

Neighbourhood Networks

Learning Summary

November 2025 – February 2026

What's this about?

These slides share learning highlights from the last three months of Neighbourhood Networks activity in Barking & Dagenham. They provide a view on what networks have been up to, before sharing by emerging learning around:

- how networks are collaborating in partnership with residents and one another
- the value networks are generating

The learning shared is drawn from intentional experimentation within each network between December 2025 to February 2026. Evidence has been gathered through structured discussions and reflection within individual networks, alongside a quarterly learning event held in February in Kingsley Hall (shown on the right), where all networks came together to reflect on their first three months of activity.



Context

Background; Learning Questions; This Quarter's Learning Ambitions



Contents

Context

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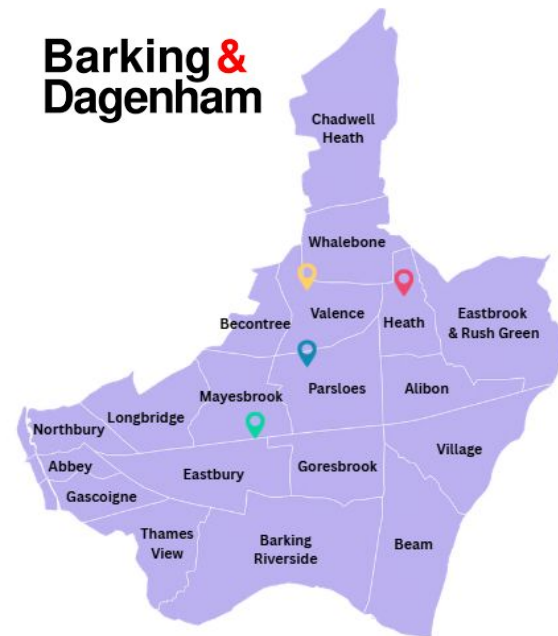
Local authority reflections



Background: Launching “hyperlocal” networks

September 2025 marked the launch of the first three Neighbourhood Networks. Each brought together at least three local VCFSE (Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise) organisations around a dedicated £28.8k funding pot, to work alongside residents in shaping neighbourhood activities. Towards the end of 2025, this number rose to [four networks](#) (see locations on the right), with the launch of John Smith House neighbourhood network.

[The programme](#) seeks to strengthen connections, skills and collaboration across the borough, and to release strengths into the community, with a long-term aim to reduce pressure on health and local authority services. Some networks are bringing together organisations who haven't connected in the past, while others formalised and deepened existing relationships. Neighbourhood Networks is intentionally learning-focused – with support provided by Learning Partner [Care City](#) to help networks adapt and refine ideas and capture learning along the way. This summary has been produced by Care City.



Our Core Questions

On the right are some overarching learning questions that networks are exploring in the programme.

These have been co-produced based on learning from recent [experiences and precursors](#) to this programme in Barking & Dagenham, including the LBBB funded [Connect](#) programme.

1. What's happening across the networks?

We're reflecting on what networks want to spend money on, and the kinds of initiatives and outcomes that feel like a priority to residents.

2. How are we working and collaborating, and how might we do that more effectively?

We're exploring how networks are working and collaborating in partnership with residents and with one another, and how this can be refined over time

3. What's the value being created by networks?

We're exploring the benefits of networks for organisations, residents, and wider organisations and services in the borough.

What's been happening this quarter?

- Bringing families and generations together
- Supporting wellbeing
- Growing environmental focus



Bringing families and generations together

In the last quarter, networks spoke of the desire they were hearing for more local activities that could cater for whole families, and spaces in which people of different generations could come together.

This has become a big focus for some networks. **Parsloes Potential** have been testing a “Dry Disco” and “Community Cinema” concept, drawing in big crowds to recent **events to seed new relationships and provide spaces for families to connect together**. The network has since been exploring how these can be made into sustainable programmes – for instance, through income streams (e.g. refreshments, ticket sales) and expanding the opportunities for residents to co-deliver them (touching on a [broader issue](#) emerging in this month’s learning).



Social media post for Parsloes Potential’s Community Disco

“I had loads of fun today!
I danced a lot 🕺 with my
baby girl 🧒, met friends 🍷,
and felt so relaxed and
grateful.
Thank you so much for
organizing this event.
And lastly, we loved the DJ!
🎵 🕺 🧒 🍷 🌟”

Resident feedback on the Community Disco

Bringing generations together is also a focus for **John Smith House** network, with emerging plans for a Community Scavenger Hunt – a free community-led family event in Eastbury Ward. The network is exploring how this can be **an opportunity for families to explore local spaces together**, and provide leadership experience to younger people in the community.

Supporting wellbeing

Neighbourhood Heart network have continued their programme of Community Hackathons to bring residents together and explore aspirations for the neighbourhood. One idea that this has helped them to develop is a **Young Mums Support Group**, providing a place to share, listen and offer reciprocal support

John Smith House network have also opted to make wellbeing the focus of their first activities. They have use funds to support a **Youth Wellness & Pampering day**. This day included wellness focused activities, opportunities for creative expression (like podcasting) and structured interactions within “soft activities” like knitting or baking – giving a focal point for people to come together and have casual conversations.

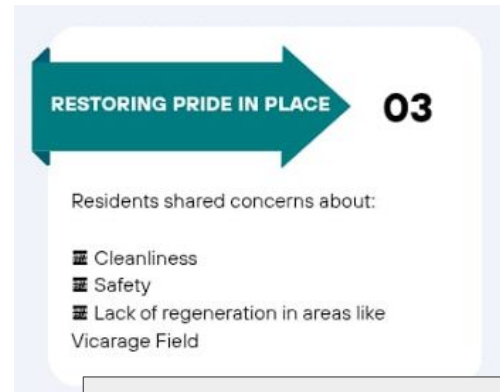


Photos and details from John Smith House network's Youth Wellness & Pampering Day



Growing environmental focus

Alongside family and wellbeing related activities, a third big focus for networks has been the physical environment – with recurrent concerns and ideas around the safety and cleanliness of public spaces. This has been remarked on as a priority for residents engaging the **Heath Park** and **John Smith House** networks



Some of the things “Pride in Place” means to residents engaging with **John Smith House**



A Neighbourhood Heart Community Hackathon

This has crystallised into a specific experiment for **Neighbourhood Heart** network. Community Hackathons have surfaced plans for **community litter picks** able to meet a number of aspirations at once. One the one hand, these seek to mobilise community around the goal of a cleaner, healthier environment. On the other hand, they are another example “soft activity” that offers an opportunity for families to come together and connect whilst exploring the local area – growing knowledge of what’s out there, and spreading awareness of the network into the community itself.

Learning about working in partnership

- The role of informality in sustaining deeper engagement
- Balancing speed and sustainability in decisions
- Shaping a culture of contribution
- The challenges of not being resident-led
- Ideas to catalyse stronger resident-led approaches



The role of informality in sustaining deeper engagement

Neighbourhood Networks aim to be driven by residents – to be more than just “consultative”, but to engage residents in a variety of more involved roles to test ideas and build momentum. A big question here is: **how can networks involve residents well in the learning and iteration process around activities** (i.e. beyond forms of participation they may be more familiar with, like consultation)?

Networks like **Neighbourhood Heart** set off with the intention of drawing residents into a “prototyping” process to support the above, used successfully in other local initiatives. However, after finding it tricky to bring consistent numbers back to their **Hackathons**, they have since been exploring where it’s helpful to drop the formality of processes, to support the an inclusive atmosphere and culture that keeps drawing people back. One thing viewed as helpful here is **holding discussions around food**, so time together feels like more than just “ a meeting”. This is also showing up for **Heath Park Network**, where it’s been helpful to follow difficult conversations in their resident panel with food, to maintain unity and good spirits.

Alongside food,. **Neighbourhood Heart** is also exploring how it could **test other decision-making methods (e.g. consent-based approaches)** that better blend the need for both structure and informality to yield productive *and* inclusive spaces.

“The Christmas celebration element, with pizzas and desserts, helped preserve positive group dynamics even after a challenging discussion” –

VCFSE, **Heath Park**

Balancing speed and sustainability in decisions

Some networks have shared how they've been caught up in thinking and planning for longer than expected, and they sense a need to be more bold in trying small, imperfect things. For some networks, this primary focus on planning and visioning stems from a desire to ensure that residents understand and buy into network's ambitions and processes, or that experiments are representative of resident desires across the hyperlocal network geography.

In contrast, networks like **Heath Park** have been very quick to get into testing ideas, through the aid of a small, facilitated resident panel. While the structure here has supported faster decisions, network members have shared the need for learning processes to keep speed with this. For instance, it's been noted that without systematic resident feedback about activities being fed back to the panel, panel decisions can feel too subjective, or based on individual preferences rather than broader evidence, and thereby less likely to be sustainable without buy-in from the wider community. As a consequence, the network is considering how to support decisions that represent wider views by **testing how to bring local intelligence and data to the panel**, something pursued through an initial outreach event in Dagenham library.

A process that's fast in yielding ideas for action is also something networks can be daunting in the sense that networks can be met with far more ideas that they feel able to receive, develop or sustain. Some organisations have shared how it becomes a challenge in managing expectations here. As a network that is giving residents very direct control over financial decisions **Heath Park is exploring how to give residents better visibility of budget and resource available** over time, so this might factor more organically into the decision-making process.

Such reflections around the *longevity* of funded network activities have always been close to the centre of recent learning discussions, and they touch on the broader importance of deeper participation to [keep things sustainable](#). But such questions can also indicate something good – of networks having taken imperfect but decisive action quickly and then coming to a place where it makes sense to take stock, evaluate, and plan what's next.

Not all networks have got into action as quickly as imagined. It came through strongly this quarter that **networks can benefit from encouragement and permission to take action swiftly**, even though they may not be certain of those being the “right” steps to take – “*good enough for now, safe enough to try*”, is a good motto we've heard shared around.

Shaping a culture of contribution

Given concerns about sustainability, many networks have shared about the importance of shifting resident's mindsets away from being provided (activities, events, services) for, and towards contributing something to their community. Many VCFSEs are bringing experience in doing this into their networks:

*"We're shifting from "What do you want to see?" to "What can you bring?" - It takes a lot of trust and one-to-one time" - VCFSE, **Parloes Potential***

*"Our focus is that people have to do something, we don't do it for them, We provide an environment that helps this." VCFSE, **Neighbourhood Heart***

*"We explain that the nice green space we have doesn't look that way by accident" - VCFSE, **John Smith House***

For some networks, making this shift means talking openly about financial contributions. We've heard how prompting for donations to support activities from the start can help people to recognise their role in keeping those activities going. We've also heard about the value in encouraging activity facilitators to clarify implications of different options regarding money (e.g. they can run a group which is free and time limited, or an ongoing group with a small cost to attend).

The challenges of not being “resident-led”

Networks are feeling the pinch when residents lack opportunities to help deliver what’s being developed. For instance, **Heath Park’s** resident panel is very effective in generating ideas for activities, but the ability to bring these to life is limited by the bandwidth of few people with responsibility for coordination. In really simple terms, if only one person has the key to an activity space, what happens there is limited by a single person’s schedule. This is encouraging the network to pursue a path of greater resident “ownership” of network activities over time and share responsibilities more broadly.

Elsewhere, **Parsloes Potential** have felt the pressure of running large community events like cinemas and discos (emerging from residents), which require lots of coordination and support to run in a safe way. This means that VCFSEs have had to call on their organisation’s volunteer pools, and challenge their capacity as community leaders, which is prompting them to explore how they can support more residents to get involved in coordinating and/or delivering activities:

*“The big projects with a lot of logistics feels like they need paid roles. We’re managing the volunteer challenge, and I’m conscious of our capacity as an organization – there is a possibility of dreaming of something bigger but **we need other leaders to take ideas forwards and we as facilitators can guide that**” – VCFSE, Parsloes Potential*

Parsloes Potential Network presents...



FREE Community Cinema

Saturday 24th January, 2pm
Venue: Kingsley Hall

A welcoming community cinema where families can relax,
connect, and enjoy a film together - Snacks provided

Promoting a Community Cinema concept
developed by [Parsloes Potential](#) residents

Barking &
Dagenham



Putting residents in charge can feel uncomfortable

Despite growing recognition across networks that they can't afford *not* to involve residents more deeply in the delivery of emerging ideas, many have commented on this being a daunting step to take, for a number of reasons:

Reputational concerns: Many VCFSEs in Neighborhood Networks have worked hard over a long time to build a reputation for delivering high quality events – **it's a challenge for organisations to be associated with activities that don't feel under their control.**

Felt obligation to step in: Some organisations have shared how bringing large number of resident together in new ways can give rise to strong emotions, which those with experience feel responsible for, and feel obliged to step in to help manage. Likewise some VCFSEs feel obliged to give time and energy to deliver emerging networks ideas where those feel aligned to their strengths and experience.,

Safety worries: When networks produce ideas for big events, requiring lots of support, we've heard about fears around safeguarding, and ensuring people supporting events have the right training to be able to deliver events in a safe way

" I don't know how to be part of something and not be fully present – not take on all obligations. Our strengths need to be on the table and offered to things, but not taken for granted" – VCFSE

Managing diverse opinions [...] while maintaining fairness and keeping everyone engaged is more complex than anticipated" – VCFSE

Emerging opportunities to catalyse stronger resident-led approaches

Our learning conversations have revealed some specific steps that feel helpful right now to support resident to take the lead within network activities – things that can “scaffold” deeper participation and support the broader ambition of Neighbourhood Networks to grow and release residents’ skills strengths into the borough. Some of these are actively being taken by individual networks, while others are opportunities being explored at the programme level as things that all networks may be able to benefit from.

First aid training: Some networks are drawing down fund to invest in first-aid training for volunteers, to help them feel confident in mobilising residents in delivering and supporting large-scale events.

Access to expertise in resident-led approaches: One network has shared an interest in wider approaches to decision-making with residents, including “deep democracy” methods – we meet this ambition, we are exploring how we might help networks engage with community leaders that have practical experience and expertise involving resident in more hands-on roles – for instance from the Barnsley [Ward Alliance](#) programme.

Investing in coaching skills: Networks have shared how it can be intimidating to hear the sheer scale and range of ideas residents have about what could happen locally. This can feel overwhelming if it's felt to be something that has to be brought to life solely by the creativity of VCFSEs. In this context, we've heard about the value of using coaching skills when soliciting ideas from people - opening up conversations that help residents take responsibility for owning those ideas and fleshing out what could first sounds unclear or overly ambitious idea, and turning it into something workable.

Steering towards "activities" over events: One network has shared how it can be helpful to aim at catalysing more informal, organic and spontaneity-friendly activities that don't depend on lots of coordinated planning and prep time to get "right" - these can feel more sustainable than bigger and more official "events" or "programmes" that oblige VCFSEs to step in, coordinate and manage.

Recognising skills in the community: A number of organisations have commented on the importance of being open, as professionals, to learning from local residents as part engagement. For example, by being more conscious of, curious about, and willing to learn from the different skills that younger people possess, networks might build confidence in pursuing deeper resident-led approaches and be open to share greater responsibilities with younger resident to enhance what's emerging from network activity.

Summary of value being produced



Boosting wellbeing, connection and environment

Networks are making their strongest impact on three main areas:

- **Connection:** Networks are focused on connecting families and generations together – building wider and stronger relationships that are essential to community resilience.
- **Wellbeing:** Bringing people together is often explicitly focusing on people’s wellbeing, particularly for younger-people.
- **Environment:** Networks are stoking awareness and collective action in support of cleaner, greener environments

Building the muscle of civic action

Networks are testing and building up an understanding of how to catalyse civic action – shaping a culture of contribution and facilitated opportunity:

“We came upon the idea of community litter pick. Residents designed a flyer to promote it and we formed a WhatsApp group. The next day, one of the residents posted notes she’d taken of the meeting – no-one knew she was taking any, and she just took the initiative. It might be a tiny example, but feels huge in terms of residents taking the lead. There is much further for us to go, but it felt like a tiny glimmer!” – VCFSE, Neighbourhood Heart

Where there's more to do: addressing place challenges in a joined up way

To date, we've seen a lot of overlap in [priorities](#) emerging from networks - wellbeing, environment, intergenerational links - though **we haven't seen lots in the way of networks teaming up to address common goals in a "place-focused" way.**

It's not yet clear how far different networks feel they understand one another's strengths, how those strengths can complement one another, or how they might share information and resources to support more joined up action on priorities and challenges across the borough.

This "place-level" thinking (and our [learning questions](#) around these) will be a big focus in the coming quarter, where we will also be homing in more on how networks can collaborate more effectively with other place partners, including local services and broader organisations across Barking & Dagenham.



Drawing different visions of what
neighbourhoods could look like in 18 months,
to guide networks in planning what's next

Local Authority reflections and reciprocal learning

Local authority reflections

Emerging learnings here have been shared with commissioning teams in London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD). In the spirit of two-way learning, they've shared the below reflections and observations on what's coming up so far:

- It's pleasing to see the growing environmental focus / physical environment theme emerging alongside the two established themes of bringing families and generations other, and wellbeing.
- This quarter feels like a 'storming/norming' kind of period where NNs are getting started with events and activities.
- We appreciate that neighbourhood networks are trying to tread the fine line of consultation and engagement and then taking action.
- We note with interest the on going discussions and thinking around 'shaping a culture of contribution', 'the challenges of not being resident-led', 'putting residents in charge can feel uncomfortable', and 'emerging opportunities to catalyse stronger

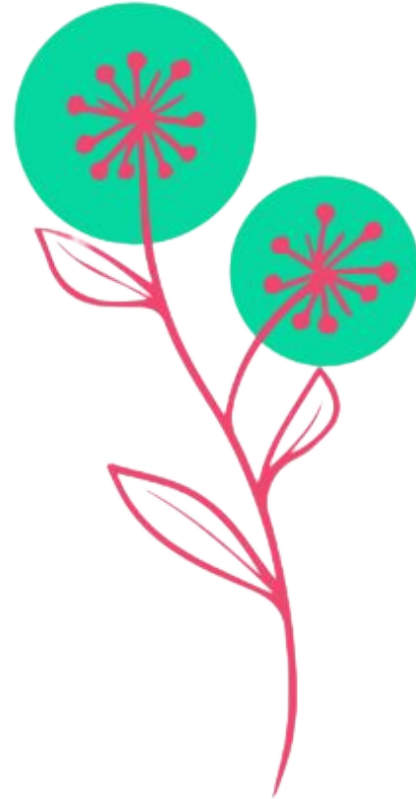


Photos from the February Neighbourhood Networks learning session



resident-led approaches' – we are pleased to see these issues being worked through and are optimistic that once solutions and approaches are found, then neighbourhood networks will begin to 'perform' strongly. (In the sense of evolving from the current 'storming/norming' position).

- We are excited by the key question for the next quarter - how networks can collaborate more effectively with other place partners, including local services and broader organisations across Barking & Dagenham



Appendix 1

Questions in our Learning Framework

Network Level Learning Questions

What we're doing	How we're working	Value we're creating
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are networks choosing to spend money on?• What is the focus and shape of the initiatives being developed by networks? (which communities, in what way?)• What resident outcomes are networks seeking to improve? (e.g. reducing inequalities, mental health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How engaged are residents in networks?• To what extent is power shared / collective wisdom being used?• How are initiatives developed or thought through? (inside and outside of meetings)• How are ideas being prioritised? / What's the process for deciding on funding allocations?• To what extent is network activity drawing upon knowledge of and access to borough assets? What is enabling / blocking that?• How are people being brought into networks?• How sustainable does network activity feel, for organisations / residents?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What's going well / not well within networks? Biggest successes and challenges?• What are the experiences of residents participating in networks?• What are the experiences of the organisations participating in networks?• What impact has network activities had to individuals in a place?• What implications does learning about value creation have for wider prevention work?

Place Level Learning Questions

Barriers and enablers to getting a network up and running

- What makes successful network delivery possible?]
- What gets in the way of setting up a network?
- What are barriers / enablers to network growth and effectiveness?

Collaborating across networks

- How do/can we share learning well across networks?
- How do/can we come together to identify common opportunities?
 - How do/can networks share information, resources, and opportunities?
 - How do different networks understand each other's roles, priorities, and strengths?
 - To what degree do networks feel they are co-creating solutions across the place, rather than competing for space/resources?
- How inclusive is place-level collaboration of smaller, less-resourced organisations alongside larger ones?
- How well are cross-network activities addressing shared local challenges and opportunities?
- How effectively do collaborations leverage diversity of perspectives to strengthen outcomes?

Working across a “place” (with broader organisations)

- How well do networks understand what’s happening across a Borough?
 - What are networks looped into? What assets do they know of locally?
 - How linked are networks to services / other agencies?
- How much trust exists between networks and between networks and wider system partners (e.g., statutory bodies)?
- To what extent do networks feel they have an equal voice in place-level decision-making?
- How can LBBB remove barriers to networks being able to achieve change?

What’s the broader impact of networks for the Borough?

- How do networks and their members perceive the added value of coming together at the place level?
- Are the collaborations leading to stronger influence for VCFEs in the borough?
- To what extent is leadership distributed across networks rather than concentrated in a few individuals/organisations?
- How is the quality of life for communities being improved through collaborative work?