residents

- Creating plumbing to irrigate civil society by strengthening and creating networks of civil society organisations, formal and informal, building trust and growing shared accountability for resident well-being

- Reducing unnecessary competition by sharing resources, and information

- Better use of scarce resources, for example spaces -buildings, parks, shops- for organisations to deliver services or bring residents together

- Building community power by using the collective action of social sector organisations to advocate on behalf of residents

- Building the capacity of social sector organisations so that they can secure more funding and deliver more goods and services to residents.

At the end of year one, the Collective continued to be led by the nine founding organisations, and had 150 organisations signing up to its newsletter.

Values

The work of the Collective overlapped with the results of an inquiry into the future of civil society led by Julia Unwin. The inquiry found that the power of civil society in England had been diminished, and that social sector organisations were both the source of the problem as well as the potential remedy. In place of recommendations for change, the inquiry proposed four values, known as PACT, to underpin future action:

- **P**ower shifting into the hands of the citizen

- **A**ccountability for social challenges shared across society

- **C**onnection between people and organisations, and

- **T**rust between citizens and between the institutions of state (civil society included).

As the Collective sought a path for social sector organisations to rebuild the power of civil society in the Borough, it adopted the PACT values. As will be seen, they have had significant utility in clarifying what the Collective is as opposed to what it is not.

THE CONTEXT CHANGES AND THE COLLECTIVE EVOLVES

The pandemic

The pandemic has challenged and changed the world. In March 2020, the Council and the Collective went into emergency planning mode, initially working apart but after a few days working together. The emergency generated new relationships within civil society, between social sector organisations, and between public systems and civil society. Trust was born from necessity of protecting people, often unknown to public systems, now unable or unwilling to leave their houses.

The plan tapped into existing resources within civil society, such as faith groups; it created new resources, additional volunteers for example; it put public servants alongside residents; it co-ordinated activity around nine community hubs.

The community support system was known as BDCAN. Initially it provided food and medicines, and later wider social support. Each hub took referrals from a centralised call centre/CRM system. Hubs were responsible for updating the status of referrals, co-ordinating volunteers, fulfilling referral requests and managing payments. WhatsApp was used to link the civil society actors.

The Council awarded each hub £5,000 on trust, bypassing the usual commissioning structures.

The new arrangements asked all participants to behave and relate differently, cutting across orthodox commissioner/provider structures. Collaboration was a necessity, and competition was viewed as potentially counter-productive.

The Food Network

The first practical manifestation of the Collective's work came in the form of a network of 19 food organisations led by Nighat Bhola from the social enterprise HumDum. Members of the network operated through a WhatsApp group. Data from the WhatsApp group was used to analyse who was involved, what was achieved, how tensions arose and how they were resolved (see Appendix 1 for more information).

The function of the Food Network is to use collective action to source more food, waste less and feed more people. If one member of the network gets more food than it can donate to its users, it can share the excess with other members. If an organisation finds it has food that will have to be destroyed because it is nearing its sell by date, it can re-distribute to other members. If an organisation comes across a resident from outside its catchment area it can redirect to another member.

Nighat Bhola is clearly the leader of the Food Network. But there is no formal organisation around the network, and no meetings, minutes or reports. All of the business is completed by WhatsApp.

The analysis of the WhatsApp feed reveals patterns of:

• connection: how many of the member organisations are contributing, and whether they contribute evenly?

• trust: are tensions between members openly aired and is conflict resolved?

• belonging: do members feel they belong to the network (e.g. do they talk about its value alongside the value of their own organisation) without it restricting their ability to make decisions about the future success of their own organisation?

The data suggests that connection, trust and belonging fluctuate over time. When there is strong connection, trust and belonging between members more food is sourced, less is wasted and more people are fed.

More networks

The food network led the way. A series of other networks began to emerge in the second year of the Collective's existence. Their functions are to:

• bring together organisations working to a shared objective, for example food and youth work

• draw together representatives of social sector organisations and council departments to re-imagine how help is delivered, for example in the early years and adult social care.

These networks appear to contribute by:

• creating new points of connection in the Borough between people who help, allowing members of networks first to 'put a face to a name' and second to build trusting relationships

• tapping into a deep bank of underused capability within social sector organisations, particularly small and emerging organisations. The fact that the networks mostly met online created a context in which previously marginalised people could speak and be heard

• drawing more organisations into the Collective. The growth inevitably meant more smaller organisations being represented and having a stronger voice

• generating innovation, particularly with respect to making help made easier for residents to receive and more fulfilling for organisations to deliver.

In sum, the focus of the Collective's work shifted away from politics with a small 'p' to the practical work of making Barking and Dagenham a better place to live.

There are also barriers to progress. Questions of resource jar in network conversations. When money is put on the table representatives of organisations tend to retreat to parochial. Secondly, the translation of talk about innovation into action on the ground tends to be sub-optimal.

A network of networks learning together

The emergence of networks changed how the Collective is viewed, organised and governed. Any social sector organisation can join a network as long as it adheres to the values of making connection, building trust, sharing accountability and shifting power. By being a member of a network, an organisation is a part of the Collective. The leaders of each network sit on the steering group of the Collective. Other network members sit on a design group that meet each month to consider what is being learned about the Collective's current work to suggest adaptations to its future work.

The Collective is not an organisation. It is a network of networks. Network members use learning to suggest adaptations in the way the Collective operates. Leaders of networks steer the forward path.

This frame also helped to define what the Collective is not:

• It does not seek to build capacity of the social sector although several experienced Collective members offer advice and support to other members. Capacity building is provided by the CVS. Members of the Collective can also be members of the CVS.

• It does not seek to raise funds on behalf of the social sector, although some of the activity has attracted income, for example the Youth Network has secured GLA funding and the Council has invested in neighbourhood networks

• It does not facilitate networks that do not adhere to the Collective's values, for example the Greening Network and Connect group, both of which add value in different ways and are run by the Council.

Innovation

The second year of the Collective has produced significant innovation. Some is the product of the Collective. Some has been brought to light in network conversations. Some is independent of the Collective. It includes:

- Kinsgley Hall's experimentation with participatory budgeting to give more power to marginalised groups

- Cocoon's focus on a 'village around a child', creating contexts for parents of newborns to connect, support and learn from each other

- Thames Ward Community Project's efforts to network and so increase the bargaining power of informal social sector groups

- The Food Network created the context for the development of Snaxchange, an online platform for food organisations to share their resources

- The Joining the Dots group -a spin off from the Re-imagining Early Help Network- design of a simple checklist to make help easier for families to secure and more fulfilling for social sector employees to deliver

- The Closed Collective of six organisations from the the Children's & Young People's Network has worked in partnership with BD_Giving to advance participatory grant making

- A series of experiments led by the Neighbourhood Networks to:

  - identify and make greater use of natural connectors such as hairdressers, taxi drivers, and cafe proprietors

  - making greater use of places where people already go to connect in the communities

  - optimise social media platforms such as WhatsApp, and

  - use connection as a basis for building community power to hold systems to account.

Tensions

The networks created new relationships. Members of the Collective reported more trust within the social sector. The trust allowed historical tensions between organisations and their leaders to surface. Here are some examples:

- Large versus small organisations: There is a sense among many small organisations that the odds are stacked in favour of the large organisations. At the same time, the large organisations often perceive themselves to be small, fending off competition from larger, external, competitors.

- Barking versus Dagenham: Prior to 1965 there was Barking and there was Dagenham, two local authorities. Older street signs provide a reminder of the separation. The changing face of the Borough, the new buildings, the new residents, the potential to socially exclude established residents, and the changing patterns of work play out differently in Barking and in Dagenham.

- Formal versus Informal activity: Using Elsdon's research as a guide, if Barking and Dagenham is like other local authorities there will be five informal, unconstituted organisations -making a significant contribution to connection and belonging- for every formal social sector organisation. The informal activity came to the fore during the first pandemic lockdown, but it has been largely marginal to the work of the Collective.

- In and Out of the Borough: Many members of the Collective live in the Borough. Living in the Borough conveys a status and a sense of commitment. Many council employees, representatives of newer social sector and infrastructure organisations live outside of the Borough. Some larger social sector organisations work across several local authorities.

- Political Power: All 51 councillors are from the same political party. Elected leaders of the Council are powerful. They can use this power to effect changes in community, sometimes to the benefit of the social sector, sometimes to its detriment. Some members of the Collective carry scars from their engagement with political leaders.

The emotional reaction to tension

The tensions just listed are words on paper to the reader. But they are deeply felt by those involved. The emotional reaction frequently lasts far longer than its cause. A few examples, abstracted to protect the identity of those involved.

- A leader of a small social sector organisation feels demeaned by having to go 'cap in hand' to a larger organisation that is sub-contracting on behalf of a commissioner. The leader of the larger organisation sees itself as securing resources for residents and work for social sector staff. The conversation takes place in email exchanges and a blog, but not face to face. It is left largely unresolved and the participants retreat to separate camps.

- Two organisations fight for a contract. The slightly larger organisation wins. The smaller organisations feels aggrieved. Words are exchanged on email. The leader of the larger organisation feels undermined, and suffers a dip in mental health.

- Leaders of a community organisation take forward issues that matter to local residents. Their work upsets local developers. Politicians get involved. Leaders of the community group feel an existential threat to their organisation. It colours all future interactions with public systems.

- At the outset, the Nine leaders of the Collective have an explicit intention to involve as many social sector organisations as want to be involved. But it takes time for smaller organisations to know what the Collective is, and how it differs from the CVS. In the vacuum suspicions emerge. Are these organisations a cartel? Are they working on behalf of the Council? Who gets to decide how the Council resources are spent?

The tensions described in the last section are structural. The manifestations of those tensions are personal, and psychological.

A stronger infrastructure

There is a shift in the balance between public systems and civil society. The pandemic was the impetus. The Collective has played its part alongside other infrastructure organisations:

- BD_Giving is developing new ways of thinking about how to give money, time, and other resources to shape communities. Involving people who will be affected by 'giving' in the decisions about what is 'given' and for what purpose lies at the heart of their mission.

- The CVS is adapting to the pandemic and the formation of the Collective with a stronger emphasis on building social sector capacity.

- Art of Hosting has been funded by the LankellyChase Foundation to bring people from across the Borough to engage in different kinds of discussions, including conversations about the tensions described above.

- The Council is exploring how community assets can be placed in the hands of civil society organisations.

- The Working Together Group (made up of Council officers & BD_Collective members) has acted as a bridge to sponsor more joint Council/ social sector innovation.

- Leaders from infrastructure entities (CVS, Collective, BD_Giving, Barking Enterprise Centre and Everyone, Everyday) have connected, recognising that to build a strong social infrastructure they have to work together effectively.

Progress is also shaped by organisations taking a lead in strengthening civil society in the Borough such as:

- The Faith Forum

- The Citizens Alliance Network, creating opportunities for informal citizen action

- Every One Every Day, creating opportunities for residents to make, meet and do.

FOUR IDEAS

The report has described the Collective's progress and catalysts. These indicate possible direction of travel during the third year. There are, in addition, four ideas running through the learning that may inform decisions about future strategy.

The Tragedy of the Commons

The Tragedy of the Commons is a concept widely used in economics to study human behaviour, and motivations. It rests on a pamphlet written in 1833 by William Forster Lloyd, brought into the modern era by Garrett Hardin in 1968. The simplest representation is a 'commons' in the middle of a village where all farmers can graze their cattle. If the farmers co-operate and each uses just part of the commons or allow their cattle to graze for just part of the year, then the grass will continue to grow and the commons will sustain from year to year. But if there is a free for all, the grass gets destroyed, and all the farmers suffer.

Farmers will act in their rational self-interest. In the first instance, that appears to be to make full use of the free grazing. It takes analysis and reflection to recognise that rational self interest means co-operating, getting less grazing in the short term, but more in the longer term.

Nobel laureate Lin Ostrom studied what happened to real life 'commons' around the world. Her book *Governing the Commons* describes the mechanisms by which people work out, without guidance, how to co-operate and prosper. She codified her findings into eight 'design principles' including: being very clear about the scope of the common resource; creating a forum for users of the common resource to come together and decide resource allocation; an external person observing to see if people do what they say they would do; and agreed sanctions to be applied when they don't.

The Collective frequently brings people together to share a common resource; the food network shares food discarded by supermarkets and other suppliers; the neighbourhood network of five organisations decides how to share £50,000 of funding across their communities.

At present, there are no design principles to guide decision making in these contexts, and there are times when rational self-interest leads organisations to get more in the short-term but less in the long-term.

Gentle Commerce

The French philosopher Montesquieu developed the theory of gentle commerce to explain the expansion of business in the 17th Century. It rested, he found, not only on the self interest and competitive spirit of business people but also the boom in co- operation and good manners. He hypothesised that enterprise depends on trust. The buyer trusts the seller to deliver the goods. The seller trusts the buyer to pay. The seller trusts other businesses in the supply chain. They don't trust each other because it is the right thing to do. It isn't written into the scriptures. They do it because it leads to more sales and happier customers.

The social sector is not 'in business' but organisations are competing for contracts and scarce resources, such as food or space to convene community.

It could be argued that the Collective is recreating a context in which co-operation and good manners are valued alongside competition. The values of connection, trust, shared accountability and shifting power are the manifestation of such a context.
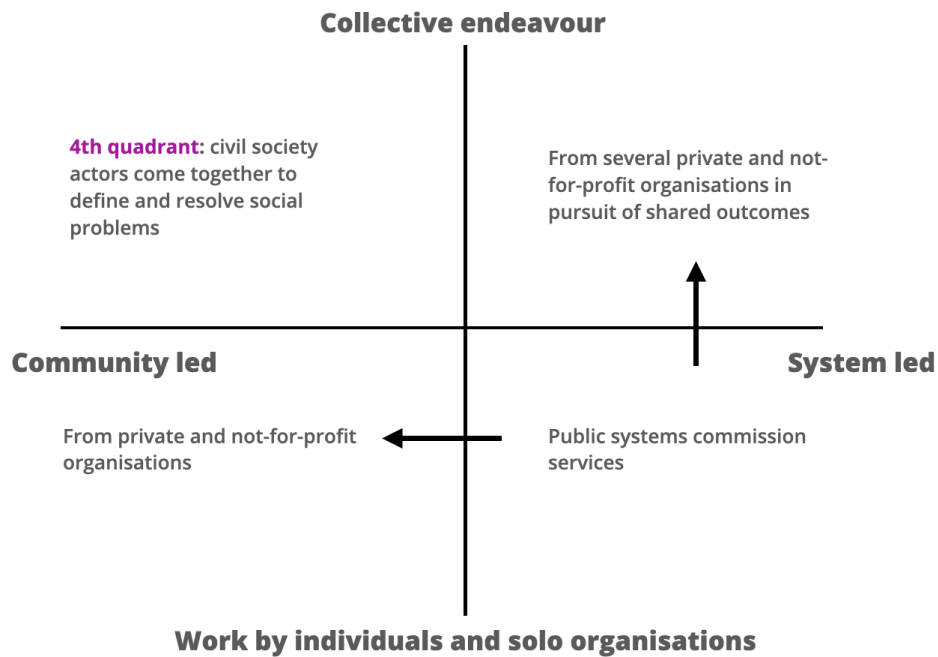
Positive Sum Games

The Tragedy of the Commons and Gentle Commerce are two examples of what are called 'positive sum games' (a game in economics is a tool for testing human behaviour). A positive sum occurs when no individual wins at the expense of another individual and the total pot at the end of the game is greater than at the beginning. For example:

• In the Tragedy of the Commons, the farmers' co-operation means that they are all able to graze their cattle over multiple years, instead of exhausting the pasture after one or two years.

• With respect to Gentle Commerce, the trust between business people leads to greater innovation and an expanding market, meaning that all producers do better year on year.

• The collaboration in the Food Network sources more food, wastes less and serves more hungry people

• The potential for social sector organisations to share a pot of money, to generate future income to the benefit of all members

• In the context of buildings given by the Council to a network of social sector organisations to manage and not contracted to one lead organisation to rent out to others, there is clear potential to support more people in the community, have less redundant space and more shared activity.

The fourth quadrant

A lot of people and organisations are working with and on behalf of the residents of Barking and Dagenham. All are committed in some way to effective collaboration.

The range can be illustrated by the following diagram. Some collaboration starts in the community, some in public systems. Some is generated by individuals or single organisations, and some is the product of co-operative endeavour.

Collective endeavour

4th quadrant: civil society actors come together to define and resolve social problems

From several private and not-for-profit organisations in pursuit of shared outcomes

Community led
System led

From private and not-for-profit organisations

Public systems commission services

Work by individuals and solo organisations

In three of the quadrants collaboration is rooted in the power of public system to purchase services on behalf of residents. They may bring together many organisations to work together towards an agreed set of outcomes (the first quadrant), but mainly they select through competitive tender, asking one of many organisations to take accountability for delivering services (the second and third quadrants).

The collaboration is shaped by the legitimate power of public systems, accountable to politicians elected by citizens.

The fourth quadrant is different in several ways:

• the participants put their shared values and community interest ahead of their organisation's interest

• the participants (not the commissioner) define the problems to be solved and the solutions to those problems

• the power of activity in the quadrant is born of connection, trust and shared accountability. Legitimacy stems from sufficient civil society actors working in concert to generate new ideas

• the value is measured in terms of optimal use of community assets -the commons- such as more food for hungry families, more communities members helping each other, more community spaces used to full capacity, fewer empty shops in high streets.

A Theory of Change

The learning combined with the four ideas above suggest a possible 'theory of change', a sort of formula about how the Collective exerts its influence.

• It starts without power or resources

• People come together. Most lead a civil society organisation and/or make a significant contribution to civil society in other ways but in the Collective space, in the fourth quadrant, they leave their organisational concerns behind.

- The changed context, and in particular the absence of orthodox organisational structures and power dynamics encourages diversity in participation and input from highly capable, previously marginalised members

- They connect.

- They build trust in one another.

- This allows them to have different kinds of conversations about the world, conversations they would not have if they were operating in one of three other quadrants. They surface disagreements and find common ground.

- From here it becomes possible to share accountability. Youth groups take responsibility for improving safeguarding, no longer taking the lead from stale bureaucratic guidelines. Early years organisations take the lead in engaging more families with young children to meet and help each other.

- The success of this collective activity gives those involved legitimacy. Health systems look to members of the Collective to help them shape the emerging Integrated Care System. The Council look to the Collective to tackle social isolation. The Collective's power comes from the breadth and depth of the connections, and its ability to share accountability.

- There are also indirect effects. The relationships formed out of the Collective begins to disrupt what happens in the other quadrants. Organisations collaborate when bidding for contracts. Commissioners discover new organisations to commission, and new ways of working.

Each of the elements in this theory of change can be measured:

- Connection

- Trust

- Shared Accountability

- Legitimacy and Power

- Positive Sum Impact (Whole more than a sum of the parts)

- Disrupting the relationship between public systems and civil society.

The measures should show dynamic effects. Connection and trust can be built, they can also diminish. The changes boost or undermine shared accountability and legitimacy. The effects of these dynamics show up in the final measures:

- the sum of activity, and

- the optimal use of scarce resources.

All four quadrants play their part in building effective collaboration. The fourth quadrant doesn't trump the other three. But many jurisdictions operate without a fourth quadrant. The natural networks of civil society are subsumed into public system commissioning in which the power of money shapes a narrow line of accountability and restricts trust and connection. The Collective could turn into a major experiment aimed at opening up a fourth quadrant, and recovering the power of civil society.

THE FUTURE

Challenges at the end of 2021

The learning continues. The Collective continues to adapt. New challenges emerge over time. As this report is being prepared at the end of 2021, four emerge as the most pressing:

The pandemic has not released its grip of the world. The pandemic will continue to influence daily life for another three years. The combined public systems/ civil society response to the pandemic was largely a success. Rebecca Solnit's analysis of human disaster suggests that the power of civil society endures crises when there is a story to describe its contribution. There is little record (with some exceptions, see the report by Compass) of the response to the pandemic in Barking and Dagenham and an understandable drive to forget the past and return to the status quo ante.

The work of the Collective remains shallow. The number of organisations represented in the Collective and in individual networks remains a small proportion of the total number of formal civil society organisations, and there is practically no representation of informal organisations, despite their significant contribution to good community health. In addition, too many of the structural tensions within the Borough -as described above -are played out as personal, psychological disputes. This suggests there are not sufficient contexts to talk about, understand and resolve conflict. To really make a difference, the Collective will need to go wider -more organisations- and deeper -having the difficult conversations.

The Collective has released the capability of people from the social sector. They have generated a lot of innovation. There has been a lot of talk about future ways of working in the networks. The translation of talk to action remains a challenge. Most innovation is not being tested. Most that is being tested remains small scale. A rigorous design and learning process that uses a combination of action, data and learning from error could underpin much of the Collective's work and turn good intentions into stronger, resilient communities.

The Collective continues to be shaped in the shadow of the Council. Health remains marginal. The new Integrated Care System marks the beginning of a radical change in public system commissioning. The social sector has the opportunity to shape the future of public systems.

Collective members reflect on this report

An initial draft of this report was discussed by the Collective Steering Group. As with all reports, there were competing views. Generally, the report was welcomed, in particular for the way acknowledges the tensions and is honest. It does leave some readers with continued doubts. There is still ambiguity in the social sector about the 'beginnings' of the Collective. There is fear and suspicion among groups not involved at the outset. In this context, some readers find the report's tone over positive. To others, it has only scratched the surface.

There are areas of the work where Collective members want to know more. Most find it hard to see how there might be 5,000 civil society organisations in the Borough, as predicted by the Elsdon research. The evidence for Barking and Dagenham is needed, with reconnaissance on how the Collective can reach the smaller, informal groups. This will now form part of the year three learning.

Some Collective members are interested in method, wanting to know, for example, how the WhatsApp data are analysed. (A summary has been added as an appendix to this report). Overall, the Era 3 learning approach used by Ratio is less apparent in the partnership with the Collective than its other work, by-passing for example innovative approaches to measurement

and the use of error to correct course. For some Collective members there is still an interest in a conventional outcome model linking the Collective's work to resident outcomes.

For some, there was a sense that an external partner looking in might be expected to be more critical, that the report is primarily descriptive. The following section is a response to this observation.

Ratio's perspective

The public policy context, established over the last 30 years, puts people and organisations in opposition to each other. One person is better than another. Smarter. Nicer. More strategic. One organisation is better than another. More efficient. Better value for money.

Conversations become personal. 'She had an inside line on that contract'. 'They are working together to exclude us'. 'He gets the work because he has an inside line with them.'

This is the language of 'I' and 'me' that has prevailed in England and the United States since the mid-60s.

But the problems of living in Barking and Dagenham are about 'we'. Women in Barking and Dagenham will live five years less than women in Camden. The solution to this problem cannot be about 'I' or 'me'. The resolution will not come from treating women one case at a time. It cannot depend on a single system or agency never mind a single organisation or leader. It demands a collective change of mind followed by collective action.

The Collective is not the first attempt to recover the language of 'we'. The mantra of 'joined up thinking for joined up problems' has been a part of our discourse for 20 years or more. Most of the innovation in those two decades has been technical: working towards shared outcomes; planning meetings so that all voices are heard; maps that describe the complexity of deprivation.

The Collective takes a different tack. It is values led. It assumes that people are capable of working together, that they don't need technical support to make a contribution. The Collective creates the context for people to connect, it gives them space to talk and challenge. It assumes that conversations will naturally cover difficult issues, not least asking why lives of residents are foreshortened. And it posits that shared accountability for the both problems and solutions to those problems will follow.

The last year has shown these assumptions to be correct, some of the time. A context of 'we' forms, but it is apt to break down.

The new hypothesis is that going wider -many more networks, many more people, so much so that nearly all of the members are new to each other- and deeper -a readiness to have difficult conversations, and to focus on the shared challenges of residents- will contribute towards the recovery of a context of 'we'. The recovery of 'we' has value in its own right. But it should also lead to action, to different behaviours, and ways of working that are felt by the residents of Barking and Dagenham, and reflected in their quality of life.

In appendices to the report, Ratio sets out some practical suggestions for going wider and deeper. They are a catalyst for discussion not a prescription. The only recommendation is to continue to learn, and use evidence of failure to inform progress.

Appendix 1: Analysis connection, trust, belonging, shared accountability and power using WhatsApp

Ratio has developed a method to measure connection, trust and belonging using the feed from WhatsApp groups. This evolved from the work to scale Street to Scale, a trust based funding mechanism to support citizens to do good in their community. In the Street to Scale work, the analysis is quantitative, and may in the future use machine learning techniques. The method was adapted for the Food Network. The analysis was qualitative. The domains of connection and trust fit with the Collective's aspirations. Adaptations have involved developing analysis techniques to measure shared accountability and shifting power.

In the context of Street to Scale, the analysis begins with a simple threshold of the number of words used in the WhatsApp exchanges between group members. A group with less than 1,500 words of exchange is coded as having low connection, (and therefore trust and belonging). In the context of the Food Network, this threshold has been exceeded 100 times over. But there is variation across time, including periods when there are practically no exchanges between members.

Above this threshold, seven of the eight Street to Scale measures appear to apply in the context of the Food Network:

- Variation in the proportion of WhatsApp exchanges by group members (are some members dominating/leading/following)
- The proportion of contributions that are closed (e.g. instructions to do something) versus open (e.g. questions or setting out of options)
- The proportion of exchanges that are one-dimensional (e.g. do not invite reply) versus multi-dimensional (i.e. take the form of a conversation)
  The presence of absence of conflict (presence is a positive indication of trust)
- The nature of resolution of conflict (level of consensus and means of resolution)
- Affinity to the group (positive emojis and/or text streams using the pronoun 'we' -as in we can ....)
- Proportion of contributions indicating agency of participant is restricted.

An eight variable dealing with disruption of group dynamics by external agents does not cross over into the Food Network:

- The proportion of contributions by an external agent (e.g. in Street to Scale mothers joining groups of children running groups or agents of funders joining groups)

In the context of Collective networks, there appears to be benefit in two additional variables to measure shared accountability and shifting power:

- The proportion of shared challenges that are resolved by 40 per cent or more of the members
- Change in leadership of the group over time.

Appendix 2: Suggestions for describing the theory of change

There appears to be some interest in the theory of change, and its potential to underpin the development of the Collective. A theory of change is essentially an analytical tool. The boxes and arrows aid reflection and analysis. But they can be confusing when describing conclusions.

As the Collective develops, and now that it knows what it is as opposed to what it is not, it will need a consistent description of its work to which all members can sign up. (At present, if 10 Collective members were asked to describe the work there would likely be more than five representations).

The following description is one option. It is offered as a catalyst for discussion not a prescription.

The BD_Collective is a network of networks, big and small, formal and informal, coming together to build shared understanding and collective responses to social disadvantage in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

The work of the networks is diverse but is bound together by shared values. Each network:

• Connects people across civil society organisations, and engages with local residents and public services

• Builds trust between people and between organisations, encouraging talk about challenging issues

• Shares accountability for the well-being of residents across all groups that can make a contribution, and

• Shifts power from public systems to civil society, honouring its primary role in alleviating human suffering.

When networks are effective they make the social sector more than the sum of its parts, for example:

• Networks of food organisations source more and waste less food, and feed more hungry people

• Networks of youth organisations engage more young people for longer and leave fewer socially isolated, and

• Networks of organisations focused on a shared objective for residents generate smarter ideas and are better at testing and scaling new ideas.

Although the networks link organisations, the work is undertaken by individuals ready to put the community ahead of their organisation. Nearly all members of the network contribute without recompense.

Appendix 3: Suggestions for practical change

To have any value, the learning described in this report has to translate 'talk into action' and make a difference to the lives of the residents of Barking and Dagenham. Network members will reasonably ask, 'what does this mean for me?'.

What this means for existing networks

The Food Network: The work has been successful. But that success varies over time. What are the opportunities to learn about and reduce this variation? How do networks evolve? What happen when the leadership changes?

The Youth Network: There are hundreds of youth organisations. How can more groups be drawn into the Collective? Should there be a series of neighbourhood networks for youth? How many more young people can be engaged in meaningful activity as a result of the improved networking?

Re-imagining Adult Social Care Network: There are four successful strands to this network: (a) connection: building new relationships between social sector organisations; building relationships between council employees and social sector workers. (b) education: people in the council and the social sector better understand each other's work, and how they can work better together. (c) learning about change, for example the emerging ICS reforms in health; (d) innovation, coming together to reframe problems and come up new solutions.

It may be time to separate the connection/education part of the work (which brings together social sector and public system colleagues) from the learning/innovation part of the work (which primarily comprises social sector members). It certainly is time for the network to be more proactive and less reactive, going to the Council and the ICS with propositions for change that place the social sector in the lead.

Re-imagining Early Help Network: The great strength of this network was bringing to the fore people with great capability. It hasn't been able to harness this capability collectively and achieve a whole more than the sum of the parts (although the individuals involved are often doing great work). Is it time for the 'capable group' to meet and think about how they want to move the group forward, maybe learning from developments in re-imagining adult social care.

Neighbourhood Network: This network is designed to translate into action. The nature of that action is going to be important. Switching from providing services for residents one case at a time to strengthening the natural connectors in communities and so building connection, trust and belonging across neighbourhoods is one contribution. The Neighbourhood Networks can also model the embedding of learning, being more open about mistakes, and using data on reach, quality and impact to continually increase impact on residents lives. Real success would see Neighbourhood Networks modelling working to a shared funding pot.

What this means for the Collective?

If there is a shared vision now, it should be repeated many times. Otherwise confusion and suspicion will emerge.

It is time to use the resources to widen participation and test new ideas.

The day to day work of the Collective has primarily rested on the shoulders of two people, one of whom is now leaving. This may be the moment to think differently about setting up and connecting networks, giving them more autonomy, for example:

- Creating a starter kit for network leaders

- Training a staff member to check in and support network leads

- Using comms staff to collect and share stories from the networks, to encourage others to start their own

- Embedding learning into the network process, giving all members something they can take back to their organisations

- Creating an informal bank around resource networks, and giving each development funds over which they have complete autonomy.

References

The data on life expectancy comes from the Office of National Statistics but the Trust for London have produced easily accessible representations of the data: https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/life-expectancy-borough/

Elsdon's book is old and largely forgotten outside a narrow group of aficionados of community work. But it makes an original contribution to the literature and should be more widely read. There reference is: K. T., Reynolds, J., & Stewart, S. (1995). Voluntary Organisations: Citizenship. Learning and Change. NIACE.

There are lots of representation of that way in which new public management approaches have changed behaviours in public systems and civil society organisations. Onora O'Neill's Reith Lectures https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ghvd8 are at the same time profound and accessible.

The values of the Collective come from the work Civil Society Futures, a commission led by Julia Unwin: https://civilsocietyfutures.org/pact/

Lin Ostrom's seminal study is called Governing the Commons and is published by Cambridge University Press. It is fundamental to the work of the Collective. An easier way into the work is provided by Simon Kaye at New Local: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/ostrom/

Rebecca Solnit's A Paradise Built in Hell was prescient. Published by Penguin in 2010 it tells the stories of civil society contributions to disaster such as the San Francisco earthquake, the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's book The Upswing describes the shift in U.S. society from 'I' to 'We' in the mid 1920s, and back to 'I' in the mid 1960s. By their analysis, civil society was fundamental to the shift from 'I' to 'We'.

The report by Compass charting the response of Barking & Dagenham to the pandemic can be found here https://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/bd-can-plus/

This report starts with evidence on life expectancy and healthy life expectancy in the Borough. The idea that 'we' approaches like the Collective might make a difference to these health outcomes might seem fanciful. But, as Putnam and Romney Garrett show, the greatest advances in the U.S. took place in the 'we' years. In England, Wigan is one of the early pioneers of 'we', effectively combining the power of civil society and public systems leading to improvements in healthy life expectancy of one month for men and 23 months for women. https://www.local.gov.uk/asset-based-approaches-local-authorities-wigan-experience.