BD COLLECTIVE

Reflections:
Five years on a
Values Driven
Movement

BARKING
LEARNING
CENTRE

C Connection **T** Trust **A** Accountability **P** Power Sharing

BD_Collective was formed in 2019 in Barking and Dagenham. The primary purpose was to develop a values driven environment based on **connection, trust, accountability and power sharing**. Focused on building collaboration across sectors, our message was that no one organisation or institution has the answers. We need each other!

It was, and continues to be, a genuinely radical idea. Looking back over the last five years, I can see just how much has changed in how we work - the environment has changed! There is more collaboration, connection and definitely more power shared. The new norm has become getting together when a new fund is announced to see how we can take a consortia approach; our statutory colleagues recognise the significance of VCSE partners being at the table and ensure this happens; and smaller organisations have had a bigger share of the £2.5million invested through consortia development.

BD_Collective is now being set up as a Community Benefit Society and will have a new leadership to take it forward from the Autumn. As the person who has sat in the 'founders' chair since inception, I have written my reflections in this piece as a kind of 'how to / how not to' guide for others who are embarking on a similar journey. It sits alongside the 'Together We Lead' learning report which describes this journey in detail.

There are many things that still need to change, but Barking & Dagenham's social sector has creative, bold, and passionate people, who are committed to building a strong and resilient community. We agreed when we got started that power should be shared and no one person or organisation should take the lead beyond one term. So, it's time to pass the baton on and I'm looking forward to what's next as I continue to be part of this tribe of local changemakers.

Let's never settle.
Avril.

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WHAT WE ARE

BD_Collective developed a de-centralised governance structure by providing a mechanism for member-led network development. Our values driven approach sought to bring organisations together to build an environment of **connection, trust, accountability and power sharing**. The CTAP values. Networks could be big or small, thematic or geographic, short or longer-term. The focus was to be on 'how' we worked together, not 'what' happened as organisations practised the values.

BD_Collective was funded by London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, through the social infrastructure contract of £100,000 per year. It was administered by a small secretariat team who held responsibility for coordination, communication and administrative support. The Leadership Team is responsible for the direction of BD_Collective. There have been various Leadership Teams over the five years, you can find out more here.

# BD_COLLECTIVE:
BUILDING CONNECTION

MORE ABOUT NETWORKS

BD_Collective was built on the belief that by coming together, the different organisations, working for the benefit of Barking and Dagenham's residents, would be more than the sum of their parts. We have tried to create this **connection** in the following ways:

BD_Collective became a network of networks. The makeup of networks has evolved and changed over the last five years and a lot has been learned about what works during that time.

Clarity of purpose is vital!

It's not rocket science to understand that when there is a clear purpose or activity, there is more engagement from members. People do want to come together with others doing similar things, but inevitably time is pressured and if there is not a felt gain, then engagement drops off (whether meeting or via WhatsApp).
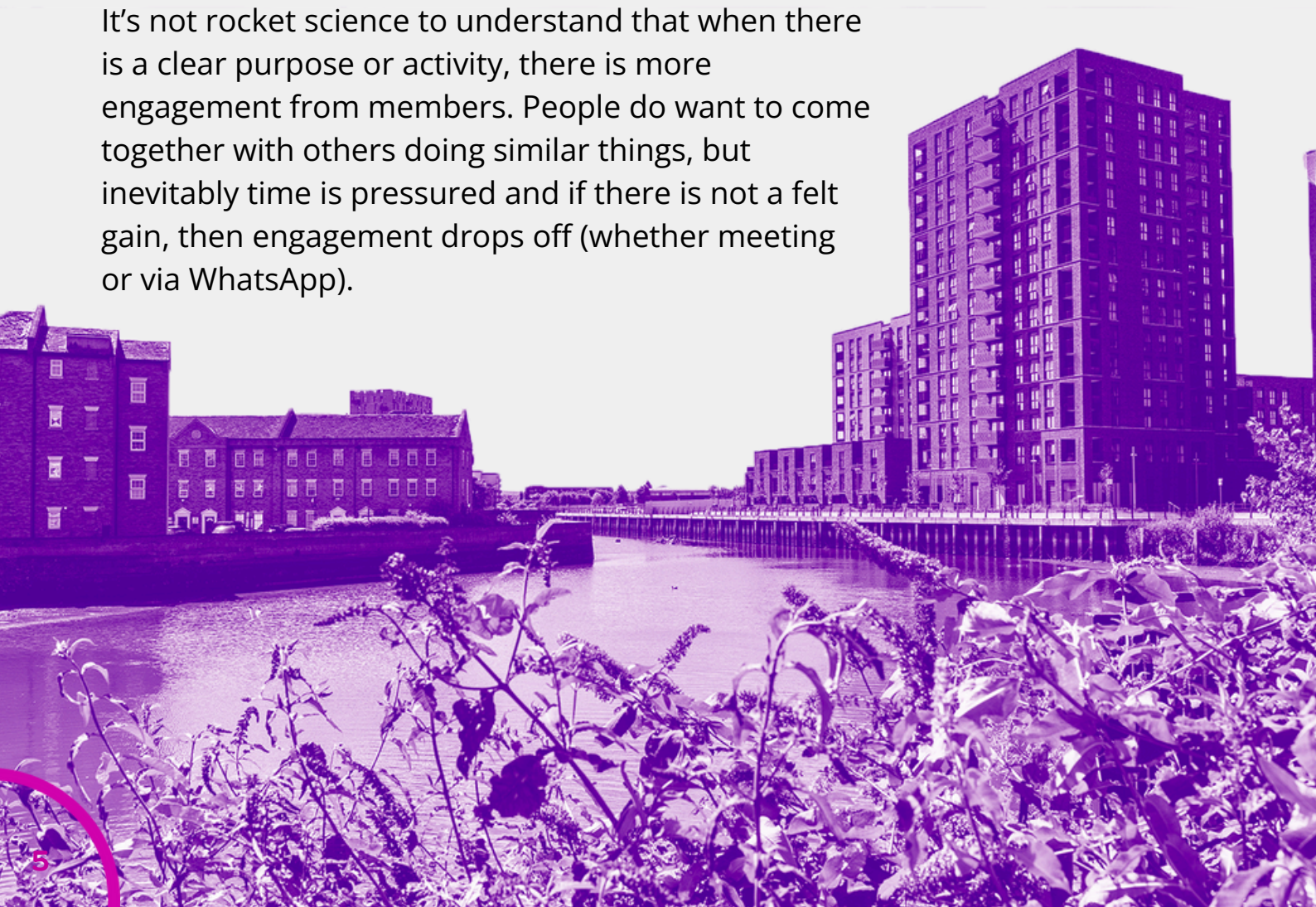
For example, the Food Network was set up during the pandemic. It operated around short-term supply and demand, e.g. one food bank had surplus, so they'd let the other organisations know via a WhatsApp group. The connection between organisations grew organically.

On the other hand, the Reimagining Health and Social Care Network was formed to develop a cross sector strategy around adult social care. It worked well for the first year, but then the strategy got lost in the pandemic mayhem and didn't get picked up again later. Attendance at meetings dwindled

and the leadership team concluded that it would be more appropriate to develop Networks around specific themes, often from consortia developed via funding pots. Emerging themes have been: Preventive approach for Mental Health, Hospital Discharge, Neighbourhood Networks, and those have had strong support with people engaged regularly to work on different plans.

REFLECTIONS

It takes time! We were feeling our way in the early days and had limited connection with people who were doing, or had done, similar things in other places. We didn't have the processes in place to enable network leads to really explore or understand the importance of the 'how' over the 'what'. That is, the significance of practising the CTAP values together. So understandably people 'thought' they got it but quickly reverted to the 'what' - let's do stuff together! As a result, when there was conflict, there was no mechanism to resolve; there were no tools for really learning from one another and relationships were often transactional. It's hard to pull back once something is in motion.

So what would we have changed? Taking time at the set-up stage to work through the what and the how is vital. The Little/Big Boxes (Little Box - an introduction to what it means to create a network, and the Big Box - everything needed to launch a network) provided a framework to do this, especially exploring the 'how' question, encouraging meaningful connection as well as maybe achieving tasks/activities. It needs to be intentional. Perhaps it needs a physical sign up where members demonstrate agreement to one another about what the network will do, how they will build together, and how often they will review their collaboration – perhaps in a written document, perhaps on a WhatsApp?

HOW THE COORDINATION IS DONE AND BY WHOM

It was agreed from the beginning that networks should be set up and co-ordinated by members of the network, not the secretariat staff team. The thinking was that the main activity of networks was via WhatsApp with occasional meet-ups. This was to keep coordination to a minimum and also create a flat structure across networks with all members being able to contribute, lead and build together.

Initially, we agreed on remuneration for administration. However, it quickly became apparent that some were still in a formal mindset and so co-ordination included planning meetings, minutes, and creating newsletters. We were losing the concept of a nimble movement – it was moving back to an organised machine. So the Leadership Team devised a different plan. It was concluded that activity within Networks should be remunerated (see Network Pot), and any communications or bigger event planning could be covered by the secretariat team, taking the burden off Network leads. However, that still meant someone from the network had to put a brief together for the secretariat team to work on.

It is clear and probably predictable that the networks that have been most effective have had one or two people who are very proactive in keeping the communication flowing. Also, when those leading had an open, inclusive mindset, which focused on building a collaborative environment – it worked (see reflections below for more on this). Perhaps the qualities of those who lead should be defined within the Big Box? Where networks had organisational structures, with Chairs appointed and minutes produced, people tended to default to passive involvement, waiting for someone else to organise.

Ratio, our Learning Partner, provided feedback on how the values of **connection** and **trust** were being reflected across the Networks. It was interesting to see the changes over time in the networks and the difference between networks.

Faith Leaders Network
Connection/Trust/Belonging Apr 23
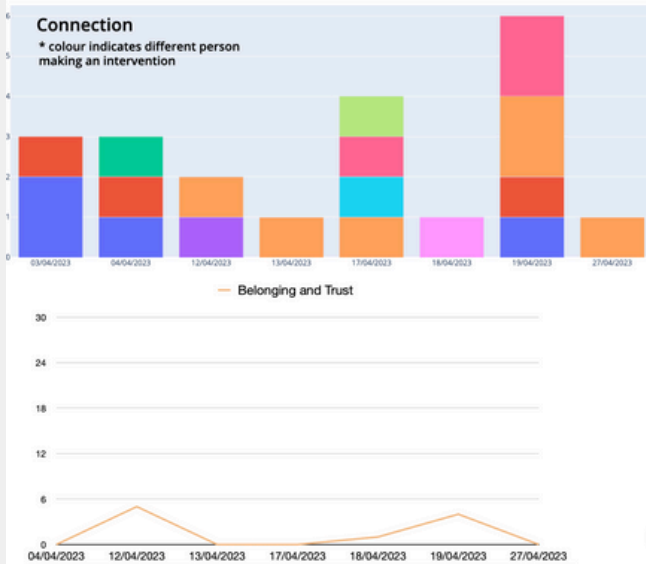
21 interventions in 8 days

50% networks members active

2.6 interventions/day (min 1, max 6)

0 question ?

10 words that indicate belonging & trust

Connection ⬇ Trust ⬇ Belonging ⬇

Women's Network
Connection/Trust/Belonging Apr 23

93 interventions in 13 days

50% networks members active

7 interventions/day (min 1, max 15)

5 question ?

86 words that indicate belonging & trust ('we' - 0%; 'together' - 29%; '🤝'- 9%)

Connection ↘ Trust ➡ Belonging ↗

Charts depict data from four networks' WhatsApp groups. They contain data collected solely over a one month period.

BD COLLECTIVE

Supporting Migrants Network
Connection/Trust/Belonging Apr 23

Connection
* colour indicates different person making an intervention

— Belonging and Trust

39 interventions in 12 days
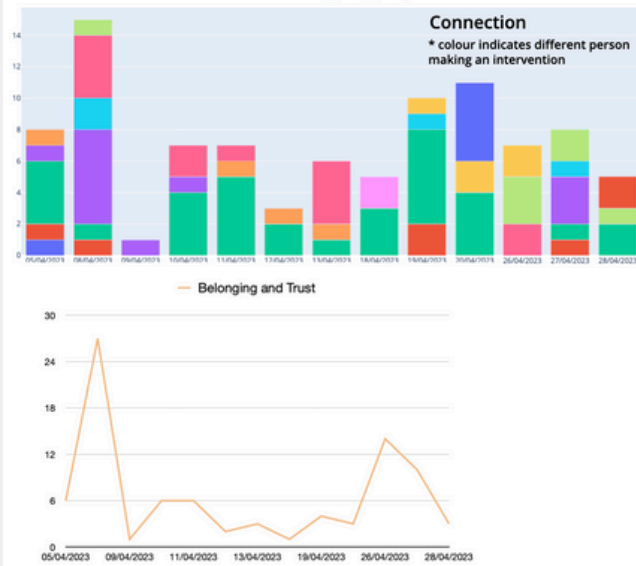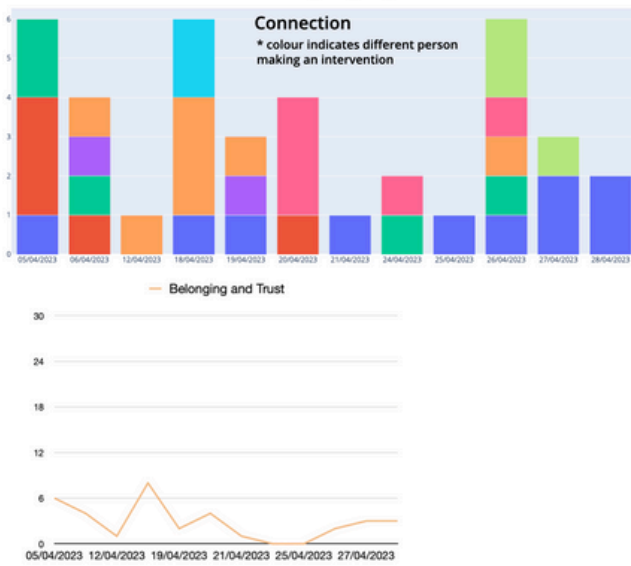
88.9% networks members active

3.25 interventions/day (min 1, max 6)

9 question ?

34 words that indicate belonging & trust ('we' - 50%)

Connection 🡕 Trust 🡕 Belonging 🡕

Locality Leads
Connection/Trust/Belonging Apr 23

Connection
* colour indicates different person making an intervention

— Belonging and Trust
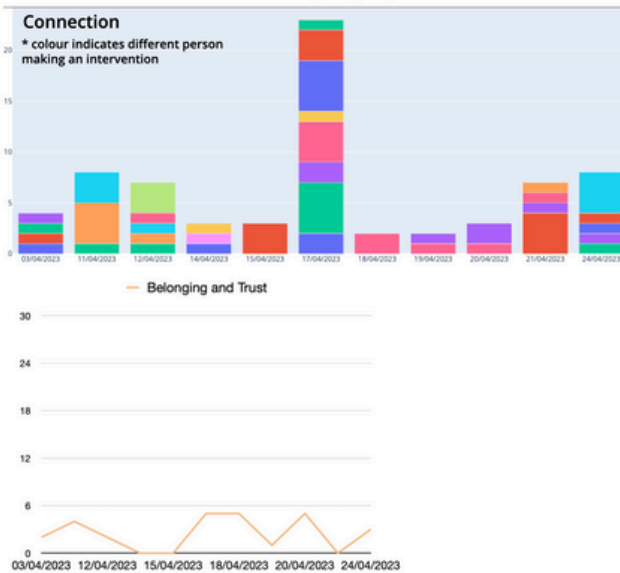
70 interventions in 11 days

55.2% networks members active

6 interventions/day (min 2, max 23)

16 question ?

27 words that indicate belonging & trust ('we' - 0%; 'together' - 37%; 'xx'- 29%)

Connection 🡖 Trust 🡖 Belonging 🡖

Abbe
Leisure
Centre

REFLECTIONS

*We realise now that the setting up of networks needed more intentionality. The Little/Big Boxes had all the information, but we probably had to take more time to win the hearts/minds of those leading. Inevitably, (and understandably), those leading defaulted to models they knew - with minutes, chairs of meetings and agendas. The intention was much more fluid, with an emphasis on networks being places to build **connection, trust and accountability - where power was shared.** So we got a mixed bag, and those leading sometimes paid a price. Those who were open and inclusive have sometimes 'lost out' in opportunities that their organisation might previously have had – just because they shared it with the network, and this wasn't always reciprocated.*

The plan was that those setting up the networks would take time to work through the principles in the Boxes. We don't think this happened and we can understand why. If we were to do it again, we'd still use the 'box' methodology but would ensure that there was a requirement to work it through. To ensure the network focused on the 'how they wanted to be' rather than 'what they wanted to do'.

Remuneration is important to recognise the time given for coordination. However, it can also be a distraction, or may attract people who are more interested in the payment than the purpose. Although we did not find that this was generally an issue. In fact, people often didn't claim it! Looking back, the criteria for the Network Pot were made in the Leadership Team setting and then published on the website and within Discourse. However, the learning point in this is that we shouldn't have made assumptions, because the information was available, that everyone could access, that people 'get it'. We should have said it, said it again, reviewed it together regularly, and said it again – in any and every relevant setting.

SETTING UP A NETWORK

The process of how organisations have had to set up networks has gone through a few iterations and in the final year, members of BD_Collective provided constructive feedback about the process which led to the reshaping that we now have. A group of twelve people reviewed and improved the network setup process. The revisions continued to offer the Little Box - an introduction to what it means to create a network, and the

Big Box - everything needed to launch a network, but the description and steps to take things forward were much clearer.

We have always tried to give a careful balance between providing a clear process, and still leaving room for networks to form in their own way. The Network Co-ordinators role has been to offer support and reflection via WhatsApp, and when needed, by phone.

Networks have struggled to recognise the autonomy they have and seem to ask for permission with the Network Coordinator, especially around spending any money. The Network Coordinator's role has been to remind the people coordinating Networks that the only criterion is that spend is signed off by all members. This has been a big deal within all Networks. Those who want to get things done get frustrated. They feel they are doing everything but then have to get everyone else to agree. The Network Coordinator has provided support with this frustration and encouraged solving this via WhatsApp so that there is still personal responsibility on members to engage. The basis of this was that if members don't engage on WhatsApp, then they won't have a say in what money is used for.

There have been frequent enquiries about new Networks, but few have been set up. The new process is clearer and hopefully easier, yet the concept still relies on people recognising that BD_Collective is all of its members, not a centralised team who make things happen.

The network strategy was based on the principle that collaboration and connection were vital for a thriving civil society. We have seen some indications of that in particular networks, but not as widely as we had expected. People are busy - that's the reality. Organisations are stretched - that's real, also. Is that the basis for the limited network take up? Or have we just not communicated it well enough, or taken enough time to help people understand the impact networks could have? It may be a lack of shared outcome to motivate collaboration. Or is there something deeper around competition or suspicion that keeps us holding our cards close to our chest in case someone gets our fund/slot etc? We think it probably relates to the investment/focus on communication. Time will tell.

Different ways of collective decision making is something we understand much more than we did five years ago. We have so many tools for this now, through different facilitation methods: deep democracy, sociocracy. We now understand that rather than expecting unanimity, there are ways to get a qualified majority decision, ensuring things are not held up but ensuring/that there is a transparent process around decisions.

CONSORTIA

A consortium is a team of organisations uniting to tackle an issue, usually with funding secured. Whether it's combatting food poverty or alleviating social isolation, consortia bring together diverse players with a shared purpose. Examples of consortia can be found in the Activity Tracker.

Consortium development has been a very tangible learning experience for everyone involved. The reality is whenever money is involved, it sharpens everyone's focus. People are much more invested around money and behaviours are more keenly noticed – both in a positive and negative way. BD_Collective consortia experience has been so useful to learn and understand how people are embracing the values.

The primary purpose of a BD_Collective consortium is to allow organisations to pool their resources to explore together how to bring change to a particular issue. The underlying principles of our consortia model is not only to deliver a particular service or activity, but to demonstrate our values in all it does. BD_Collective consortia concept aims to provide a platform for social-sector organisations to collaborate together and with local authorities, or other statutory partners, to develop and implement comprehensive solutions to complex problems. There is always a lead organisation, but their role is coordination rather than management. The consortium members choose to make themselves accountable to one another and decide together how they want to do this.

As with most innovations, there must be sufficient innovators and early adopters ready to experiment and take risks on ideas and prototypes that are yet unproven. This is why a lot of weight must be given to selecting member organisations so that those onboard are committed to working creatively and ambitiously together.

Some important aspects in creating consortia:

- Ensuring decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent, and participatory for a consortium to be effective. To encourage this, all organisations within the consortium must be fully involved in the design meetings. These meetings are all about fostering open dialogue and making decisions that resonate with the shared values.

- Promoting shared accountability, with members collectively curating processes that ensure this. This may include regular check-ins that review and evaluate the democratic processes within the consortium to identify areas for improvement and ensure their effectiveness over time.

- Creating a culture of learning and experimentation with regular learning meetings, where both frontline workers and managers come together to review delivery and curate prototypes and look at different ways of working. Commitment to new ways of working must be trickled down from management to the most junior member of staff and all involved should participate in the development of innovative models that generate social impact. Given this, consider capacity issues. Will staff have time to participate before selecting an organisation to join a consortium?

There have been a variety of different consortia developed around shared pots of funding. Experiences of each of these have been very different. A key struggle has been moving from the ingrained practice of the 'lead organisation with partners' model, even when all members have been part of the design and implementation process. It takes time, challenging conversations, and thoroughly testing if members really understand the difference of this model of working.

We realised that for some organisations, it's just easier or safer to have 'someone in charge' rather than collective accountability. It means they can avoid the uncomfortable conversations about performance, commitment, or delivery style that inevitably will emerge. However, we have seen that for those organisations who do embrace this model, there can be rich learning with new ways of tackling issues emerging. We have seen glimpses of this, there is definitely more to explore in this area.

One of the most interesting outcomes is that funders are keen to explore consortium models with us. They like it and have been willing to move from a competitive process to a conversation with members to build a collaboration that opens the doors to organisations that would not otherwise make it through competition. In principle, it shifts from 'the best bid writer' to those 'positioned to best deliver'. However, there is a lot of risk for the lead organisation, and to date, we have not achieved a high performing consortia whose impact really does demonstrate the change we wanted to see.

FORUMS AND EVENTS

At its heart, BD_Collective is about strengthening relationships in the social sector. To facilitate that, it has had various gatherings: chances for people to meet face-to-face, connect, and network, reminding people that they are part of a bigger entity - the Social Sector, and their organisation is one of many working for the good of Barking and Dagenham residents.

FORUMS

There is a lot of information being communicated via Discourse, an online forum created for the social and voluntary sector in the borough, and E-bulletins, as well as through Networks and other means. Some people struggle with this amount of information and have fed back that they would prefer to have events where information can be shared around themes.

In the autumn of 2023, a new way of connecting was piloted via Forums. There is one for Children and Young People, and one focused on Adults' related work. They offer a once-a-term opportunity for organisations to connect and share information. They are coordinated by the secretariat team and led by members of Networks.

The Forums have filled a gap for the Children and Young People's Network and Adult Social Care Network, both of which felt too 'all-encompassing and hard to manage'. It's early days for this format, feedback has been mixed, and attendance dwindled a little in the winter term.

EVENTS

Transparency is core to the work of BD_Collective and the Annual Reviews have been a key part of that, focusing on the message that together 'we' shape BD_Collective, not a central team.

Annual Reviews involved discussion around BD_Collective's effectiveness, time for networking and connections between members. It was time for all voices from across the sector to be heard.

The 'Together We Lead' events were convened in 2023 to bring external voices into the conversation, reflecting on the work of BD_Collective and its future. Experts from inside and outside of the borough came together to explore the vital role of a collaborative social sector both locally and nationally. These events seemed to have more traction in the wider sphere than locally. The positive feedback was how much people enjoyed meeting up with others they didn't see much, in a relaxed place with drinks and food. We recognise there is merit in this alone.

Events generally have been useful for people getting together. It probably goes without saying that those with a funding focus have always been better attended. We recognise the time pressure on people in the sector, so have tried a mix of online and face-to-face.

Facilitation and visible involvement from members have been important. Also, the opportunity for others to design and lead events beyond the secretariat team has significantly increased involvement and ownership, not only of those involved, but also increasing the engagement of others. We've seen this in the Forum meetings, final annual review, Community Chest and across the Networks.

REFLECTIONS

Most events have had a particular focus which can be useful but also means there is less time or emphasis on just connecting. From time to time, the secretariat team organised meet-ups in different places across the borough. They were not widely attended but were a great way of having deeper conversations with those who turned up. Perhaps we were put off by the limited numbers on those occasions. We think we may have under-estimated the significance of creating space to connect - a time to provide open space for those who wanted it. If we did it all over again, we would do this regularly and consistently in different ways and spaces.

SHIFTING POWER THROUGH REPRESENTATION

A vital part of the ambition of BD_Collective is seeing the social sector recognised as an equal, valued partner by statutory colleagues.

There is a call for social sector representation on many committees and boards, yet it has often been tokenistic, with an expectation that one person or organisation can represent the entire sector! Since its inception, BD_Collective has challenged this and required more meaningful representation and also more meaningful accountability back to the sector by those who represent it.

Shifting power through representation has been significant: those who represent now are different people to five years ago, diversity is better, and people understand they represent BD_Collective, not their own organisation; statutory partners have increasingly recognised the value and experience held within the social sector, even recognising the need to pay for this representation. It has meant that social sector colleagues have played vital roles in shaping future solutions and strategy.

Who decides who represents

Requests for representation from partner agencies are usually made to the secretariat team. This is then shared as widely as possible through our mailing list, Discourse and Network WhatsApps. Remuneration for representation has always been important to BD_Collective. The original thinking was that it would enable a bigger take-up from smaller grassroots organisations who have potentially smaller teams or people in a paid capacity than larger organisations

Accountability and building strong connections with one another have been vital when it comes to developing the BD_Collective. It was important to ensure that all opportunities were shared to the wider VCSE, and this has been a key way in which we have been accountable to one another. Initially, all opportunities and updates shared were reflected back to members of BD_Collective through network meetings, and those representing the opportunities were asked to give feedback into relevant networks. However, as engagement in some networks reduced, we recognised that only organisations attending the meetings were benefiting from the information - which is not the heart of what BD_Collective wants to achieve.

When it became apparent towards the end of 2023 that there needed to be greater accountability and clarity around expectations of representatives, one of the secretariat team gathered all those currently involved in representation to develop and design a new code of conduct. It has been an extremely helpful process: encouraging organisations to remember they were part of a wider system that had information to share back into these platforms.

REFLECTIONS

We've made an important breakthrough with statutory partners around the concept and process of representation. There are definitely fewer invites for single sector tick box representation, and a recognition that they will be paid (either via BD_Collective pot with Council or from additional funds via Health). There is still more to be done to make representation meaningful while avoiding being cumbersome, for those picking up roles. There is more to be explored here. The recent paper referred to above is a starting point.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership within and across sectors has been a key strategy for the BD_Collective and happens across the networks, specialist initiatives (e.g. pandemic response), events, consortia and through the representation.

There has been a major shift in how statutory partners see the social sector in many areas across the borough. Whenever there has been a new strategy or initiative, partners have been keen to work with BD_Collective to brief the sector and explore how we can work together. This has included: responding to the pandemic; Localities work - where we explored how to connect support via locations e.g. a hub; Early Help Network - a consortium exploring early intervention for families; Cost of Living strategy; and currently the 'Get moving' Sport England investment. There is much to build on here but it's so encouraging that there are almost no new initiatives or strategies that do not have meaningful involvement from the social sector.

Recognising areas in which BD_Collective are helping to shape Barking and Dagenham

REFLECTIONS

This has been one of the most significant changes since the inception of BD_Collective. Partners have said that they find it easier to engage with the sector and have been open to the challenge of genuine partnership, rather than a tick box. It is now common for social sector organisations to be part of shaping new strategies across the borough.

There is further opportunity to build on this and also ensure more social sector organisations can be meaningfully involved. It is worthwhile thinking about training/coaching for those leaders less confident in engaging in partnership space.

COMMUNICATION: DISCOURSE VS. E_BULLETIN

A regular e-bulletin was sent out as a way to disseminate information that organisations sent to the secretariat. However, it was a passive, one-way method of communication that was highly dependent on information being received in a timely manner, and recipients had little control over the information they were receiving and how they could engage with it.

Feedback from the Year Two Annual Review, where some members expressed frustration that BD_Collective was very 'centralised', prompted us to find a way to decentralise the communications, to foster deeper connections, and give all members of our community a voice.

After researching different options, a sub-group of Collective members chose Discourse – a forum that allows all members to find, share, and post information. Moderators oversee the forum, facilitate the onboarding process, and answer users' questions, but users have autonomy over what they post.

Initially, some members were reluctant to sign up – it takes time for people to get used to a new tool and a new way of doing things – but, gradually, people have recognised the platform's value, and the number of users has steadily grown. Although there are now 362 members, the use of the platform varies. We have not seen progressive use, as we would expect with a growing number of users, but more that there are different seasons where the platform has been busy, and others when it is quiet. As an example, since inception, the highest number of people engaged (consolidated page views) in any one month was 2,498 (Feb 22) and the lowest was 676 (Sept 23).

However, the secretariat is seeing more valuable content than we did in the beginning, though engagement with the content posted is still low.

To join BD_Collective's Discourse group:
https://discourse.bdcollective.co.uk/invites/53Mnh64fpH

REFLECTIONS

People love and hate Discourse in equal measure. There has been limited interaction on the platform, but it has been increasingly used by members to post information. We believe it has changed the culture of information flowing out from the secretariat, with more people recognising their role in sharing. Does it matter that engagement is passive?

One member of the secretariat team offered regular training, which was always well received by those who attended. It's sometimes hard to know what might be the barriers to people signing up, or what the barriers to engagement are. Is there reluctance to use yet another platform? This is just a platform - could another platform work better, or can this one be made more effective?

BD_COLLECTIVE:
THE HOT POTATOES

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST

Within the five-year time frame, which includes Covid-19, and the Cost of Living Crisis, changing hearts and minds has been an extraordinary task. It takes time, honesty, and energy!

In an environment where quid pro quo is common, and promises often undelivered, it felt important to address the issue of **accountability**, and work transparently. This has been done by ensuring information, feedback, and updates are accessible and in a form that makes it easy for people to follow.

At the inception of BD_Collective, **trust** between civil society residents, statutory agencies and funders was low. Building **trust** has been a cross-cutting theme in all that BD_Collective has aimed to do, part of this is how we managed the £100,000 social infrastructure grant from the Council.

The budget was developed by the secretariat and signed off by the Leadership Team. 60% was allocated for staff, management and central activity (events) and 40% was to be used for network activity. The network activity money was placed on Open Collective, a transparent money management platform, and the Network pot criteria developed within the Leadership team. At any point, members could view the fund on the Open Collective and see who/what was being claimed. There has been an ongoing underspend from this pot. In trying to understand this, it seems that much underspend is related to the fact that any money spent has to be through networks, where members are doing something together or consortia development. When ideas around the money come in, the only question asked is where has the spend been agreed. Often money ends up not being claimed because there is a reluctance to take the idea back to the network. It has been hard to get to the root cause of what is happening.

TRANSPARENCY AROUND FUNDING AND COMMUNICATING OPENLY

Through the Annual Reviews, our email campaigns, Discourse etc. BD_Collective has worked hard to foster openness and fairness to all. When receiving information about funding partners or grants, that information has been openly available. Modelling accountability has been an important focus for everything within BD_Collective. We believe it builds trust and ensures there are no opportunities for decisions to be made behind closed doors. The Activity Tracker is a spreadsheet, it is a limited format, but it does give up-to-date information on all that is happening across BD_Collective and members are regularly encouraged to look at it. It includes information about: funding applications within the networks, consortia, strategic initiatives and representation.

When establishing the BD_Collective networks, a WhatsApp schematic was introduced that sought to increase **accountability** and openness within the networks. This tool would analyse communication via the WhatsApp group and give feedback on how the values were being demonstrated. While it couldn't be completely accurate, it gave an indication of how the network was connecting. What network members did with this insight was for them to decide. Interestingly, following feedback being posted in the chat, there was often an increase in communication.

The openness of a WhatsApp group helps improve **accountability**. It helps members to see if others are doing what they said they would do. It's easier to see who is participating in network life including who the givers and receivers are. The WhatsApp record creates an immediate snapshot of how the group is operating, though we recognise that it might not be the only method of communication within the group, and therefore has its limitations.

REFLECTIONS

Looking at the last five years and trying to find the best way to ensure opportunities and decisions are transparent, accessible, and widely owned, has been a huge challenge. Some people struggle to engage because of other commitments and pressures they face in their own organisations. For others, they need time to talk things through. Trying to get the balance of time to talk things through, and easy access to information - to read when there's time, has not been easy. The information has always been available and as transparent as we could make it, but we also understand that we will never please everyone - one person even asked if we could just call them regularly to give them an update of everything that was happening! People need different things and we can only keep trying to make things as accessible as possible. Not sure we'll ever win that one!

*In the last year, we have come back to explore the values in the Leadership Team again. We concluded that whilst the **CTAP values** had some use, they didn't really reflect the complexity of the work we were doing within BD_Collective. Trust is particularly difficult and very subjective. A team from the Leadership group developed <u>a new expression of values</u>, these have not yet been tested with the wider membership, but may be a useful starting point for the new entity.*

POWER

Sharing power has been a huge consideration right from the start of BD_Collective. It was recognised that some organisations or people – not necessarily those from larger organisations – had a lot of influence and power. This was primarily used for the development of their own organisation because of the lack of collaboration happening within the sector at that time. Nine of those people agreed to be part of the development of BD_Collective, agreeing to use this influence to open the door for others. It should be noted that these people got involved in this piece of work with no remuneration and at times, some sacrifice to their own organisation in that first year.

The power issue remains the biggest challenge across the sector and with other sectors. How do we ensure opportunities are equal for all, is that possible? Where are voices least heard, recognised and amplified? When is it appropriate to require some organisations to hold back so that others can come forward?

The primary purpose of BD_Collective was to tackle this core issue locally. Whether it has been successful is for others to judge but these structures were developed to address the issue, building an environment that opens doors for others.

One example of **sharing power** is the Community Chest development. Over the last two years the pot of funding was entirely led by Collective members with no involvement of the secretariat team. This is an important example of a de-centralised and effective model of what could be achieved in the future.

REFLECTIONS

Power is so critical in all we do. The language we used in the early days was that those with power had the opportunity to be 'door openers' or 'gate keepers' – allowing anyone to go through the doors already opened to them, or making sure they continued to choose who could go through! It wasn't about people being required to 'give up' the power they had, but being willing to share it, allowing others to grow and develop in theirs. The people who have power within BD_Collective today are not those who had power five years ago. Some of the behaviours challenged by others at that time, are now evident in those who sit in the seat today.

For us, we are conscious we have a privileged position through the relationships we have with a wide variety of people across the borough and beyond. It's hard to assess how we have shared our power – it's probably for others to say. We believe we have sought to open doors and not control what happens as people go through them. Avril McIntryre, the CEO, promised to step down at the end of the first contractual period and she is doing so. It's time for others to pick up the leadership and shape this incredible opportunity that we have to build an inclusive, connected, and accountable mechanism, which enables our civil society to grow and thrive.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

At the inception of BD_Collective as already described above, there was a Steering Group of nine social sector leaders.

At the end of year one, the Steering Group developed into two groups. Some of the original team remained involved, others stepped back and new people were included. The two groups formed were: the Steering Group and Learning Team (which later became the Design Team). These were in place until year four, with people leaving and joining during that time. A call out for members was made across BD_Collective membership and reviewed following each Annual Review.

The Steering Group was made up of people who led or represented networks and its primary focus was to update one another on activity and focus across the networks, and ensure the work of the networks (within and across networks) developed in a way that reflects BD_Collective's values.

The Learning/Design Group acted as a strategic body exploring how the data and learning gathered by Ratio, the learning partner, is shaping the work of BD_Collective. This group also considered together how we communicate the learning to others both locally and beyond.

Trust and accountability have been the most significant and tested aspects of BD_Collective over the years. A values-based movement is a radically different approach. We knew it was when we started but didn't really understand how much time, planning and skill was needed to get the communication right. We made assumptions; we were naïve. Now we realise it involves high level skills in communication and facilitation, persistently demonstrating to people that this is different from what we've done before, helping each other not to slip back into the status quo.

As BD_Collective develops and changes, it is vital to spend time on getting this right. Taking time at every junction to explore how to create an environment where the values can be practised and ensuring mechanisms are in place to review this regularly together.

THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARIAT

The charity Community Resources has held the social infrastructure contract since 2019 and acted as secretariat for the duration of the contract, including the two times one-year extensions. The role is to provide coordination of all BD_Collective activity: convening and facilitating meetings, liaising with partners, and communication.

Using the findings of Konrad Elsdon's 'Voluntary Organisations: Citizenship, Learning and Change, Niace, 1995', there are an estimated 5,000 formal and informal organisations comprising about 46,000 members within Barking and Dagenham.

Since the focus was a network of networks, it was important that the secretariat team facilitated **connection**, and didn't become the primary connection. This was hard to navigate and took a few iterations of the team to get there. BD_Collective started off with one member of full-time staff along with the Convener who was remunerated for four days per month. The focus was to approach organisations and voluntary groups, establishing relationships, and inviting them to join the bigger conversation. This was the first step to seeing a more collaborative borough. In many ways, the pandemic era helped with this, with organisations having more appetite to work together due to all that was happening.

Over time, the make-up of the team changed with an emphasis on facilitation. In the final year of this contractual period, the secretariat has 2.5 FTE staff focused on communication, network management and coordination. The secretariat has been 'hands-off' in the leadership of any project or initiative but has had close involvement in the development stages, handing over leadership after setting up.

The Connector role has been important as things have developed. It is easier for someone to trust a person rather than an entity.

Ruth Robertson, for example, one of BD_Collective's Connectors, has worked in the borough for some time now. She is known by many and has developed trust over the course of several interactions. Though you can invite someone to trust you, they do not know that you are trustworthy until that trust is put to the test. Asking people to put faith in what we're trying to achieve is an uphill task, particularly in an environment of distrust and hurt. Ruth has effectively played the broker when conflict or misunderstanding has arisen.
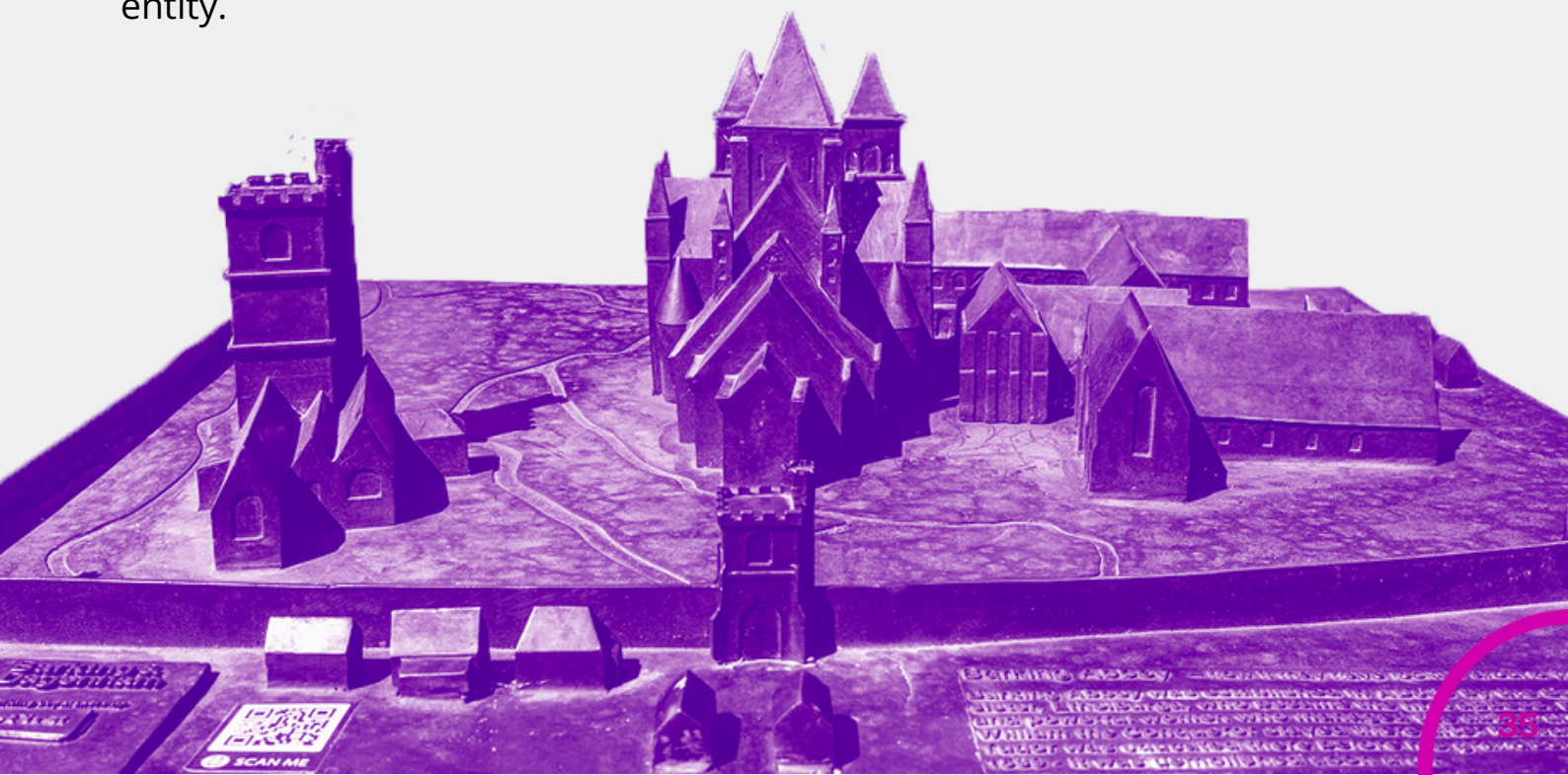
REFLECTIONS

The secretariat model was an important part of breaking the mould of a centrally organised and coordinated social infrastructure entity. However, the resources available meant it just wasn't possible. Perhaps we did need more resources to hold things, while those coming into the leadership seats really got to grips with a different way of working. The secretariat team were committed to the values, and sought to demonstrate them in everything they did. However, it takes time for those involved to a lesser extent to fully grasp the values and aims, and we made assumptions about what people really understood. If we were doing it all again, we would take more time at the beginning of a new network, consortia, or strategy, to work through what it might mean to embed the values in whatever was being developed, working it through practically and holding the space as people explored new ways of doing things together.

As BD_Collective develops and changes, it is vital to spend time on getting this right. Taking time at every junction to explore how to create an environment where the values can be practised and ensuring mechanisms are in place to review this regularly, together.

BD_COLLECTIVE:
THE FUTURE

COLLECTIVE

The process is now in place to develop the BD_Collective into a Community Benefit Society. Following a series of 'Future Proofing' workshops, with a self-selected group of Collective members, it was agreed that it would be helpful to have a commissionable entity for new opportunities. One of the limitations around funding has been finding a lead organisation that was willing to take risk and build the consortia as a flat structure. If BD_Collective was an entity that could be commissioned, then work could be done to develop a way of ensuring any consortia or partnership embeds the values. This could build a very radical and exciting future that could be an exemplar for others wanting to develop new ways of collaborative working.

There is much learning from the last five years and we can choose to build on this, developing new and creative ways to increase **connection, trust and accountability, and power.**

There's no going back now, things have changed too much.

BD
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