

# Building Belonging in Barking and Dagenham:

Radical approaches to reducing social  
isolation



Care City

Lifeline  
Community  
Resources

ageable

Barking &  
Dagenham

**This isn't a story about a  
project or a pilot.**

**It's about taking people on a  
journey to systematically  
create power.**

# The problem (part one)



When people come out of hospital, having support from health and care services often isn't enough.

If you don't have a strong social support system, it can make recovering really hard.

Or even getting through your front door in the first place.

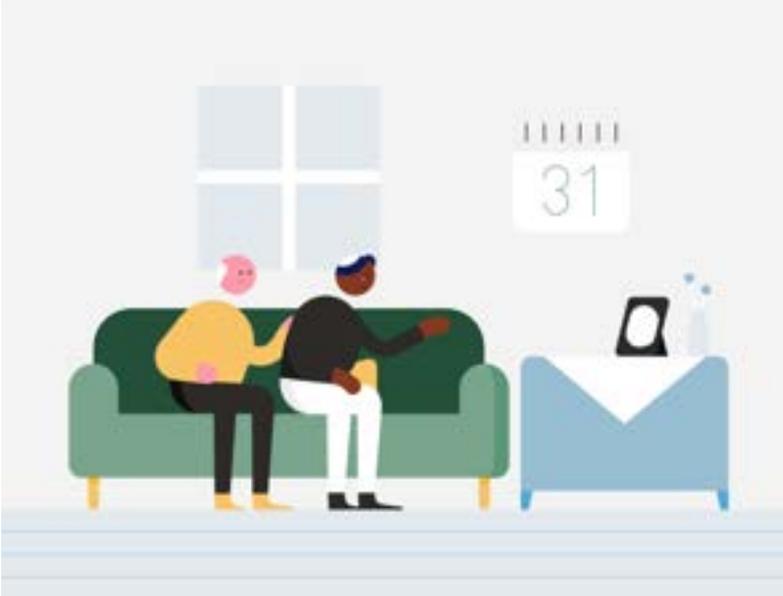


# LBBB Council intentionally commissioned something different:

- Funded jointly through Ageing Well Programme, Better Care Fund and Local Gov investment
- Led with, and within the community
- Commissioned for learning, iteration and evaluation, not consistency and targets
- A design-led approach, based on real experiences



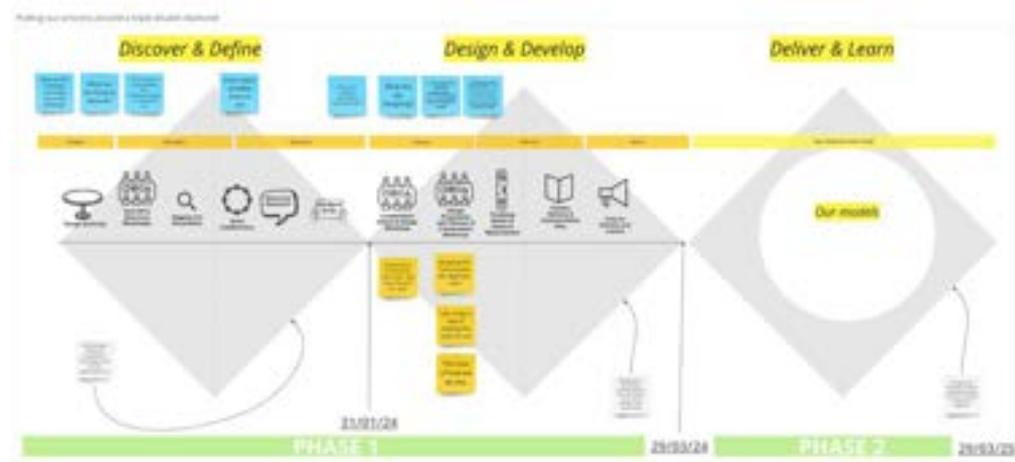
# Replicating the way that you or I might find belonging, care and friendship:



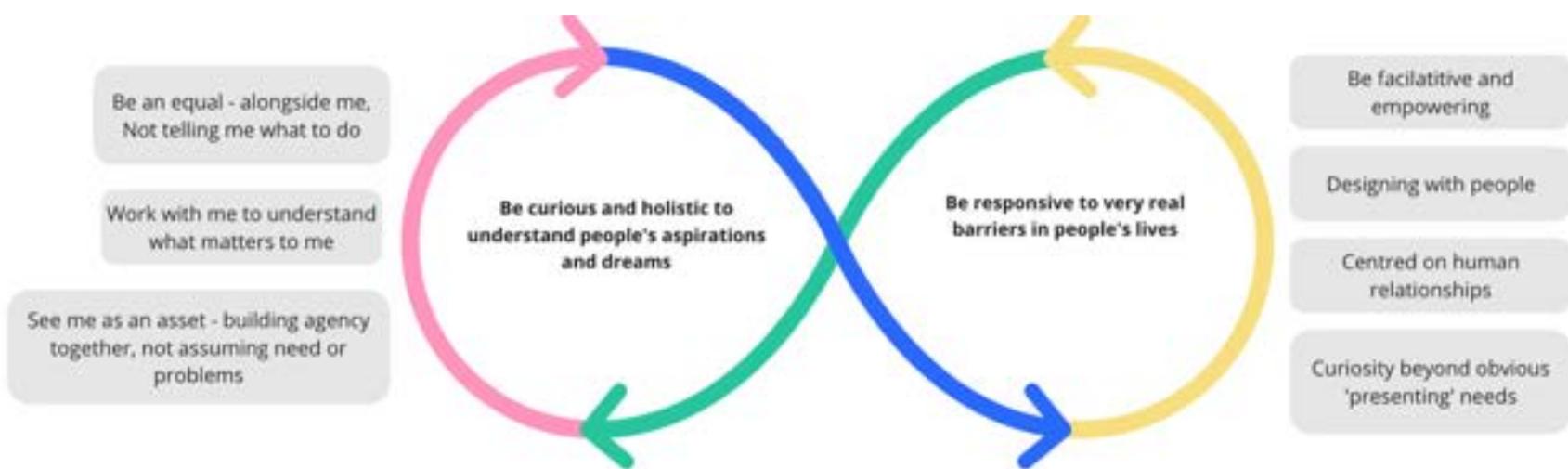
- Creating an **environment** around people, not a service
- Where help is **easier to give and more joyful to receive**
- Testing the assumptions we all have, by **designing from real stories**
- Helping the community we're part of to **organise strengths and energy**
- Developing a **sustainable approach** that builds confidence and relationships, so that the impact lasts beyond us working with someone.

# Why a design-led approach?

- Understand people's lived experience so we could challenge the status quo with legitimacy
- Hardwire learning and iteration in at every step
- Think outside the box, be creative, design with people, to create something 'alive' enough to respond to human complexity
- Based on real people, and real hopes, strengths, needs and dreams.







Doesn't label people

Builds individual strengths and community capacity and opportunity

High Support / High Challenge: making decisions in the moment

Complements what is already happening elsewhere

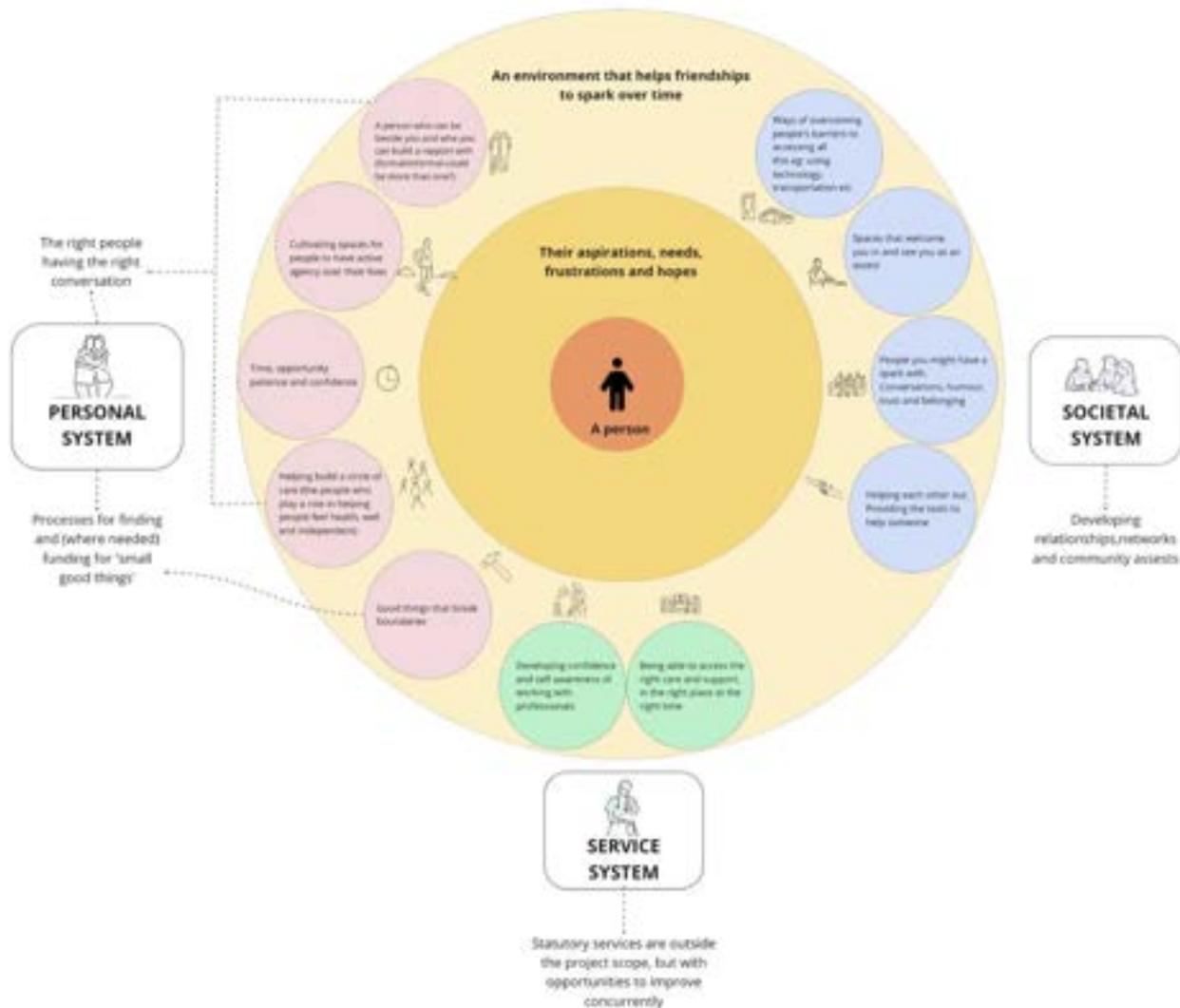
Deeply personal & flexible to changing needs

Decisions being made in the relationship - enables on-demand small good things

# What we learned was different to what we expected



- The people we've listened to have a lot of **interacting factors** happening in their lives that have led them to a place of being isolated.
- All of them are experiencing some kind of **complexity**.
- Services **aren't designed** to build deep understanding of where people are at, or to support them to shape and try different solutions. They can work relationally, but they shouldn't be where we turn for relationships.
- **The answer to this isn't to set up another service.**
- We needed to create an **environment where friendships can spark and flourish**.
- To do this, we needed to shift to a **deep and sustained relationship** with people, and to **creatively work with them to draw in things that will overcome barriers**, and **different types of support** that they might need, from the everyday, to things that might feel extraordinary to that person.
- That doesn't mean that it can be done without services. **For this project to succeed, we will need to bring in some service support in a different way.**



## Method



Assessing



Building relationships

## Structure



Signposting the person to support

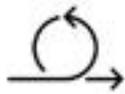


Drawing and creating support around the person

## Form



Set, seeking completion



Actively iterative, seeking learning, organic

## Focus



Deficits and needs



Overcoming barriers, building on strengths

## Power



Services and organisations

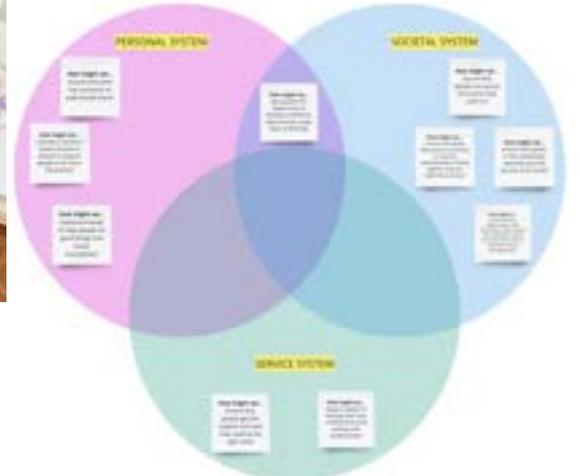
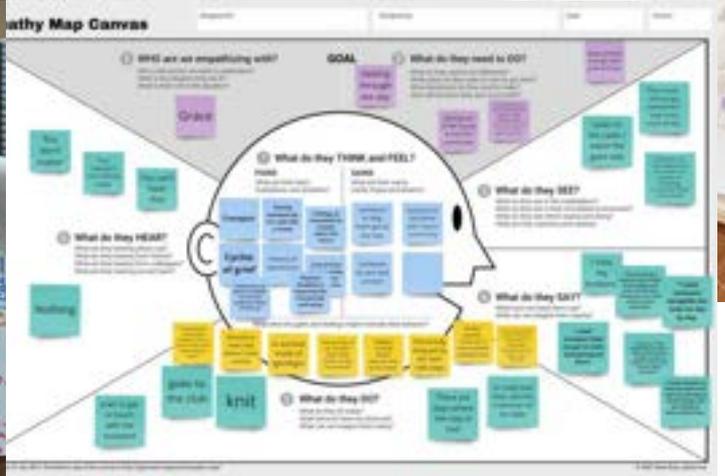


People and communities

# Testing and iterating our prototype model:

## Design workshops – March 2024

- What does and doesn't work when we test it against real, long-term stories?
- How will we work and learn together across three intrinsically connected systems that need to respond to isolation?
- Who might need to partner with us in the delivery of this work, and in what ways?



# Meet some of our people



## Meet Karen

Karen lives on her own now. Her husband passed away about 14 months ago. She has a wheelchair and lives with a condition called neuropathy, which affects her nervous system, as well as a food allergy because she can't clean and doesn't know what is happening or available to her. She wears a chain cross around her neck with a gold cross on, and every day she talks to her husband asking for a sign that he is here. She used to love embroidery but it has to now so she can only knit in time.



## Meet William

William lives in Marks Gate by himself. He has previously lived in Heninger, Longdon, Hoxton, and Oxford when he was in college. He likes fairness and equality and preserving wildlife and the environment. He doesn't like hypocrisy and double standards. He likes writing fiction and non-fiction.



## Meet Amara

Amara lives with her husband in Berlin. She is a counsellor. She also has her CC. After growing up in a very tight-knit group, she lost her great grandfather and then her dad when she was very young too. Her mum brought them up as a single mom with three kids. Before it was close to one of her sisters who recently passed away from Cancer.



## Meet Maureen

Maureen lives with her husband and likes watching TV and listening to music. Church is important for her, and she plays her role in her community. She had cerebral palsy, and a few years ago she had an accident and tore a tendon in her knees. She now has an electric wheelchair which is great as it now means that she can get to a bar with her husband's earnings.



## Meet David

David lives alone and has ended up in and out of the hospital quite a lot. He lives with MS.

## A peak into Amara's life

### Meet Amara

She lives with her husband in Berkeley. She is an integrated counselor. She also has her OC. "We've been running griefless groups slowly and a lunch club as well. We also run a death by suicide group". "After growing up in a very tight-knit group, I lost my great-grandfather and then my dad when I was very young too—too young. My mom brought us up as a single mom with three kids." She was closest to her sister who died of cancer.



Meet Amara's husband

More recently her sister died from cancer. She says, "I had become her carer and looked after her to the end. Having my husband's support is of tremendous good and value, but it isn't the same as having my sister's support. With my sister I could share stories about growing up, we could talk about our marriages, her family and things that women talk about. She was the one I shared everything with."



Amara's sister's illness

"Looking after my sister with cancer was one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. Everything I did for a period was for her. I changed jobs so I could care for her."



Her mother

"There have been various points in my life when my sister cared for me too." When Amara was in the hospital, she says, "It was a really isolating time too. At that point, I wasn't in a relationship, and my sister had her own family - no one came to visit me. It was so tough, but my sister and her daughter were very supportive."



Amara's sister's illness

After she was discharged, her sister asked her to come and stay with them for a few weeks. "I was lucky to have her, but it was still so isolating. Everything I needed to do I had to call her for. If I needed something to eat or if I needed the loo, I had to ask. I felt so alone."



"When I had to go back for my hospital appointments after I was discharged, I was so on my own, and I just cried because, at that point, I was like, mum, where are you. There was no one to pick me up after my appointment. It was winter, and it was so cold. I remember standing at the bus stop, and I had never felt more alone, and I cried. My parents were gone. People that I love are gone, and now it's just me."

#### Hospital Appointment

I remember the time when I had to go back to my hospital appointment after I was discharged. I was so on my own and I just cried because at that point I was like mum - where are you - I was completely on my own - there was no one to pick me up after my appointment - it was winter - and it was so cold and I remember standing at the bus stop and I had never felt more alone and I cried. My sister was gone, and my parents too all the people that I love are gone and now it's just me.

#### Counsellor & Bereavement Teacher

I did a course in counseling and felt that my community can benefit from the counseling angle with faith at the heart of it.

I also did some bereavement counseling, and when I was doing it the man that ran the course even came to my first one to kick it off for me - and he gave me the confidence to be able to do this going forwards. He said you know you can do this Amara, don't you?

#### Parents & Family

My father died when I was really young. My mother died when I was a young adult. When I was in hospital last my sister cared for me afterwards, but it still felt so helpless.

After growing up in a very tight knit group - I lost my great grandfather then my dad when I was very young too - young. My mum brought us up as a single mum with three kids.

#### Sister

More recently my sister died from cancer - I had become her carer and looked after her to the end. I basically moved in then.

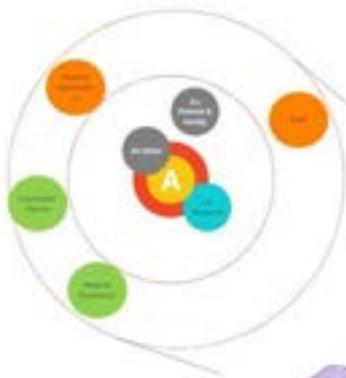
Looking after my sister with cancer was one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. Everything I did for a period was for her. I changed my job so I could care for her. She has 2 kids. We used to pray for her, me and my husband.

Now I have my husband - but it isn't the same as it is to have his support. Our relationship was different - I miss her so much.

#### Her Faith

At the hardest points its my faith that has kept me going and my memories of my family. I'm of western Indian heritage and we're always a very christian family.

### Amara's Circle of Care



She lives with her husband in Barking. She is an integrated counsellor. "My mum brought us up as a single mom with three kids." She is only close to one of her sisters. After growing up in a very tight-knit group, and lost her great-grandfather and then her dad when I was very young too— young.

She also has her CIC. "We've been running grief/loss groups biweekly and a lunch club as well. We also run a death by suicide group".





## Amara's Challenges & Needs

### Feeling isolated or Not part of things

Me and my sister were really close and now we aren't so I miss her so much - she was the one that I shared everything with, my husband supported me throughout that time I became a carer for my sister who died from cancer but my sister's home when she was alive was like a place of refuge aside from my own home. Not having this can at times create a feeling of great loneliness and isolation. Unless you've had a relationship like that you don't get it and so not the same. My sister who is alive and I are not as close as our sister who died.

There have been various points in my life when my sister cared for me too - when I had my bunions out - I had to be in hospital - it was a really isolating time too - at that point I wasn't in a relationship and my sister had her own family - no one came to visit me, it was so tough, I had my own flat but I was all on my own there and I remember feeling so alone. She had a daughter and they were all really supportive because I had no one.

### Feeling on my own, even when I was at my sisters

After I was discharged my sister asked me to come and stay with them for a few weeks. I was lucky to have her but it was still so isolating - everything I needed to do I had to call her for - if I needed something to eat or if I needed the loo I had to ask I felt so alone.

### Loosing my sister

More recently my sister died from cancer - I had become her carer and looked after her to the end. I basically moved in then. Having my husband's support is of tremendous good and value, but it isn't the same as having my sister's support. With my sister I could share stories about growing up, we could talk about marriages, her family and things that women talk about. She was the one I shared everything with.

### Losing her tight knit family too young

After growing up in a very tight knit group - I lost my great grandfather then my dad when I was very young too - too young. My mum brought us up as a single mum with three kids. I'm of western Indian heritage and we were always a very christian family.

### And something written on my soul with that feeling of isolation and being alone

She talks about her own experiences of losing her grand father at a young age and not being invited to his funeral - to be with others to grieve. She parents at a young age too. The impact that had on her at a young age she feels has sparked her own feelings of isolation.

### Feeling completely on my own

I remember the time when I had to go back to my hospital appointment after I was discharged I was so on my own and I just cried because at that point I was like mum! - where are you - I was completely on my own - there was no one to pick me up after my appointment - it was winter - and it was so cold and I remember standing at the bus stop and I had never felt more alone and I cried. My parents died, the people that I love are gone and now it's just me.

## Amara's dreams

Her dream would be if she was in hospital someone came to see her and when she was out.

"Having people around would have made such a difference. My sister helped me to get to that point where I was of my brushes."

Running some tea and coffee mornings that will enable people having space to be able to get a cuppa and have a chat

"As we know spaces like that really help. We're looking to find some funding so we can go out into the community."

"Imagine if every one that can afford too buy a coffee or tea for someone else in the queue the world would look a lot better that's for sure".

"Every person in B & D would have access to a cup of tea and coffee."



# Our learning so far: Dreams

**I'd love to do a peer support group where people with lived experience can support people who are already back on track with their own lives and step in to support people coming out of hospital.** This will give people a way to get support alongside someone with live experience throughout their journey. Often people have carers in and out who are not interesting in you as they are in and out.

Y

**Hobbies and things to do.** I do miss cooking. I can no longer cook, which is rubbish, but my husband can - but lots of people won't be able to for sure

A

**My dream would be if I was in hospital someone came to see me and when I was out.** Having people around would have made such a difference. My sister helped me to get to that point where I was of my crutches.

W

**I need someone alongside me, help me day by day. Work out what I need and how I can do it and help me get out and about more.** I did look up how to get to southend in a wheelchair but it was so much - there's no way I was going to be able to do that.

C

**People to go around and be with people.** My carers were okay. Support for meds and meals and food, but we need more. **Someone to call people once a week, have a look around the shops with them. A service that could help develop a friendship with someone - no chatting or changing with who it is - you know.**

A

**My dream would be to have someone who could come for a swim with me or meet for a cuppa and develop a friendship with.** But generally she doesn't do any of these things for herself - she's looking after her family's needs instead. My mum just had a stroke too.

P

**This year we're hoping to run some tea and coffee mornings that will enable people having space to be able to get a cuppa and have a chat - as we know spaces like that really help.** We're looking to find some funding so we can go out into the community.

W

**Imagine if every one that can afford too buy a coffee or tea for someone else in the queue the world would look a lot better that's for sure.** Every person in B & D would have access to a cuppa tea and coffee.

W

**Imagine if everyone has someone to visit them once they are in hospital and once they are out.** And has someone to take them to an appointment and pick them up - that was such a tough day for me.

W

**No service users**

**No clients**

**People working together**

## Let's design together

Imagine that Josh and Logan live in your place. What might a different experience for them look like using these **'how might we's?**

New Transition in  
peoples lives

Developing a new  
circle of care

Getting the right  
support at the right  
time across the  
services

Supporting people  
to understand the  
system more and  
how they can  
access it

Supporting people  
out of 'Their  
cocoon' and into an  
active life with a  
community of  
support

**How might we**  
be beside  
people  
differently as a  
community?

**How might we**  
organise to  
help people  
find and give  
support for the  
little things?

**How might we**  
draw in service  
support, when  
there is a clear  
case that a  
service  
interaction is  
what is most  
needed?

**How might we**  
help people  
build their  
confidence  
when they're  
working with  
services?

**How might we**  
help people  
build their  
agency and see  
a new role for  
themselves?

"That people aren't asking for something revolutionary, they want someone to talk to, to do things with..."

"I feel excited!"

"The power of connection, community and thinking differently."

"That people here are all wanting to make a difference."

"My goodness, doesn't it feel nice to work in this way."

"That it all feels real."

"Wow is my main reaction. It feels like a radically different way of trying to do things together. I feel overwhelmed."

"How great this might look..."

"To trust in the process, and also to challenge it as we go!"

**Big thoughts at the end of discovering and designing together**

"That this is a revolutionary way we're bringing people together."

"I feel more positive about what this work could do"

"That small things can make a really big difference..."

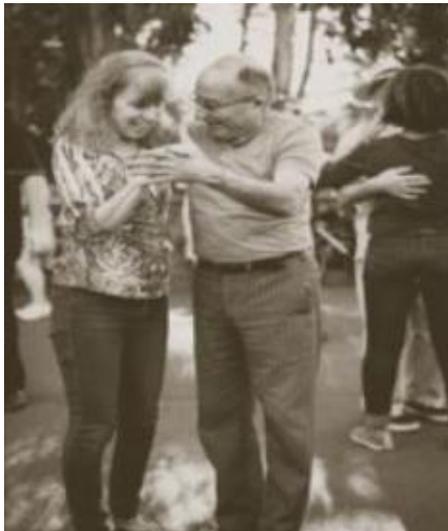
"The variety of people's stories and the complexity that they're living with."

"What other stories are we missing?"

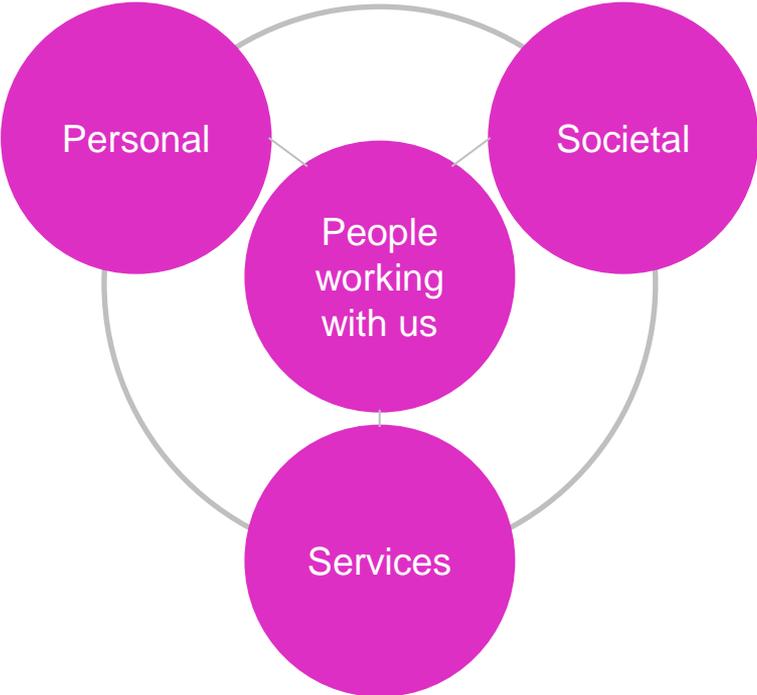
# So... what's next?



Independent  
Living  
Agency



# Learning together, every week

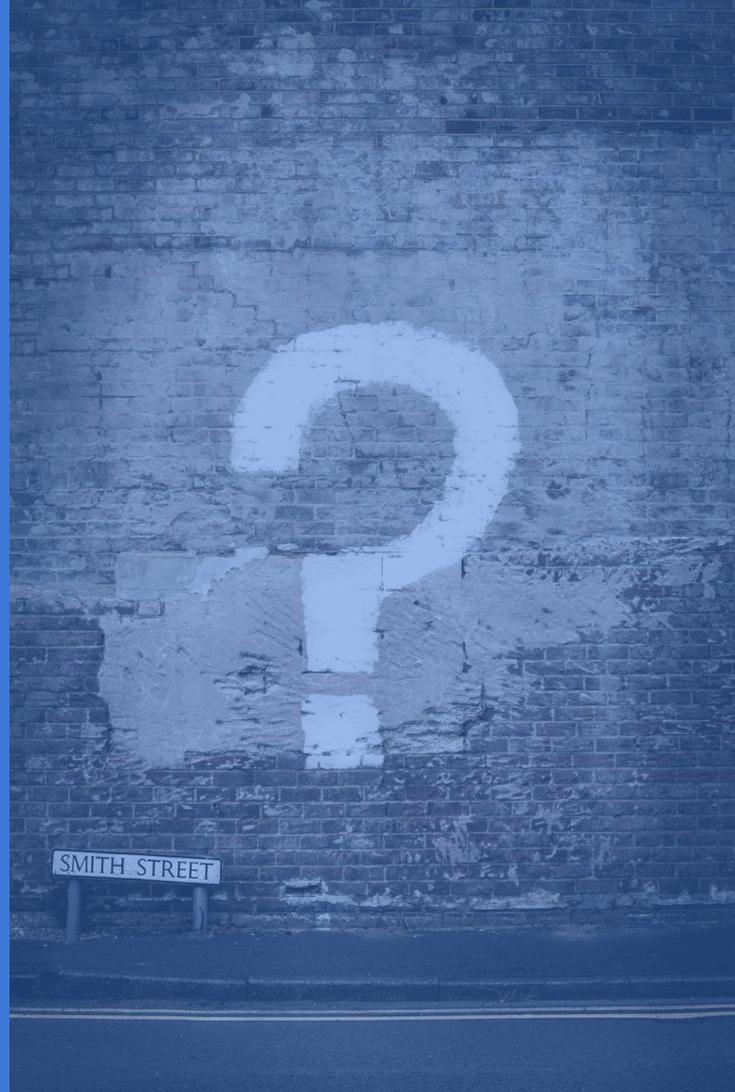


We'll be sharing our learning throughout at:

[www.carecity.org/projects/harnessing-the-power-of-community-to-overcome-social-isolation/](http://www.carecity.org/projects/harnessing-the-power-of-community-to-overcome-social-isolation/)

## Thanks for listening

If you have any questions contact us at  
[emily.brook@carecity.org](mailto:emily.brook@carecity.org)



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