



# **Social Cohesion**

**in Barking & Dagenham:**

# **Participatory Approaches**

# Contents

Barking and Dagenham Infographic .....	4
Introduction.....	6
Methods.....	7
<i>Project Overview</i> .....	8
Themes & Findings.....	18
Social Fabric of Barking & Dagenham.....	36
Towards Higher Levels of Cohesion in Barking & Dagenham.....	56
Appendix.....	70

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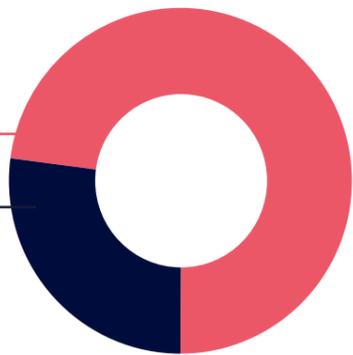
# Barking and Dagenham



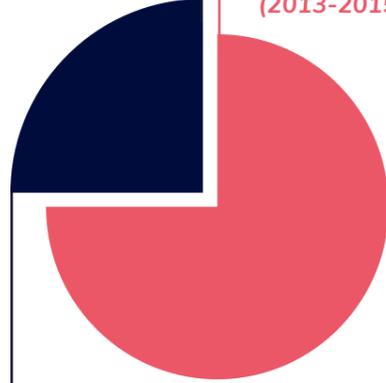
72 different languages spoken

20% drop in residents aged over 65 since 2001

27% of residents are 16 years or under



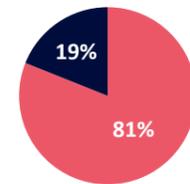
Population turnover = 25%  
Stable population = 75% (2013-2015)



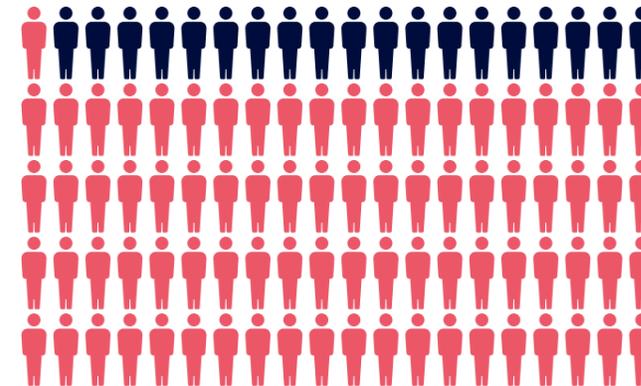
Barking and Dagenham has the largest percentage of residents under the age of 16 in the whole of the UK.

Of that 1/4: 33,000 new residents came 30,000 existing residents left

## In 2001

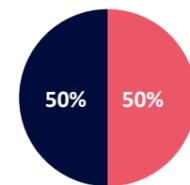


81% of the population identified as White British.

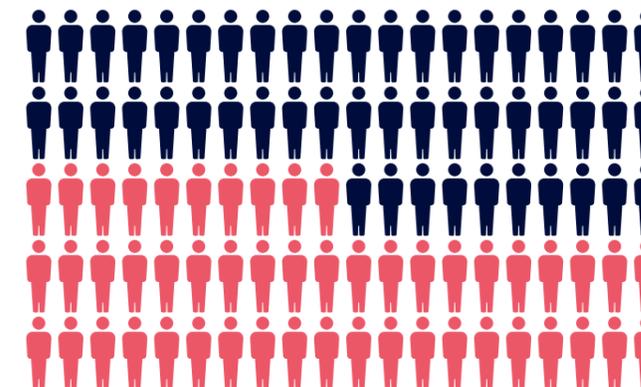


334% increase in residents born outside of the UK & Ireland over the same 10 year period

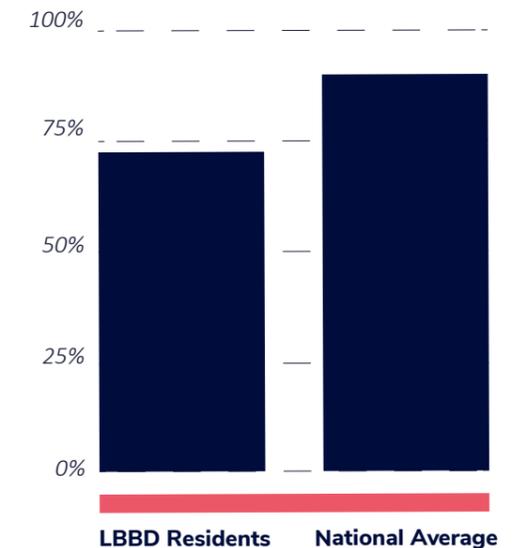
## In 2011



50% of the population identified as White British.



In 2016, LBBD residents scored lowest on perceptions of social cohesion in the whole of the UK.



# Introduction

Barking and Dagenham is a borough characterised in recent years by the increasing social and cultural diversity of its population. There are 72 different languages spoken as the main household language across the borough. Over just two years (2013-2015), the borough’s turnover was approximately a quarter of its population; 33,000 new residents came while roughly 30,000 residents left.

This has brought fast-paced demographic shifts. In 2001, 81% of the population identified as White British, compared with 50% in 2011 (GLA Census 2001, 2011). The White British working-class heritage in Barking and Dagenham still exerts a strong influence on identities and cohesion within the borough, and shapes the experience of many newcomers to the area.

The changing population also resulted in a 20% drop in the number of residents age 65+, and a 334% increase in residents who were born outside the UK and Ireland, over the same ten years (GLA Census 2001, 2011). Barking and Dagenham now has the largest percentage (27%) of residents who are under age 16 in the whole of the UK (ONS: Mid Year Estimates 2018).

In 2016, LBBD’s Residents’ Survey found that just 7 in 10 (72%) residents agreed that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together. This is significantly lower than the national average (89%). Previous research by The Young Foundation echoes this finding, as Barking and Dagenham scores among the lowest 20% of all English local authorities both in terms of funding (in terms of core public spend, as well as philanthropic and charitable investments) as well as ‘community strength’, in terms of community-led activity which strengthens community resources or community ties (YF, 2019).

As a result, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) received funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) under the Integrated Communities Action Plan. From this, LBBD created the ‘Connected Communities’ programme which funds various organisations to create action research projects working on social cohesion in the borough. The Young Foundation partnered with Community Resources; a community organisation local to Dagenham, and together they designed Amplify Barking & Dagenham which was chosen to become a part of LBBD’s Connected Communities network.

Given the local context, Amplify Barking and Dagenham was designed to go beyond the statistics by hearing from local people across the borough about their experience of community and cohesion as residents – and then use this insight to catalyse community-led action on the issues that matter to local people. Over the course of the programme, we employed seven researchers to talk to over 600 residents through hundreds of research engagements. To mobilize what we heard, we also carried out ten workshops focused on sharing experiences of social cohesion in the borough, and co-designing actions to take on the issue with 130 residents over the course of the workshops.

## Aims

1. To generate new insight on social cohesion in Barking & Dagenham.
2. To amplify the voices of residents and groups that are least heard.
3. To support local people to create new initiatives to improve social cohesion.

# Methods

**The Amplify model combines research, storytelling and action in order to build a movement of people that are committed to tackling the issue at hand. In the research section of the programme, we used peer research methods to hear from as many residents as possible in the borough through both light-touch urban interventions, and in-depth interviews. Over the past 18 months, the storytelling and research strands have come together to allow deep insights into the issues surrounding social cohesion in Barking and Dagenham, with the action modules exploring and piloting ideas around how residents can work together to overcome the emerging challenges. The timeline (see Project Overview) illustrates how different components of the Amplify methodology ran in parallel and in sequence, in order to achieve this tight action-research interaction.**

# Project Overview

Oct '18

Jan '19

Mar '19

May '19

July '19

Nov '19

Jan '20

March '20

## Research

Recruitment & Training  
(Oct - Nov)

Phase 1 Research  
in-depth interviews,  
light-touch engagements

Phase 2 Research  
continue research, test findings,  
target hard to reach groups

Research Analysis  
of all collected data

Group  
Analysis  
Day

Group  
Analysis  
Day

## Storytelling

3x Storytelling Events  
food sharing & interactive  
exhibition (April - May)

Participatory  
Video Workshops  
with young people

1 Day Participatory  
Video Workshop  
with amplifiers

## Co-Creation

3x Co-Creation  
Workshops  
Barking Learning Centre

Co-Creation  
Redesign

5 x Co-Creation  
Workshops  
in 3 locations

# Peer Research

The peer research methodology was at the heart of Amplify Barking and Dagenham. Peer research is a participatory research method that sees individuals with a shared experience or identities taking part in planning and conducting the research (Lushey, 2017). For the purpose of this project, nine ‘Amplifiers’ who live Barking and Dagenham were recruited and trained in research practices, as residents would have comprehensive experiences of life in different parts of the borough and connections into many of the different groups who live, work and study there. In similar vein to other participatory research methods, peer research “recognizes that individuals within any community being researched are themselves competent agents, capable of participating in research on a variety of levels, including as researchers” (Higgins et al., 2007: 105). As such, through this methodology we aimed to move away from more traditional ‘extractive’ models of social research (Kindon et al., 2007: 1), and instead endeavoured to create a process that would empower residents to explore the research topics within their communities themselves (Wadsworth, 1998).

The benefits of this approach include:

- **Empowerment** – The research is conducted for and with residents of the borough, and as such the power imbalance that often exists between traditional researcher and subject relationships is readjusted. (Lushey, 2017; Edwards & Alexander, 2011).
- **Access** – As residents, the amplifiers will have deep, hyperlocal expertise of the borough. Their networks and previously existing relationships will allow them to engage participants that professional researchers would not have access to. Further, potential participants may be more trusting of fellow residents. (Elliott et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2002; Guta et al., 2013).
- **Lived experience** – The lived experience that the Amplifiers bring with them, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the issues relating to social cohesion in the borough, enhance the richness of the research (Beresford, 2007; Dixon et al., 2019; Edwards & Alexander, 2011).
- **Better data** – Due to the shared experiences between amplifiers and research participants, the likelihood of misunderstanding is reduced (Smith et al., 2002). Subjects may feel they can answer more honestly and openly, and amplifiers will be better suited to asking probing follow ups in an informal way (Littlechild et al., 2015; Dixon et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2018).
- **Benefits to peer researchers** – The team of amplifiers may benefit personally greatly, by gaining work experience and specific training in social research methods, increasing future employability. (Dixon et al., 2019; Dowling, 2016; Thomas-Hughes, 2018). We have seen previous peer researchers report increased confidence and self-esteem levels. Amplifiers may feel more connected to other residents in the borough, and value the relationships built with fellow researchers throughout the project.

For a more comprehensive explanation and evaluation of the impact of the peer research model in this project, please see the specific Amplify Barking & Dagenham process report.



# Research Tools

Two main approaches were utilised by the amplifiers when conducting research with residents. However, it is important to note that insights gained from the storytelling and co-creation events (pg. 14 - 15), were also captured in order to add nuance and depth to some of the gaps in our data. These types of reflections and observations were captured in the **field notes**, which the Amplifiers recorded over the course of the project.

- **524 light-touch engagements** over 18 pop-up research stalls. These urban interventions were used to start discussions around the borough, and for us to gain quick insight into as many different communities in the borough as possible. Stalls were set up in varying locations, from festivals to shelters for vulnerable members of the community, and at football games to on busy high streets. In these sessions the Amplifiers used following tools:
- **Speech bubbles** – asking about the challenges in Barking and Dagenham, along with their hopes for the borough's future
- **Community maps** – research participants mark significant areas into neighbourhood maps of Barking and Dagenham
- **Identity mapping tool** – created by the team to gauge the extent to which residents felt belonging to different communities using flags and putty
- **Lego Serious Play™** – used to facilitate creative thinking on both perceptions of the borough and dreams for its future
- **137 in-depth interviews** – Amplifiers recruited potential participants through their networks and relationships, and by establishing new connections. Interviews were conducted in an arranged meeting place, such as their home, a café, library or community centre. Amplifiers followed an interview guide, that had a previously agreed-upon questions covering a range of demographic questions and open-ended prompts around social cohesion and community in the borough.





## Storytelling

### Storytelling Events

The purpose of **storytelling events** was to share some of the initial research findings back into the communities of Barking and Dagenham, to better understand whether our analyses of this data was resonating with people on the ground and to capture additional feedback from both participants and others new to the programme. The amplify team organised three storytelling events approximately halfway into the project.

The first event took place at Castle Point in Dagenham, the following two were held in Marks Gate and Thames Ward in Barking respectively. Proving to be very popular, the events saw over 70 residents attend. A range of activities – including community mapping, marking up posters that shared emerging research findings in a creative and visual way, writing postcards on how to improve the borough- served as a way of strengthening the ongoing analysis of the research and adding additional data; simultaneously emerging themes could be probed while encouraging other residents to get involved with the project and their community.

### Participatory Video

Participatory video is a research method that aims to empower people to tell their own stories as representatives of a given community. Through the process participants are encouraged to explore and identify issues important to them, or their community, translate these into a storyboard and ultimately into a film, all while learning some basic film-making techniques that will allow them to do so.

Two sets of participatory video workshops were run during Amplify Barking & Dagenham. The first series was with a cohort of young people. Residents under the age of 25 had proven to be a hard-to-reach group and so the participatory research workshops were conceived as a method to fill this gap in our research. However, because of the challenges many of the young people participating faced in their personal lives, the group needed to meet consistently on a regular basis but this was even more difficult than expected and unfortunately they were unable to complete a video together.

The second participatory video process was conducted with the amplifiers themselves towards the end of the 18 months. It served as a concluding exercise, during which the team explored final reflections on the research findings, the co-creation process, and the impact of participating on them personally.

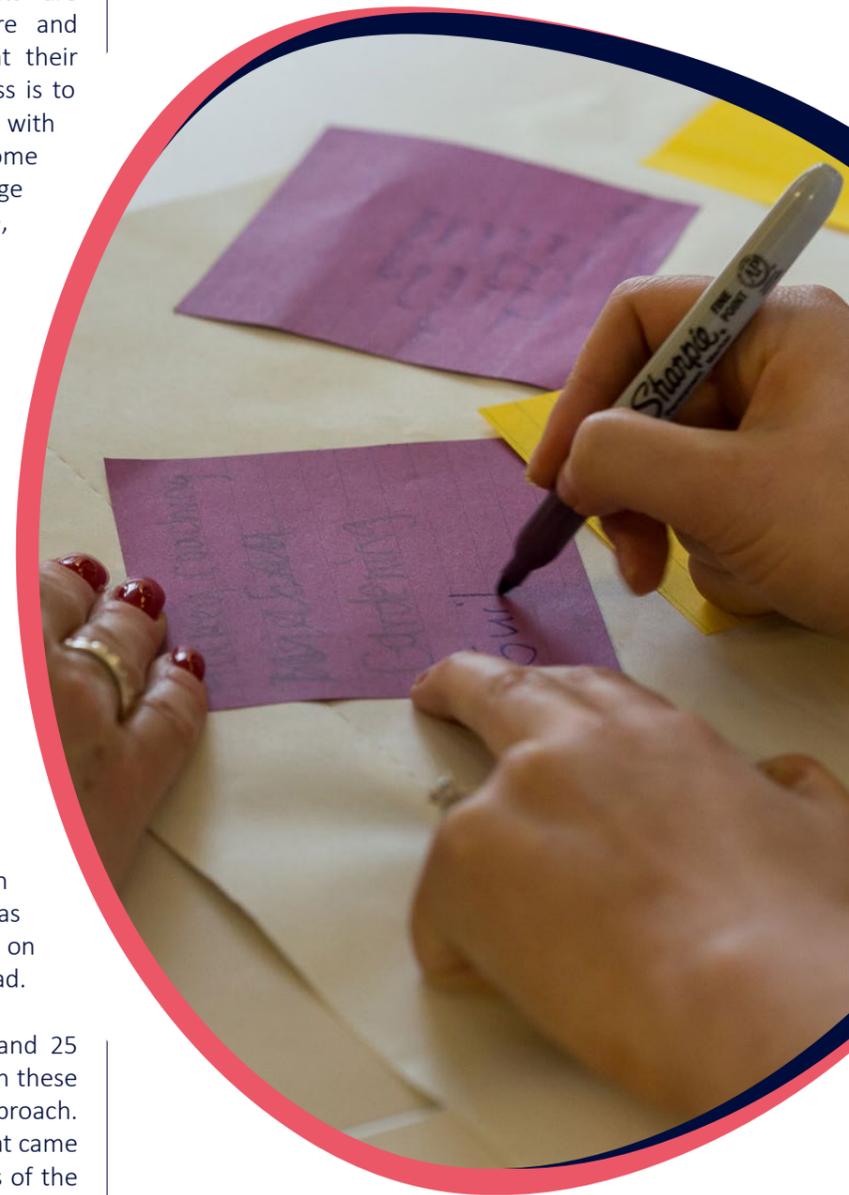
## Co-creation

Co-creation is a process by which residents are encouraged and given the space to explore and pilot ideas to respond to the challenges that their communities are facing. The aim of this process is to facilitate the collaboration of diverse groups, with varying opinions and styles of working, to come together to work on these shared issues. A range of tools and exercises support this collaborative, exploratory process.

Throughout the project, the amplifiers led two waves of co-creation workshops with residents across the borough. These took place in: the Barking Learning Centre, Castle Point Community Centre, Castle Green Community Centre, and the Dagenham Library.

The first took place in Summer 2019, welcoming 34 participants over the course of four workshops. Some of these participants were those who had participated in the research phase of the project, while others joined at this stage after hearing about the workshops through other local partners, posters, local services, or from individuals who had already engaged in the programme. The initial set of workshops focused on common themes across the borough and then was implemented in three different locations based on those themes and the residents that took the lead.

The second wave took place in Spring 2020 and 25 participants attended across three workshops. In these workshops, we took a slightly different approach. Rather than beginning with the main themes that came from the research, we used three specific areas of the borough that came up the most in the interviews and ran workshops in each of them. The aim of the projects developed in each area were based on current issues in these hyper-local areas that the participating residents felt most invested in.



# Limitations

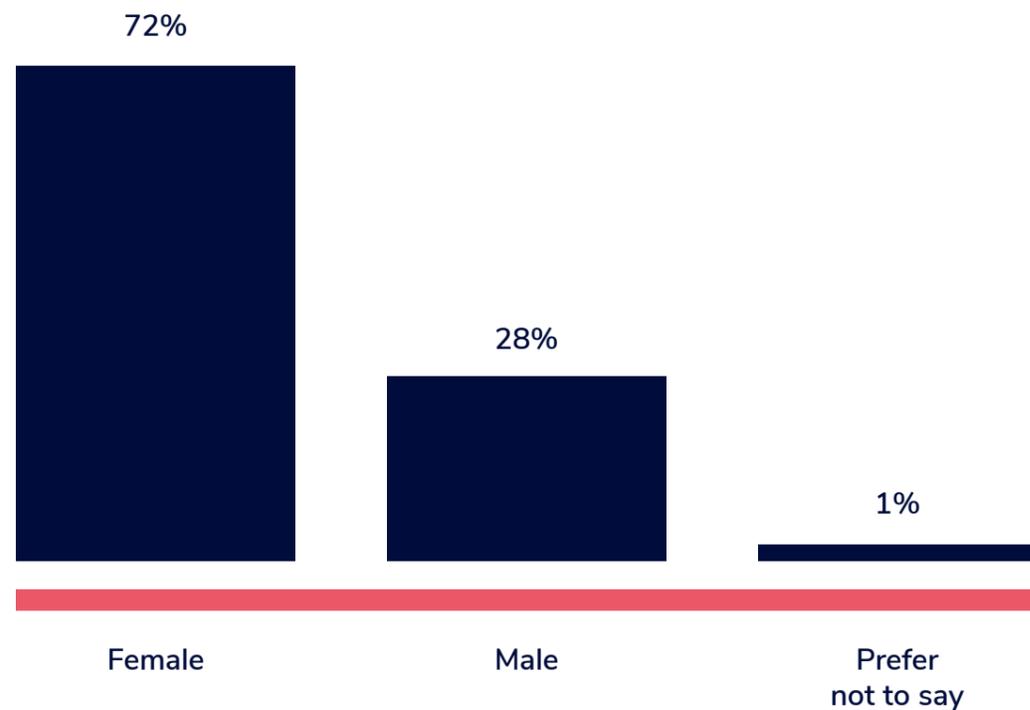
It should be noted that although the team of community researchers was a diverse group of residents reflecting different backgrounds in the borough, the data collected was still limited to the teams' specific networks and as such some demographic groups proved harder to reach than others. As a result, the data cannot be taken as a perfectly representative sample of the borough. However, groups that emerged as hard-to-reach were targeted using specific methods and interventions once the gaps had been identified.

Further, as Community Resources is a faith-based organisation and much of the team's activities were centred around their various sites in the borough, there might be an additional skew towards these networks and associated groups.

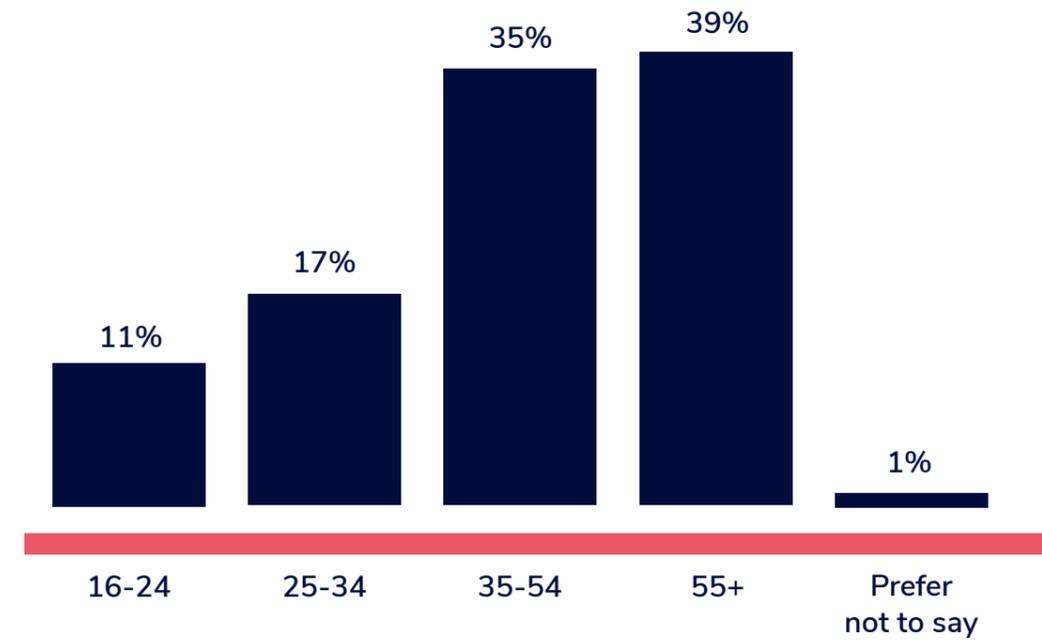
The varying levels of technological literacy present in the team of community researchers was also a factor affecting the quality of the data collected and transcribed.

Finally, the recent upsurge in council-funded programmes in the area has contributed to a degree of consultation- and participation-fatigue amongst some residents, posing an additional challenge for the team to engage residents – particularly those less inclined to participate in this type of research in the first place.

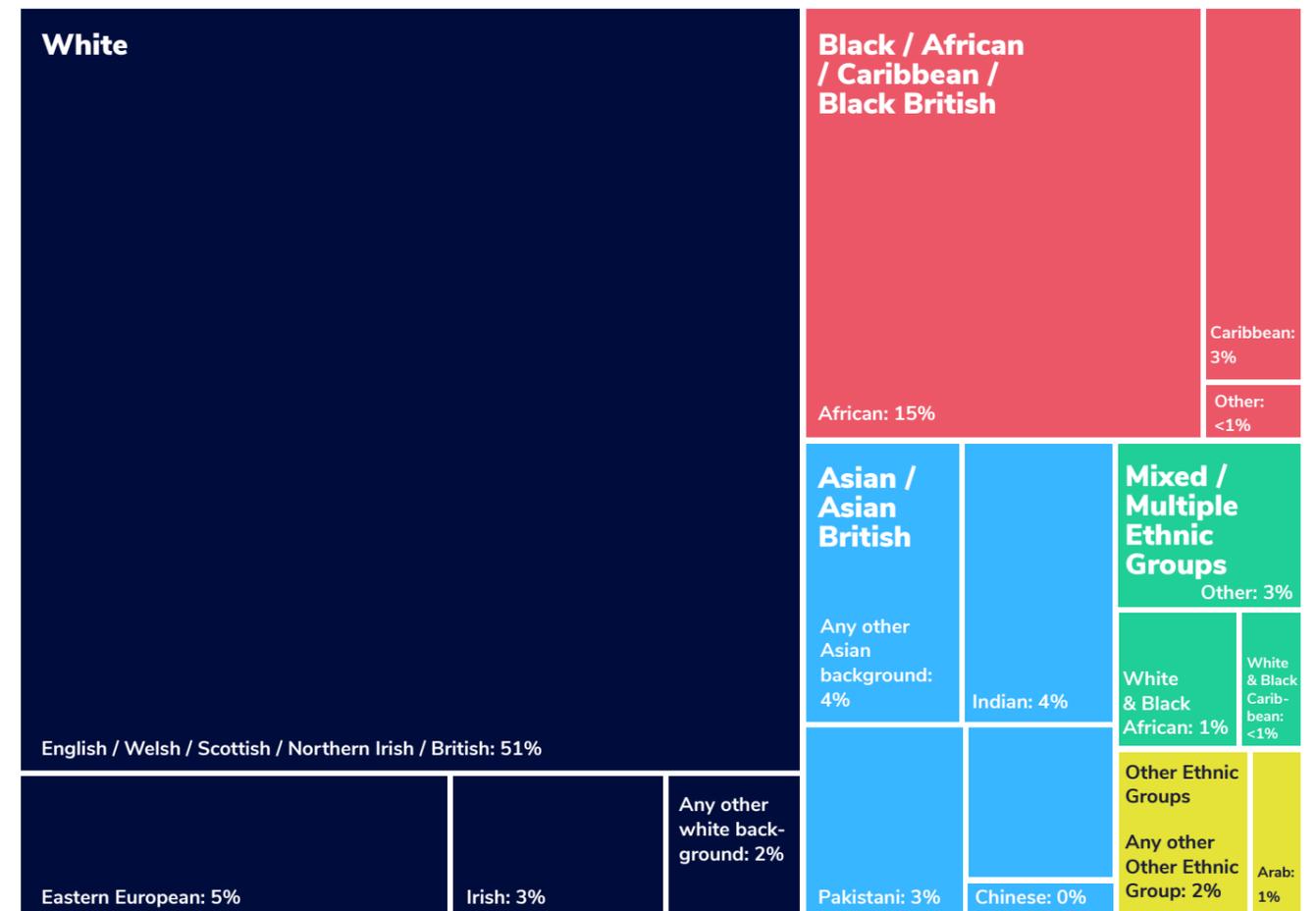
Participants by Gender



Participants by Age



Participants by Ethnicity



## Defining the Ideal

**When I say community, what comes to mind?  
What does “community” mean to you?**

*“Different types of people having something in common that they are doing that is positive. Spending time with one another. Knowing where things are, being able to access things that meet your needs. Being able to contribute something positive towards the people and area where you live. Somewhere you feel you belong, and you feel you contribute towards it.”*  
(Female, 25-34, Multiple Ethnic Background)

*“Neighbours, supporting one another. I’m an East End girl and community was always important...”*  
(Female, 39, White British)

In Barking and Dagenham, it emerged that support and togetherness are at the core of almost all definitions of community. This was true for almost all residents, regardless of whether they themselves felt they belonged or were part of any communities. In fact, ‘looking out for each other’ emerged as a prevalent theme. Many definitions included an acknowledgement and celebration of diversity; highlighting that it is precisely this coming together of different groups that make up community.

*“Community means we are one borough and it doesn’t matter what ethnicity you are. We are communal together.”*  
(Male, 35-54, British Pakistani)

*“Community means coming together in crisis, being there for each other no matter the differences, class, age, culture etc. Respect for the area we live in...”*  
(Female, 55+, White British)



# Themes & Findings

## Experiences of Social Cohesion

**Social cohesion refers to the relationships and networks that make up communities and the extent to which these interact with one another. We looked at how this was experienced on both the individual and group level through the research. To begin, it is important to outline how social cohesion is experienced by exploring different understandings of community, as this is fundamental to understanding the possibility for a shared vision of social cohesion in the borough.**

*“It is a warm word. Lots of people coming together including different faiths and different races. Community spirit in this block is great. We care about each other. Once a baby got locked in and we all got together to help the neighbour. My husband went and got a ladder from a builder in order to get to the baby.”*  
(Female, 35-54, British Pakistani)

## The Reality of Cohesion in the Borough - An Overview

Building on general senses of 'community' from residents, we looked at how it was experienced by them in Barking and Dagenham in particular. We found that for some people, it was impossible to speak about community, even in the ideal, separately from the physical place. For those who spoke distinctly about the ideal of what they thought community should be and how they experienced it in Barking and Dagenham, there were a broad range of responses: from those where ideal and reality aligned, to those who experience a vast gulf between their hopes and experience.

Overall, of those spoken to in-depth, five times as many agreed with the statement that in Barking and Dagenham people from different backgrounds get on well with each other, than disagreed. Nonetheless, a large proportion of residents voiced mixed feelings about this statement – explaining that while there are some examples of strong cohesion in the borough, these are matched with incidences of conflict.

*"Pretty good but could be better. There are a lot of 'cliques', lots of diversity but not all ethnicities mixing together. A strong community would be one where everyone cooperates, looks out for each other, willing to help each other, neighbours help each other, being selfless. Feel safer because of people's caring nature."*  
(Female, 25-34, British Pakistani)

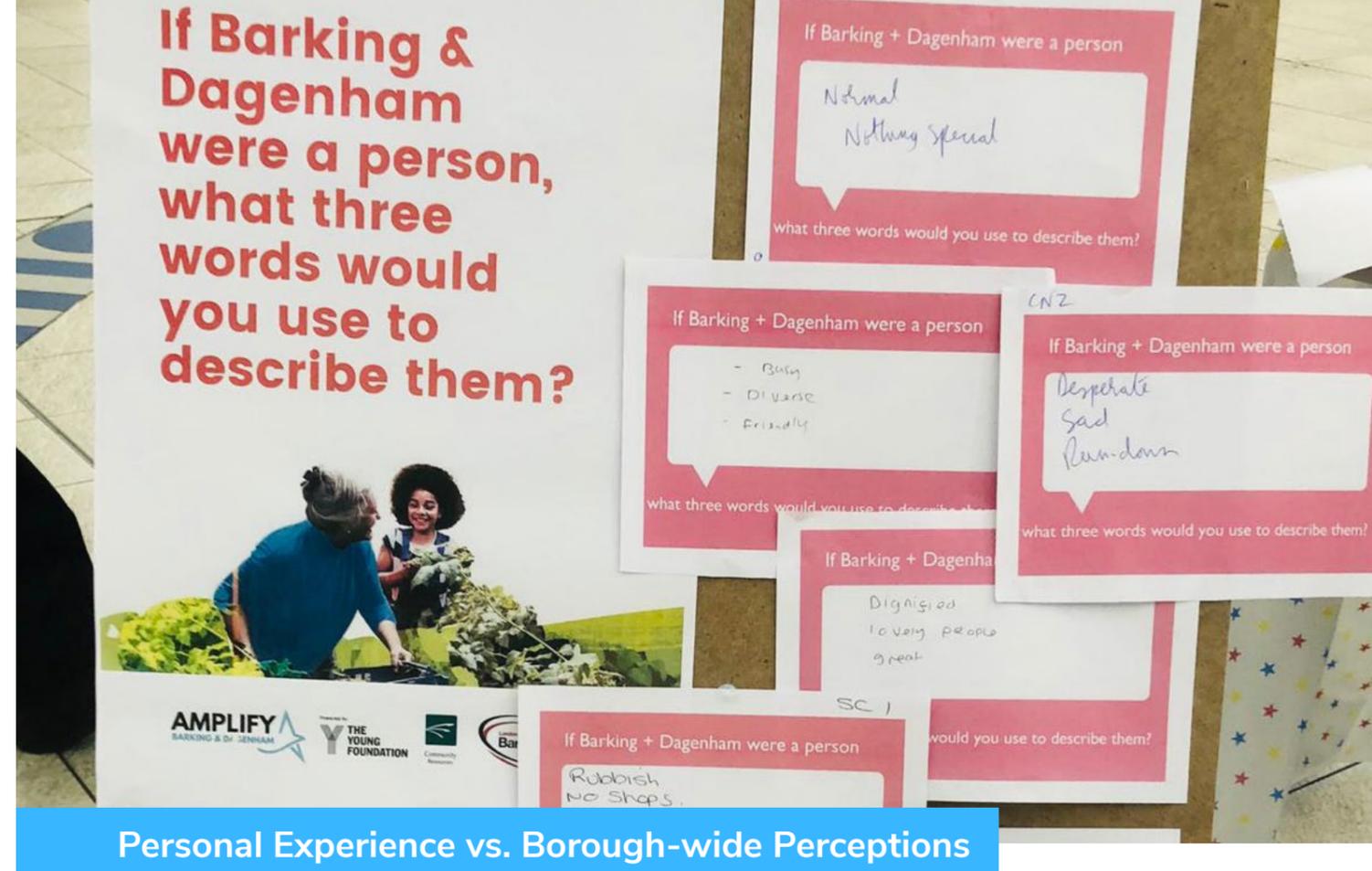
When speaking about this disparity between people's ideal of community and their daily experiences of it, residents often cite tensions between people coming from different areas and backgrounds as a main barrier to achieving this ideal of community and neighbourliness. The historical context of Barking and Dagenham and the rapid demographic changes it has undergone, mean that differences between older and newer residents are often implicit in how any resident understands and experiences social cohesion in the borough.

Among those who feel a strong sense of community and social cohesion, we heard about faith-based communities, organised groups, and the sense of belonging which comes by virtue of being a parent or living on a particular street.

*"There are many different groups I belong to. There is a group of Asian women where I feel a sense of community. With mothers at school where my children go, I find it again - a sense of community. Here at the Hub there is a sense of community and I feel I'm part of it. Lifeline community is another place I belong. However, there are people I know that they don't feel part of any community, they feel they don't belong, they are isolated. Sometimes it's about the lack of knowledge, finding out and being willing to engage"*  
(Female, 40, Indian British)

While positive experiences of community were most frequently associated with shared-experience- or interest-based groups, people were more likely to speak about demographic groups in reference to lacking cohesion – age; ethnicity; area within the borough; and length of having lived in Barking and Dagenham.

*"There's a division - a positive and negative side to things. Elderly people do not like community because it has changed from what they know. Ethnicity issues, friends have moved away and they feel isolated and lonely. But some places have good community. It feels unsafe at times and lots of trouble with the youth."*  
(Male, 35-54, Mixed Asian/Black)



## Personal Experience vs. Borough-wide Perceptions

A common theme among residents was an implicit contradiction between local experiences of social cohesion and their perception of cohesion in the wider borough. Many residents highlighted how strong the sense of community is in their immediate surroundings – their street, their estate, their building. 'Neighbourliness and friendliness' came up five times more often than any other theme in our analysis. However, this perception did not translate into perceiving the borough as cohesive overall and instead suggests that people often see their own situation as an exception from the norm.

*"...There is no community in Barking. The only community is in Dagenham Church 'London Riverside Church'. What comes to mind is neighbours, being able to speak to neighbours. Community is when all neighbours get together to speak out and make a difference"*  
(Female, 27, Black British)

We were confronted with the widely spread narrative that Barking and Dagenham is a rapidly changing and wildly diverse place, with remarkably low levels of social cohesion – and yet, individuals' experiences often told different stories. The role that the media's portrayal of the borough had in painting this picture was unpicked during the first wave of participatory video workshops. Additionally, the narrative of 'two boroughs' and the fragmented geographic identities within Barking and Dagenham came up particularly among older participants. The prevalence of this contradiction between experience and perceptions of social cohesion suggest that the wider narrative that surrounds the borough may often act to undermine more positive feelings and experiences on the individual level.

Unsurprisingly, people who are part of a specific group often perceive themselves very differently to how they are characterised by those who are not – and those who are not in the group may also have differing perceptions. Often, people are seen as a member of a group based on shared, visible identities – such as age, ethnicity or disability – but experiences of cohesion and distance are also shaped by belonging or not to other groups built around shared activities, interests, and places.

### Ethnicity

When asked to think about social cohesion, groups defined by ethnicity were the most commonly referred to. This is not to say that people are quick to identify ethnicity as a barrier or enabler to social cohesion directly, but rather, that many interpreted the question primarily – and sometimes, exclusively – along these lines. This is perhaps predictable, as ethnicity is often the most salient in social interactions, as a result of language, race or cultural differences, and the language of ‘social cohesion’ is often used primarily in relation to ethnicity, race and immigration in politics and the media. We provide here some initial insights into how different ethnic groups in the borough are referred to in terms of being a source of or a barrier to connection. A more comprehensive analysis of how ethnicity may interplay with other factors such as rate of change, prejudice, safety or experiences of belonging within the borough can be found in the sections below.

#### Within Group

When talking about specific ethnic groups, residents are four times more likely to do so in terms of not feeling connected to these groups than feeling connected to them. This is only true when talking about groups that they themselves do not belong to. For groups they do belong to, residents are much more likely to portray these as a source of connection; friendship, mutual support, belonging.

*“I think I would say the Asian group, since I have known them for long time, and we have become very good friends. We connect because we share the same interests, like have the same culture, which I think it can help at times as well.”*  
(Female, 40, Indian British)

A small, but not negligible, fraction of residents feel disconnected from their own ethnic groups. Individuals who self-define as White British are least likely to refer to their own group as a source of connection. This may be in part because many people feel there is an expectation to be connected to other people in one’s respective group, and when this expectation does not match lived experience the sense of isolation is even greater than it might have been without this underlying belief.

*“In my experience, people from my country are the most difficult ones to build friendship and form community. I know it’s interesting, but I find freedom and access mostly from people of other cultures and countries, not my own. I don’t know (why this happens) ... When I first arrived here, I tried to make friends from my own country, because my English was very limited but never happened...”*  
(Female, 35-54, Spanish)

#### About Other Groups

Almost all residents acknowledge the diversity of the borough’s population. Many make a point of saying that they do not feel more connected to any specific group of residents, but rather that they feel connected to all people regardless of their ethnicity.

*“I try to speak to all different types of people at the school. I talk to Mums of all different nationalities. I’m quite a social person and like to talk to different people and find out about their way of life, culture and religion”*  
(Female, 39, White British)

*“Feel connected to everyone. I’ve always been around diverse people. I’m friendly to everyone”*  
(Female, 25 - 34, White British)

Nonetheless, there is a strong narrative around certain groups “keeping themselves to themselves”. This is, however, rarely accompanied with people talking about having made a real attempt to connect with those groups and instead often appears to serve as a justification for not having done so and shifting responsibility onto others.

*“Some people can adapt quick and join the society, however, most other cultures tend to keep themselves to themselves, they get along with people from same culture or religion which makes it harder to mix and know each other. For example, one of the neighbours was horrible to the other neighbour of other culture for simple things, which is sad. This matters because people don’t connect and causes division”*  
(Prefers not to say)

*“The Asian community. They tend to keep themselves to themselves.”*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

*“I do not trust them. I’ve seen on a few occasions where they have robbed someone in broad day.”*  
(Male, 35-54, Albanian)

## Guzim's Story

For the past 12 years, Guzim has lived in the same area of Dagenham with his wife and children. He has mixed feelings about the area. On one hand, he feels his neighbourhood is full of good people with whom he gets on well. Guzim enjoys the parks and Future Youth Zone for his kids. On the other, however, he feels unsafe in certain areas and feels that young people are often causing trouble.

Guzim feels that, "there is a divide between the English people and foreigners." At the same time, he doesn't trust 'gypsies' in the borough and says he has seen them rob someone in broad daylight. He thinks having more events such as street parties would allow people to get talking to one another.

**Guzim, Male, 35-54, Albanian**



Faith-based groups represent a fundamental aspect of community for many people. In turn, religion was also frequently pointed to as affecting social cohesion – both in positive and negative ways. Many of those who identify as a member of a religious group feel that the main place that they can interact with people from different backgrounds is through this community. For people who are not part of a faith-based community, they often represent sources of division.

Members of faith-based communities frequently highlight these groups as being a main source of community in their lives. This could be in part due to the fact that some places, including Community Resources where the team were based, serve as a community centre but with strong links to a religious group, so for those who are involved the church is very much at the centre of their community. However, this came up across people of different faiths in the borough – possibly because many of those who have more recently moved to the borough have found it as an immediate community.

*“For me [the most important community] would be church. Community means closeness, helping one another. I’ve been going to Lifeline Church for 2 years, it makes a difference spiritually, wellbeing. Knowing a lot more people, knowing what you can do to make a difference.”*  
(Female, 25-34, White British)

*“It’s about getting the connection... Local Mosque in Barking has pensioners lunch every Friday (over 55 group)”*  
(Female, 25-34, Pakistani)

*“Community is group of people with similar mindsets, people who support one-another, a place where people feel at home and seek help. I personally had both parents but I never felt home or like a belonged to a family... so for me, I never experienced this support until I came here in Life Line church... Community should be inclusive and open to people around.”*  
(Female, 40, Eastern European)

Conversely, residents who themselves do not belong to faith-based communities often view such group with scepticism and distance. There is a strong sense that faith-based groups are closed off to ‘outsiders’ and that they reinforce separation and existing divisions between people, rather than bring them closer together.

*“People of each religion tend to stick with people of their own religion. This can be [may be] isolating. If there was something that brought [people from] different religions together. I believe that most religions teach the same values and beliefs.”*  
(Male, 16-24, Mixed/Black British)

*“Sometimes, I think religion coming together is slightly improving, but often is represented as religion focuses more on their king so they form tribes. So it’s not that they can’t get along its that they don’t know each other.”*  
(Male, 20, English)

## Ndidi’s Story

Ndidi is a certified accountant working in the city of London. She has lived in Barking for 22 years and feels that the area has become less friendly in this time, pointing to the transient population and ‘buy to let’ properties as a main driver of this.

Ndidi attends her local church and feels most connected to others in this self-elected ‘family’ of hers. She mainly socializes with African and Caribbean residents through church and feels less connected with people of different faiths. Ndidi doesn’t go out after 10pm and avoids certain areas of the borough.

**Ndidi, 55+, Black African**



## Age

Two groups are predominately defined by their age: young people and old people. Whilst people often recognize overlap within other groups (e.g. you can be part of both a ‘parent’ community and the ‘Asian’ community), young or old people are often referred to in exclusively those terms. This may be in part due to the day-to-day realities that many people within these age brackets share with one another – going to school or being retired – but these generalisations often lead to important differences in individual experiences being minimised, with a resulting risk of isolation.

### Young people

Barking and Dagenham has 57,535 under 16s, which is the highest proportion of children in all the UK. As most of the young people we spoke to attend school, it naturally means they generally spend a lot of time with other young people. Yet this does not always translate into feelings of connection. Many young people have moved to Barking and Dagenham in recent years, and a significant proportion of them still feel more connected to their previous homes. Many speak of a lack of connection to their peers in the borough.

*“I don’t spend time or socialise here; I just go to school and go home. I socialise in south London (Catford) where I used to live”*  
(Female, 16-24, Black British)

*“I feel more connected to my year group, because I have more things in common. Although I often just go alongside them, there isn’t really a connection or relationship... I do not feel connected... It’s the peer pressure that wants us to change and be different, like some young people join gangs as that way they can be heard and draw attention to themselves, at least they don’t feel lonely.”*  
(Male, 20, English)

Many residents associate low (perceived) levels of safety in Barking and Dagenham with the young people in the borough, with their presence in public spaces making some people uncomfortable. While young people are aware of this perception, they also feel that frequently there is nowhere for them to go.

*“I get along with everyone I come across. However, teenagers in the street will make me feel uncomfortable because of the experience I told you about earlier, and the media as well.”*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

Simultaneously, young people themselves often experience the borough as unsafe – especially at night. They speak about local gangs and the perception that one has to develop a tough skin to get by.

*“I avoid the Heathway as much as possible. The only time I go there is if I need to get the train. I don’t feel safe there.”*  
(Male, 16-24, White British)

*“There is a gang culture here. Always large groups which makes me nervous.”*  
(Male, 16-24, Black British)

*“I would like to change the safety in the area by raising the numbers of police in the area, because if people in gangs saw police around, they will be more afraid of doing crimes, violence etc. Also, the community will feel more secure knowing there are more police around. When I was in secondary school at Mayfield some of the teachers used to do the police work in order to keep the place under control.”*  
(Female, 18, White British)

That said, all the young people we spoke to value diversity but believe that social and language barriers need to be overcome for that diversity to flourish and be seen as a positive aspect of the community.

## Alice's Story

Alice is a student at Coventry University London. She has lived in Barking with her mum and dad for 18 years. Although Alice feels safe, she is acutely aware of the high crime rates in Barking town centre – close to where she lives. She feels there is not much going on for young people, which is why she and her friends resort to meeting in cafes or restaurants. Alice almost never goes to Dagenham.

According to her, there's no real community in her area and people of different backgrounds do not interact at all. She finds this to be particularly true for the Asian community: "They isolate themselves don't speak to people other than their own.... Also, language is a big problem, it's hard to get to know neighbours when they don't speak to each other."

**Alice, 20, White British**

## Older people

It is frequently the older people in the borough who are a part of the longer established community, and so in some ways are the group who have been most deeply impacted by the speed of the demographic shifts. Over the last ten years, the proportion of the population aged 65+ dropped by 20% in the borough. This has resulted in some older members of the community feeling nostalgic for the past, and feeling that the borough has lost its former 'community spirit'.

"(I would describe the community spirit as) 50% either way due to original residents keeping the community spirit alive. New people are moving in who are not community orientated. Moving in for the wrong reason."

**(Female, 55+, White British)**

"When I was younger we'd leave our street door open and neighbours would just pop their head in and ask my nan (who I lived with) if she was ok and would pop in for tea and unfortunately a lot of that community spirit seems to have died off with the older generation. The younger generation seem to make less time or don't have time and people keep themselves to themselves more and don't join in with their neighbours and that's quite sad. Some people have family but others don't, some people may be lonely and you may be the only person that they get to speak to all week (particularly elderly neighbours)."

**(Female, 39, White British)**

While some younger residents appear eager to reach out to older neighbours and build connection, there is also evidence of reluctance coming from both sides.

"I struggle to connect with the younger generation particularly, but I always speak to them as I want to break the ice, show love to them, be an example. Sometimes I speak to them because of fear; if they are few of them together I'm afraid what may happen, so I speak first to them and they usually are polite to me. Why am I fearful? Well, once in a bus stop a young gentleman pushed through the queue and was very rude to an older lady, shouting screaming etc. Also, media hearing about the knife crimes that are happening."

**(Female, 55+, White British)**

Overall, the generational divide seems to be particularly acute in Barking and Dagenham, with many people voicing a lack of connection to people distant in age.

"Youngsters seem to have no respect for their areas anymore or the elderly. I was on a crowded bus the other day and two young girls were asked by an elderly lady to give up a priority seat and they kissed their teeth at her."

**(Male, 35-54, White British)**



## Shared Activities, Interests and Life Experiences

Many people report belonging to formally established community groups, specific pubs, sports teams or gyms. It is notable that when speaking about these groups there is little mention of demographic categories, with the focus on the joy that comes from pursuing an interest and connecting to others who share it.

*"The local football club gives a sense of community - "a massive community spirit"... I think sport is massive in bringing people together. (During the world cup last year everyone forgot their problems and came together.)"*  
(Male, 16-24, Mixed White/Black British)

*"People who go to the pub. The pub can be/should be the heart of a community. That has changed. People haven't got the money for one thing. I enjoy engaging with people in a social setting."*  
(Male, 35-54, White British)

*"Other people that go to my gym (in a local leisure centre). It's a nice community to be in and we talk about all kinds of things. The Leisure Centre does a lot of things in / for the community - clubs and activities."*  
(Male, 16-24, Mixed White/Black British)

It is often these shared activity groups that allow even the most isolated residents in the borough to feel more connected to others.

*"I feel very alone, isolated and misunderstood. I feel lonely all the time. I find it hard to connect with many people in the borough. Sometimes I feel connected to women at my gym - often they speak to me."*  
(Female, 25-34, Mixed British / White / Black Caribbean)

Having a strong sense of community becomes more important, and often more accessible, during certain phases of people’s lives, with parenthood being a particularly notable example. Many parents feel most connected to other parents in the borough. Both the shared experience of parenthood, as well as the pragmatic opportunity to meet other parents at school, play- or parent-groups often enables a greater sense of community within this group. Positive interactions – from simply recognising each other through to deep friendships – which cut across demographic and economic divides, has benefits far beyond the school gate. Residents who had met in parent groups generally spoke more positively about diversity overall.

“There’s a good network of mums in the area once you get “connected”. It’s about getting the connection. We needed a Mums Group and I led on so many things. I run 2 groups which opens up so many doors.”  
(Female, 25-34, Pakistani)

“I have a strong sense of community where I live. In Dagenham I feel I know other people who work in the area, people who live in the area, people who share a faith with me, people from the community centre and parents who go to the same toddler groups/school as my children. Therefore, generally I think community is strong in Dagenham. Nearly every time I leave the house, I bump into someone I know which is great.”  
(Female, 35-54, English)

“Parents, especially mothers. Working mothers need that comfort from them to know that I am not the only one who has struggles; we all share the same struggles.”  
(Female, 35-54, British Asian)

“I go to breakfast with some school mums once a week in a cafe near school. I tend to stay quite local and not branch out too far in case my son has any problems. I belong to a Parent/Carer forum which helps to support local families of children with SEN, parents of children with Autism/Downs Syndrome/ADHD. We hold our meetings once every few months and get in different speakers to keep them informed of anything going on in the Borough for SEN children.”  
(Female, 39, White British)

However, some residents feel that while parenthood has allowed them to see and interact with different communities, it has not necessarily led to connection.

“You get lots of different communities, like mums at school gate can have their community, work place, or group faiths can have their own community.”  
(Female, 16-24, Black Caribbean)

“School gates and walking home from school mixing doesn’t tend to happen as children go straight to their parents’ car.”  
(Female, 55+, White British)

“When you walk in the playground you’ll see that the Asian mums stand together, the white English mums stand together and the Eastern European mums will stand together, and I feel that sometimes, whereas I talk to all the mums. I think it is fantastic that our children are taught about all the different faiths and mix - it would nice if the parents learnt from their children and did the same. This would give people a greater understanding and connection to each other.”  
(Female, 39, White British)

For many, family and community are synonymous as immediate and extended family alike are viewed as a main source of community. This conceptualisation of community is often, but not always, accompanied with lower levels of engagement on the neighbourhood or borough level.

“Community to me is all about the family and friends; the people make the community not the surroundings.”  
(Male, 16-24, Multiple mixed ethnicity)

“[In the borough I feel most connected to] friends and family. My family and I make an effort to meet up on a Thursday.”  
(Male, 35-54, White British)

There is a sense that residents without children or a family are excluded from much community life, as many events, groups and activities are targeted primarily at families with children.

“Community projects, activities involving local people and their neighbourhood. What stops this from happening at the moment is lack of vision, lack of funding, excluding people who don’t have kids. No central coordination.”  
(Male, 35, Mixed British)



# Social Fabric of B+D

While for almost everyone we talked to there is some aspect of their lives that they feel allows them to connect with others, linking this individual experience to a broader sense of community is yet to happen in many cases. This ability to create tight-knit bonds with neighbours, fellow parents, members of the same religious community or ethnic group is what we call ‘bonding capital’ (Putnam, 2001). The residents of Barking and Dagenham time and time again point to examples of this. ‘Friendliness and neighbourliness’ was mentioned more than any other theme in our analysis.

Ideally, with this ‘bonding capital’ comes ‘bridging capital’. This speaks to having personal connections which create a link with other groups of people, who might be different from them. No group is homogenous, and there can be bridging capital within strongly bonded groups – such as across generations within a faith group, or across ethnic divides among school children and their families – but people having connections (or ‘weak ties’) to groups outside their main personal or professional networks is strongly associated with more inclusive communities. It is those weak ties which often seem to be missing in Barking and Dagenham.

To build on this, we decided to investigate why despite strong bonding capital between groups, and a shared value of neighbourliness, bridging capital is lacking. We identified several key factors in individual experiences of borough-wide belonging: the narrative of the borough and its history; the high rate of change in Barking and Dagenham; the benefits and challenges that come with greater diversity; and the impact of uneven access to services.

“Usually different communities do events where they invite only their kind and they don’t open it to the public, therefore the community does not exist if we all don’t join in. There is no public announcements to inform everyone. How can we include others? We can invite others by using social media, banners and so on”  
(M, 20, Prefers not to say ethnicity)

“One of the main places is the pub but the Eva Hart is generally white working class, it’s not a deliberate thing it’s just that people of Islamic faith tend to go to the shisha bars and Eastern European men tend to congregate in the Romanian Cafe over the road having coffee. So, places become ethnically specific, especially as people from an Islamic backgrounds don’t drink so feel left out.”  
(M, 25-34, White British)

“If you venture into a Polish shop they look at you as if to say ‘why are you here?’.”  
(Female, 25-34, Pakistani)



## The Fragmented Identity of Barking and Dagenham

The backdrop to these individual experiences is a place with a fragmented identity, beginning with Barking and Dagenham coming together as one borough. Given that for most of their history they existed as separate entities, few people identify with the borough itself. Most residents are more likely to think of their area as Barking or Dagenham or Chadwell Heath or Barking Riverside, for example, rather than ‘Barking and Dagenham’ as a unit. In part, this is because the communities of Barking and Dagenham existed separately for so long, but also because smaller places like Chadwell Heath or Mark’s Gate feel forgotten and side-lined in the borough. ‘Barking and Dagenham’ is the political structure associated with the council, rather than people’s lived experience.

“You talk to residents, and they live in Chadwell Heath. They don’t say I live in Chadwell Heath Barking or Dagenham or I live in Chadwell Heath Redbridge, I live in Chadwell Heath.”  
(Female, 65+, White British)

“I think people generally seem to stick to their little areas ... to say Barking and Dagenham ... realistically it’s actually Barking then Dagenham. And then like Becontree, right in between.”  
(Male, 16-24, Mixed British)

“I think it’s silly to suggest that someone that lives in Marks Gate has got some kind of sense of community with someone who lives in Barking Riverside, because they’re miles from each other. We happen to be in the same borough but it’s not really relevant.”  
(Male, 55+, White British)

“Marks Gate they feel excluded. They don’t feel part of Barking, don’t feel part of Dagenham, they don’t feel part of anything. They feel like they’re Iceland, they’re on their own. They usually say they feel more a part of Romford than Barking and Dagenham. And so I think they feel kind of excluded. When it comes to Barking and Dagenham, Marks Gate and Chadwell Heath, they feel excluded ... I think because of the distance. If you see it geographically, it looks like it’s far away.”  
(Female, 35-54, Eastern European)

Among older residents, there is clearer memory of when Barking and Dagenham were two distinct boroughs. Today, many residents of Dagenham feel that even they are left behind as a part of the borough’s identity, and that Barking dominates the idea people have of the borough.

“I think talking to residents, especially the age-group 55+, there is two parts to this borough. That’s because 52 years ago there were two boroughs and there’s still a lot of people in the borough that remember it as two boroughs.”  
(Female, 65+, White British)

“There might be something going on, as an example in Barking Riverside, you might think we can do that thing in Marks Gate. I always use those two examples because they’re the furthest apart. So I think that the best things in any part of the borough could be adopted and applied in other parts of the borough but I don’t think you can literally have one borough where everyone feels connected.”  
(Male, 55+, White British)

However, although there is not a borough-wide sense of community identity, there are many ‘pockets of community’ - a “borough of many villages”. Many people feel that there is community and social cohesion on their street, with their neighbours, and in the area - while in the same breath saying social cohesion doesn’t exist in Barking and Dagenham. These contrasting perceptions illustrate both a lack of interest in building a sense of borough-wide identity and community, along with again a shifting of responsibility, asserting that problems lie only in other areas.

“I like that. I like to be in a community who say hello. When I lived in Chadwell Heath the neighbours kept themselves to themselves, especially a local Indian family where the man would say hello and the wife would hardly speak. Over the road there was an Irish family who were very chatty. Where I live with my father in Marks Gate there is an Eastern European family over the road who invited us over for a BBQ and they are lovely.”  
(Male, 35-54, White British)



## Rate of Change, Shifting Community

Although felt more strongly in certain areas of Barking and Dagenham, the experience of rapid change in the borough surpasses the fragmentation of different geographic communities and is a key issue in most areas. Some residents voice concern that this rate of change is a direct threat to the emergence of social ties within the community, as people move away before any relationships can be established. A few areas are even portrayed as being in constant transition in terms of their residents – an ever-running conveyor belt of people moving in and out.

*"In my block [there are] lots of people changing a lot - so people don't stay for long. I have lived there for a year and only know of two people who have been there long-term. So not really a sense of community. By the time you get to know someone they are gone so it's not worth getting to know them."*  
(Female, 35-54, Multiple Ethnic Background)

A detailed analysis of the differences in how people speak about change – with some viewing it positively, as an opportunity to improve the area and others negatively, as a development resulting in steady decline – reveals how age, ethnicity and length of time in the borough shape residents' experiences of change. There is a clear distinction between how long-established communities in Barking and Dagenham feel about change within the borough, compared to residents who have moved into the area more recently. These differences between the 'old' and 'new' communities roughly align along lines of age and ethnicity – with older, white British residents typically representing residents who have lived in the borough for a long time and younger, non-white or non-British residents representing the newer communities moving in. The rapid population change has typically been more challenging for longer-standing residents, with some saying they don't recognise the area.

*"I like that the area of Barking and Dagenham is multi-cultural and it's not the case of 'too many foreigners' but I feel there's no English being spoken any more. I find this upsetting. I miss the British values; they seem to be disappearing. Children aren't speaking the 'Queen's English'"*  
(Male, 35-54, White British)

*"I've lived in Dagenham for more than 60 years ... Different people from different cultures have moved into the area now, so this makes it difficult for us to communicate with them. Not knowing people makes it difficult to connect and be happy. There are different reasons behind it; people are afraid to speak to strangers, language is another big barrier etc. but still we try to use what we have in common in order to connect with people. Sometimes only by giving a smile, or complimenting their dog, garden etc."*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

*"I do feel more connected to people who've been here a long time and experienced the very different world that Barking was years ago. Different values. The change has been phenomenal. We must accept change, but it is a challenge to make friendships. People tend to go home and shut their doors nowadays."*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

However, it is not only the long-established residents are concerned with the rate of change. Frequently people who have moved to the borough more recently lament the lack of access into the community, preferring their previous London home. Whether due to lack of local networks, services or opportunities to socialize, a respectable portion of the newer residents either feel they can't integrate, or they don't have the desire to fully do so. For these groups the rate of change – at least in terms of culture – is not quick enough. Many young people seem to think that it is only a matter of time before the area catches up with the demands and needs of its newest residents and so hope for a future where they see themselves become a more integral part to the borough's population and identity.

*"I live in Dagenham. Where I lived in SW London it was lovely compared to Dagenham. I don't like living in this area at all."*  
(Female, 25-34, Black British)

*"Not a large amount of mixed-race people my age. Mixed-race is usually a minority. Unless I go north London, I can't get my hair done, basic things like this. It makes you feel like you still have to go elsewhere to access things you need. I love Caribbean food but cannot access it easily here. When my husband goes Finsbury Park to get his hair done, I ask him to bring me food back from there. There's a lot I feel I can't get here. But I feel it will change as the borough is changing; maybe my kids when they grow up will have access to get their hair done here."*  
(Female, 25-34, Multiple Ethnic Background)

For many residents, diversity is viewed positively. There is a sense of future possibility and that the area is “on the up”. Having a diverse group of neighbours and a mix of people with different backgrounds is seen as an exciting opportunity for cultural exchange and connection. This does not only apply to people who have moved in recently, but also pockets of the more settled population.

*“The area is vibrant and there is a lot of transient population. I know my close neighbours and they have become my friends. People in my area are from all parts of the world. We are quite settled.”*

(Female, 55+, White British)

*“The area that I live in is in some parts well-kept and in others unkempt. It’s an elderly residential area of multi cultures. Its diverse. It’s a rat run off the Eastern Avenue, but the area is friendly.”*

(Male, 55+ White British)

A considerable proportion highlight Barking and Dagenham’s diversity as the best thing about living in the borough. For those residents, it is precisely this mix of people from different backgrounds that make the area an attractive place to live.

*“The best thing about living here is the rich diversity of people in the area. From East Enders who still remember the way things used to be, to West Africans, Muslims, East Europeans. If you make the effort, people are generally friendly.”*

(Male, 35-54, Multiple Ethnic Background)

*“The best thing about living here is the people because of the different cultures, and also the places in this area are very beautiful.”*

(Male, 35-54, Portuguese)

However, celebrating diversity does not necessarily translate into people of different groups mixing and connecting with one another from day to day. Residents often point to language as a main barrier preventing people from getting to know each other. While for some language serves as an easy excuse to exempt oneself from even attempting to connect, others voice a true intent to interact with fellow residents. The latter turn to third parties for translation or more creative means of communication.

*“I do have Somalian neighbours and they are great ... I have white British neighbours and we get on well. I have a Somalian family next door who are very nice; they give us sweets for Diwali, and we give them sweets for Eid. The mum doesn’t speak English, but the four adult kids do, and we chat and get along.”*

(Male, 35-54, British Indian)

In some rarer cases, residents feel that language is actively utilised by others as a barrier to purposefully exclude certain members of the community who do not speak this language.

*“The Muslim mums at the school, they have a clique. I try to get them to have treatments with me and try to chat and include them, but they speak in their own language.”*

(Female, 35-54, Black African)

Prejudiced expectations that members of a certain group will act in a specific way also often undermine any opportunity for meaningful interaction, as some residents pre-emptively respond to expected behaviour of a group rather than the real actions of an individual. Hearsay and rumours usually form the basis of such assumptions. It is worth noting that often residents of different ethnic groups report very similar experiences of reaching out to others, and yet they attribute this to being uniquely typical of that other group. The following quotes illustrate how two residents have virtually identical experiences and yet both associate the unfriendly behaviour as being typical of the other group.

*“Whenever I used to walk my dog (when I lived in Chadwell Heath) I used to say ‘Hello’ to everybody. If I’m being honest, I used to get ignored by the majority of Eastern European and Muslims. They would keep their heads down and ignore me or look at me like I was mad.”*

(Male, 35-54, White British)

*“Where I live, they are majority English white people. There is no one friendly, they don’t say good morning or communicate, just stare at me. I smile at them but don’t get anything back.”*

(Female, 25-34, British Asian)

Experiences of racism and xenophobia vary greatly amongst residents in Barking and Dagenham. Whilst some do not perceive it as being particularly prevalent in their area, others experience racism as part of their daily reality. This variation does not only fall along lines of ethnicity – experiences and perceptions vary greatly within these groups as well and are often mediated by age or area within the borough.

For some, racial tensions are a thing of the past or overstated. Among these residents, the sense that levels of racism have fallen is often based on personal experiences (or lack thereof) and an overall perception that there are fewer hate crimes and incidences of racial conflict than in the past. There is rejection of the perceptions that some people who do not live in the area have about the borough (particularly in relation to the historic election of BNP councillors) and the narratives that are often propagated on social media.

*"Dagenham isn't what people think it's like. When I first moved here people, I knew were asking me 'are there black people here?'. People in North London used to assume Dagenham is full of people 'Essex type, middle, class, all white, think they are better than other people'. People were worried about my kids living here, how they would fit in. I didn't have this perception though as I had been here before to visit friends and knew it wasn't like this."*  
**(Female, 25-34, Multiple Ethnic Background)**

*"In the last 20 years, hate crimes have reduced meaning people are getting on a lot more."*  
**(Male, 35-54, Multiple Ethnic Background)**

*"I personally never experienced any racial abuse because I am Muslim ... I am friends with many people from different nations, religions or cultures ... so I think it depends how you see the situations, people etc. I became more confident when I came at the Hub to learn English; meeting people and learning helped me become more confident."*  
**(F, 25-34, British Asian)**

However, a considerable number of residents seem to have a very different experience and very much feel that racism is still a key issue in Barking and Dagenham today. Often having been subjected to racist comments, treatment (and sometimes attacks) themselves in the past, the sense of safety and belonging of these residents are strongly affected by racism.

*"I have heard stories, and I myself have experienced racism, my husband has experienced it, even though we are both born here, but the fact we look dark, gives the assumption we are Muslims. My husband was called a terrorist and told to go back home, I was called a Paki, although I'm not from Pakistan, my son was called Black face. All this is because of skin colour we have. So all this has happened in the area. I'm not Muslim, but my friends are, and one of them was pulled the scarf off her and told she would be burned alive etc."*  
**(Female, 40, British Indian)**

*"I face racism. I feel unwelcome. I actually dread coming out of the flat. It is an unhappy place. I fear for my child's safety. I don't want to take her out. The communal door doesn't shut so anyone can come in and 'get me'. I feel I can't go shopping alone even with my pram because it takes a split second for anything to happen, such as acid being poured on me and my child."*  
**(Female, 25-34, Bengali)**

Some residents believe that the extremely narrow time period in which so much population change has occurred has been a cause of this. Increased experiences of racism and prejudice, along with a decline in levels of cohesion, are almost always connected back to the rapid population change within the borough.

*"I think it is a massive change for a very short period of time, and people are finding this difficult. Any people who are born and raised in the area are looking down the road and they don't recognise their neighbours; my neighbours have often said to me that they look and can't recognise their neighbours. I think this is the reason why there is more racism, hate, crime in the borough, because people are finding it hard"*  
**(Female, 40, Indian British)**

Xenophobia – most often directed towards Eastern Europeans – is also still widely experienced in the borough by some residents. Many Eastern Europeans report experiencing discrimination out in public, often in response to their accents. For these residents, there are often stark generational differences. Children of first-generation immigrants might be less likely to experience this type of explicit xenophobia first-hand, but they bear witness to the discrimination that their parents and others in this group face.

*"People don't always like foreigners (not everyone). I've had unpleasant experiences on the bus [because of my accent] - "Go back to your own country etc."*  
**(Female, 35-54, Polish)**

*"I remember once my mother went to the shop with my little sister and an old English man swore at her calling 'immigrant go back home' ... it was very shocking for me, because at least I never had had a similar experience before ... Although my parents are used to those comments. I have adapted with the English culture more, so I don't get treated as a foreigner, because I don't have an accent etc ... however my mother she has that Eastern European accent and she gets judged more and is treated differently."*  
**(Female, 16, Romanian)**

Once again, there is also an interplay of the borough's fragmented identity into smaller areas with experiences of racism – Dagenham being more widely associated with racism than Barking. The latter is more frequently discussed as being an area in which there has been more progress in terms of social bridging, whereas people feel that in Dagenham there is not much connection between groups.

*“Barking is different to Dagenham. Dagenham stick to their own. Similar nationalities talk to one another only. I feel more comfortable in Barking. A friend I have is mixed race; when you find similar people, you want to stick with them. So maybe it's natural, when it's not so multi-cultural you want to stick to your own. If an area is multicultural, you know you have access to people who are similar to you, so you won't stick to them so much as you know they are there.”*  
 (Female, 25-34, Mixed Other)

*“[In] Dagenham I feel singled out, might get racial abuse.”*  
 (Female, 25-34, British Pakistani)

Although it seems to be a proportionally small group of residents with explicitly racist attitudes, this fraction can be particularly vocal. Although racism is often spoken about in terms of discrimination by White British residents, racist discrimination between other ethnicity groups also emerged. Implicit and more subtle forms racism are spoken about less frequently and these may represent a larger – but less visible – barrier to higher levels of cohesion in the borough on the whole.

*“I was asked to help an Asian lady to connect back with the community. I knew the majority of Asian people wouldn't like Black people's presence, but still I decided to offer my support. First the lady wanted to know me, but once she met me, she didn't want to see me again; she wouldn't return or take my calls, and one day she did take my call only to tell me not to contact her again - she shouted and used abusive language towards me. So I'm not saying all Asian people are the same (because I have Asian friends now) but I'm saying that if people are not used to other cultures, or if they have been told things against some particular cultures, they would respond negatively, which would affect the spirit of community.”*  
 (Female, 55+, Black Caribbean)

*“Africans and Eastern Europeans are not getting on and I feel trouble could start because they fight over boundaries ... they are both naturally greedy people.”*  
 (Male, 55+, White British)

## Rafsan's Story

Rafsan moved to Barking from her previous London home in Poplar in 2011 when she got married. She likes how multicultural and diverse the area is and feels that the area is often portrayed more poorly than what her experiences have been. Through her daughter's play groups and later on, her school, Rafsan has found a strong group of local friends, despite saying that she is not involve in any community activities herself.

On more than one occasion, she has felt intimidated by young people and highlights anti-social behaviour as a major problem of the area. She feels there is a lack of activities for young people: “more free stuff for kids, e.g. free summer camps involving activities such as rock climbing. I'm sure some of the kids who hang around and smoke weed would want to do such activities.”

**Rafsan, 35-54, British Bangladeshi**

Concerns around safety also emerged as a major barrier to connections between groups, be that across racial or generational divides. Fears about safety in many cases also reflect an implicit negative assumption about 'other' groups. Perceptions that the area is not safe exist both at borough wide and localised levels, although the latter is more prevalent. Many residents perceive their neighbourhoods as dangerous, which strongly affects their behaviour and movement through areas, particularly at night.

*"Honestly, it's quite dangerous in terms of the type of people and activities that happen in the community; such as knife crime and acid attacks. I live near a police station and I still don't feel safe. I try to avoid going out at night-time."*  
(Male, 16-24, Mixed)

*"I don't have any issue going anywhere in the area because I drive everywhere so it's safer. However, in the evening I'm careful, I wouldn't go by myself because of knife crime ... I'm brought up in Lithuania where many problems were happening in the place we lived and we were taught to stay in so in the evening don't go out, stay inside. Just being careful that's all."*  
(Female, 40, Lithuanian)

For some there is a strong perception that crime has increased. For many this sense is fuelled by social media which increases exposure to bad events and the feeling that something bad is likely to happen. Certain hotspots are mentioned frequently as areas that are particularly unsafe and avoided by many.

*"I try to avoid Barking. It's the hub of the local cocaine market. The Albanians are basically running the cocaine trade in London from the Gascoigne Estate, i.e. there's a crime problem. It's also dirty."*  
(Male, 26-24)

*"Goresbrook, Heathway, Barking - feels very intense, lots of crimes, unsafe"*  
(Male, 35 – 54, Mixed Black/Asian)

*"I do not visit Barking and Dagenham Heathway because of the crime in the area."*  
(Female, 35-54, White British)

It is evident that sense of personal safety is strongly affected by residents' demography, along lines of gender, age and ethnicity. Perceptions of crime are also often racialised.

*"I used to avoid Barking station as it is unsafe at all hours of the day. Walking past betting shops. There is an increase in betting shops which has resulted in an influx of men and 'cat calling' which is not nice for women."*  
(Female, 27, Black British)

*"You should be able to go from A to B without feeling threatened from knife crime. I got off the bus after coming back from The Three Travellers and a large Black man was standing on the green was terrifying; he was shouting things at me, I feared for my life."*  
(Male, 35-54, White British)

*"Romanian gypsies are often seen sifting through the rubbish bins, looking for wires, metal etc., and this makes a lot of mess. There are a lot of young people smoking drugs - they are not evil people though. But it is annoying when they congregate and kick the doors inside the block"*  
(Female, 35-54, British Pakistani)

A minority told us the threat of crime is overstated.

*"I don't recognise the Barking that people talk about (who don't live here). They call it a no-go area. Social Media highlights the bad things and gives an exaggerated sense of the bad things."*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

Whilst some residents see young people as the main perpetrators and report feeling unsafe when they see groups of young people hanging around, others view young people as at particularly high risk of becoming victims of or involved with crime.

*"We have the crime issues that we can't live untouched and that needs to be stopped, because it has affected the community and the life of young people."*  
(Female, 25, Black British)

*"The gangs are a worry. Groups of young men hanging around are a bit intimidating - I tend to pass wide while looking ahead, just in case, but for all I know they could be doing nothing wrong other than talking loudly/shouting."*  
(Male, 55+, White British)

*"I think, I would try to make the area bit safer, considering what is happening with knife crime. It feels not safe enough. Maybe being more strict with young people, by making tough laws, they need to take responsibility for their action - we can't justify it as this way they will keep doing it .... why do they get involved in crimes? It depends because some are influenced by media, some others have been affected by their upbringing - they do what they see at home - sometimes peer pressure, just to join the crowd."*  
(Female, 16, Romanian)



## Physical Spaces

In Barking and Dagenham, residents frequently refer to littered and uncared for streets as a sign of decline. However, agreement on the extent to which this is the case, and the reasons for it, differ. As with perceptions of crime and safety, many residents are quick to point fingers to other groups, often in a way that is racialised and refers to immigrant communities being the reason for the lack of investment in the area. One resident dubbed the borough “Dustbin of my England”.

*“It used to be a nice, clean, pretty quiet, nice shopping areas. Now it’s multinational, multi faith area. The area is dirty, untidy, unkempt, lots of rough, dirty people walk around the area. Drug paraphernalia litters the street.”*  
(Female, 35-54, White British)

*“Like a ghetto, no exaggeration. The environment is untidy and lots of fly-tipping where we live.”*  
(Female, 35-54, Romanian)

The extent of littering is also seen as linked to a lack of respect for the area people live. Frequently this is chalked up, once again, to the speed with which the population has changed; older residents argue that Barking and Dagenham was once tidy and cared for, whereas now, with new people coming in, this has been lost. This is frequently associated with the state (or absence) of community in Barking and Dagenham as a whole, and a feeling that a greater shared sense of belonging has been lost.

*“Community means coming together in crisis, being there for each other no matter the differences, class, age, culture etc. Respect for the area we live in, nowadays rubbish is placed everywhere.”*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

*“It used to be a nice, clean, pretty quiet, nice shopping area. Now it’s multinational, multi-faith area. The area is dirty, untidy, unkempt; lots of rough, dirty people walk around the area. Drug paraphernalia litters the street.”*  
(Female, 35-54, White British)

However, some residents instead highlighted issues within the council and service provision as the root of the litter issue.

*“Well I think I would prioritize to clean the area, pick up all the rubbish, the old cars removed and make the area look nice again ... this is a big issue in the area ... we pay Council Tax but people still drop rubbish everywhere.”*  
(Female, 40, Lithuanian)

While there are issues surrounding the perceived lack of care of the physical spaces of Barking and Dagenham, there are certain areas that residents cite as a locus of community. For some these are community centres or parks, while for others these are pubs and coffee shops.

*“The particular area where I live has become quite run down. It’s dirty - the streets are very dirty and there’s litter everywhere. Shabby. There’s a good community spirit: There are teams of local people who go to my local park and tidy up the park. It is voluntary and they can only do so much.”*  
(Male, 35-54, White British)

*“People, neighbours, local pubs, coffee shops, parks. Meeting people getting to know them whilst waiting to pay at the off licence. Going to the park with children and other parents and their children.”*  
(Female, 25-34, Portugese)

These places seem to give residents a greater sense of ownership. As a result, they feel more invested in maintaining these spaces, and think of them as places of connection within the borough.



## Access to Services

Alongside physical spaces, access to basic services in the borough is important for residents. Public services includes public transport, publicly maintained spaces (libraries, centres), health care, and education. From all walks of life, people point to a decline in provision and highlight specific issues such as access to GP services, and parking.

*"We have no proper hospital in the borough and GP's are overstretched"*  
(Female, 35 - 54, Prefers not to say)

*"We need better secondary schools here. Kids aren't as protected as they are in primary and there's more bullying and less parent/teacher connection."*  
(Female, 25 - 34, Indian)

*"We need more parking - especially for people who are disabled - this road is always packed"*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

Nonetheless, three times as many residents indicated that their access to public services is good compared with those who said it is bad. Transport links was the most commonly mentioned asset, followed by library services and local shops.

*"The best things about living in Barking and Dagenham is the Barking Library because I enjoy reading books from there."*  
(Female, 16-24, Black African)

*"On the positive side, we have Valence Library, Valence House and Centre where you can research history of the area. A launderette which is great for families, a great secondary and primary school with good reputation."*  
(Female, 35-54, Prefers not to say)

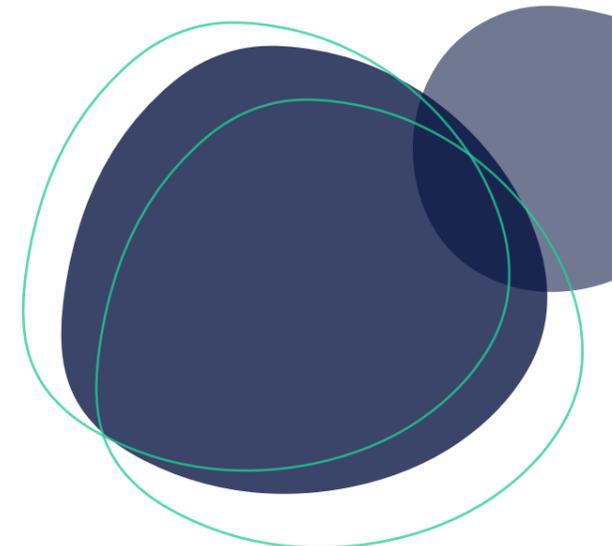
*"The connectivity is excellent as we are close to major roads and the station."*  
(Female, 55+, White British)

*"The best thing about living here are the transport lines"*  
(Female, 35-54, White British)

This is particularly important for young people:

*"I live near the station which means getting about is easy. There are good transport links. My friends live in the borough and we often meet up in places like Mcdonalds and Asda cafe."*  
(F, 20, White British)

Connected to experiences of public services, is the perception of the council as a whole. When talking about the council, it also became clear how residents think of their own role and responsibilities in the borough.



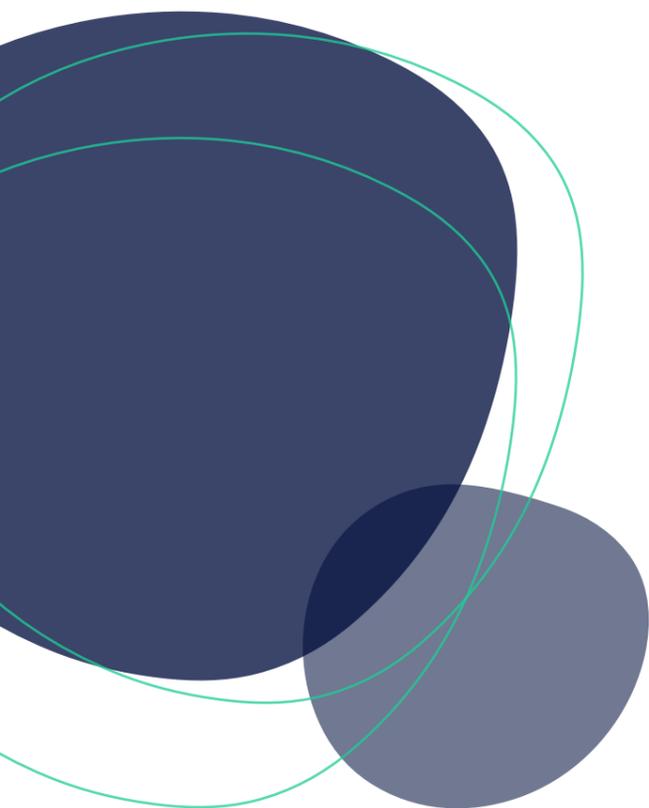
## Perceptions of the Council and Resident Responsibility

The council in Barking and Dagenham holds a difficult space because of the fragmented identity of the borough. Parts of the borough also have a long history of a relatively 'paternalistic' form of service provision, through both the local authority and the influence of major employers such as Ford. Coupled with the rapid pace of change creating new demands on council services, there is a general sense that the council could and should be doing more.

"If I was the leader of the council I would have a strict overhaul of services to maximise funding. Repairs, refuse, housing allocation and tiers of management need to be addressed."  
(Male, 55+, White British)

"The council don't really give us much information and don't feel inclusive of B and D. Too much is done online now and the council do not communicate."  
(Female, 55+, White British)

"There is a lack of communication and grass-roots connection with the council. There should be a council officer for the area who makes these connections with local institutions - schools, youth club, medical centre."  
(Male, 25-34, Black British)



# Towards higher levels of cohesion in B+D

## Shifting the Narrative

Some of the issues identified as characteristic of the borough (such as its diversity) or challenges (such as littering and poor maintenance of the public realm) can also serve as impetus and reasons for people to come together. As with most communities, people are also brought together by shared needs, aspirations or values.



"Where I live, I know everyone in the block. The same people have lived here for a long time, so we have been able to build relationships ... I am very close to my neighbours, some even keep in touch with me after they have moved away."  
(Female, 35-54, British Pakistani)

"I get on well with neighbours. My Muslim neighbours were intrigued that I dress as Santa for play groups so I rang bells and knocked at their door for their kids, which they loved, [so] we invited the neighbours in for Christmas parties."  
(Prefers not to say)

"I am lucky, my neighbours are friendly, caring and make time for each other"  
(Female, 35-54, White British)

## Alina's Story

Alina was born in Romania before moving to Devon. In 2015 she moved to Dagenham, where she lives with her husband and two boys. She is engaged with her church community and loves that she can go out and about with her sons to go to places like the Future Youth Zone. At the same time, Alina feels that the borough could do with a revamp in many areas: "(It's) like a ghetto, no exaggeration. The environment is untidy and lots of fly-tipping where we live."

Even though Alina is a qualified social worker she can't find a job as she has no work experience in the UK. "I've tried and nothing's going through. I've been told they're trying to protect me." Although she was closer to her community in Devon and back home in Romania, Alina gets on with her neighbours and wishes there more community spaces where people of different backgrounds could meet and interact.

**Alina, 35-54, Romanian**

Amplifier: "This interview was very insightful because not only were we getting the rare and valuable voice of our Eastern European community but also an insight into their culture and reasons why that voice was so hard to obtain."

Evidently, there are numerous challenges to be overcome on the path to increasing social cohesion in Barking and Dagenham. Equally, there is much activity already happening on the ground and plenty of opportunity to expand on this to further build new connections between different groups. The Amplify model points to two major routes by which this can be achieved.

Perhaps one of the most striking insights is the difference between people’s individual experiences of connection and their perceptions of cohesion within the borough as a whole. For many, experiences of neighbourliness and local community do not translate into a wider sense of belonging and cohesion, so shifting the narrative may be a key step in closing this gap.

Discourse, on the public as well as the private level, contributes to creating shared narratives and, increasingly, social media plays a dominant role in shaping perceptions of the borough. Although some residents actively reject media portrayals that do not align with their own experiences of the area, other residents seem to mould their perceptions – and thus, inadvertently their behaviours – almost entirely on others’ descriptions that they are confronted with. Increasing levels of cohesion goes hand in hand with shifting the narrative of the borough as a diverse place welcoming of all – one that all residents can identify with.

*“Include everyone in the historical accounts of the borough ... They should take into consideration the length of time Black, Asian and other groups have lived in the borough and include the contributions they have made to the borough. Often historical accounts have been ‘whitewashed’ to give the impression that Barking and Dagenham used to be a white only borough. From the top, leaders including the MP to the leader of the council, all need to be practising inclusion and equality in speech and action and not use language of “us” meaning the white population and “them” meaning the ethnic minorities.”*  
 (Female, 35-44, Prefers not to say)

There needs to be a collective effort to shift the narrative of Barking and Dagenham to be one that celebrates diversity and inclusivity – a borough of many communities which intersect and overlap. For the residents of Barking and Dagenham, it is a sense of friendliness and good neighbours as much as – or maybe even more than - events and groups which contribute to a sense of a strong community and belonging.

At the same time, there is a demand for community activities to be more inclusive - thus, celebrating examples of people from different backgrounds coming together can act as a catalyst for others. Proactively enabling and inviting participation of people from different pockets of community will be important in facilitating ‘first steps’. Our research shows that most people and groups are eager to see a more cohesive and integrated community, but also that there is a perceptions gap between how many see themselves, versus how they are seen by others. Closing that gap will require a concerted effort from everyone to challenge their own assumptions about how open to others their community is.

*“Usually different communities do events where they invite only their kind and they don’t open it to the public; therefore, the community doesn’t exist if we all don’t join in. There are no public announcements to inform everyone. How can we include people? We can invite others by using social media, banners and so on”*  
 (Male, 20, White British)

## Emma's Story

Emma works in a special needs school in Dagenham. She lives with her husband and three sons, and her extended family lives nearby. Emma doesn't feel the area is particularly safe and wishes there was more CCTV. She is frustrated that due to the lack of local parking, people often do not respect the disabled bay that she has outside her house for her son.

There have been some attempts by neighbours to build a better sense of community, however Emma thinks it could still be improved. She feels particularly connected to other mothers through playgroup and her colleagues, as they have shared interests. Emma thinks that on the whole people from different backgrounds get on well in the borough and thinks that more opportunities for people to meet (such as community projects, street parties, school gatherings) would help forge those connections even more.

Emma, 25-34, White British

## Participatory Video

The participatory video workshops were a space to explore young people's perceptions and experiences of living in Barking and Dagenham. Photographs, newspapers and social media excerpts served as stimuli to spark discussion around wider narratives that exist about the borough and whether these resonate with young people in the area.

Through a series of games and film-related activities, the young people began to unpick issues around cohesion and community. It was evident that the large majority of young people view diversity as something positive, yet they consider social and linguistic differences as major barriers to mixing of different communities. Young people feel least connected to old residents in the borough, due to a lack of shared interests or points of mutual contact. However, there is a sincere interest in bridging those divisions. The planned subject of the film was a round cross-generational interaction in the borough and how this could be facilitated in future. Unfortunately, due to the aforementioned challenges of retainment, the cohort of young people did not end up producing this film, but the insights into their experiences were captured regardless.





Being the Change

It is the belief of many residents that the main obstacle to borough wide change is the willingness of people to change their individual behaviour.

*"Members of the community, particularly long standing ones, need to take individual responsibility to connect / communicate with others, with patience and tolerance. One of my non-English neighbours learnt English just through day-to-day chat and via her children at school. It's not very scaleable, but it's good/important. Be welcoming. Persevere. For example helping out with what goes in which bin."*

(Female, 55+, White British)

Repeatedly, we heard stories of residents trying to encourage this behaviour change in others, by taking initiative and acting on issues that are affecting them in their area. A small but vocal and active number of residents reported taking ownership of the change they would like to see, with some focusing specifically on improving cohesion in the borough.

*"I know a few neighbours. I have a mature neighbour that comes here. I'm at work a lot so don't see other neighbours a lot. I am trying to make a difference. I did have an open house for people and my mature neighbour was the only one who showed up."*

(Female, 55+, White British)

*"There's lots of loneliness, which we've sought to address. We invite our neighbours in for tea and coffee. Before that no-one bothered."*

(Female, 55+, White British)

The type of action varies from small everyday efforts, like individuals reaching out to isolated neighbours to connect with them, to more formalised action, like taking on roles in local voluntary organisations or organising community groups.

*"[I feel connected to] the elderly age group, Castle Point members, Lifeline Office and the Men's Shed. I mentor teenagers who have had problems at school or have been thrown out. It's great to let them know they have a friend and I encourage them to look to the future."*

(Male, 80, White British)

*"I am an appropriate adult for youths when they are arrested and offer them support. I have grandchildren from 5-18 so I am used to being around children of all ages and can speak well to them. I am also a Neighbourhood Watch coordinator."*

(Female, 55+, White British)

We also frequently came across residents who want to initiate change locally yet lack the confidence to do so – often pointing to insufficient resource, skills or experience as reasons.

However, a considerable portion of residents are reluctant to initiate this type of action themselves. Although there seems to be a consensus on the type of issues that are affecting them, some residents do not express the desire – at times due to competing pressures of daily life – to take action on these issues, for which they do not feel responsible. So, while there is a demand for improved community life, accessible events, groups and celebrations, there is limited capacity or motivation among residents to organise these themselves. This reflects again, the common underlying belief that the Council or similar organisations should be responsible for such initiatives.

*"Maybe hold events about a certain country and others would come to learn about the country and learn about the culture. Funding and attitudes and difficulties in arranging things is probably why this does not happen at the moment. eg Health & Safety puts people off. Too many procedures to do. Too much red tape. Local people won't go out of their way as it's too difficult. We need the local authority to do this and ask for help from communities."*

(Female, 25-34, Pakistani)

## The Co-Creation Process

This discrepancy between having an idea for an improvement and feeling empowered to turn it into a reality was reaffirmed in many of the initial conversations we had at the co-creation workshops. However, across these sessions the community researchers worked to minimize this gap by leading discussions and activities that allowed residents to think about the issue at hand in novel ways.

Diverse groups of residents came together and worked together to resolve shared challenges. As such, the sessions acted as an accelerator for community development, through which residents not only gain confidence and skills, but they experienced the process of organising and running a given initiative or project themselves within a short window. Further, the act of working towards a shared objective (which for some sessions was to improve cohesion and connectivity), was fertile ground for creating connections and 'bridges' between those present.



## Keep On The Grass

Growing up, Marilyn remembers being told constantly to 'keep off the grass!', and when she shared this memory with other residents at the co-creation session many had had the same experience. From this, they decided to come together to encourage people to keep ON the grass. They began by choosing the oldest park in the borough, in Chadwell Heath.

They started talking to everyone involved in the area, from park rangers to fitness users to park frequenters. From this they brainstormed ideas about fitness classes, gatherings like the Big Lunch, park runs, and ways to keep the park beautiful. They organised a very successful litter pick, more of which are on the horizon, and have succeeded in bringing together different groups around the park to think about how to preserve it and make it a nicer place to be into the future.

## Parents 2 Parents

*In the summer of 2019, residents came together in 'co-creation' sessions to discuss the issues they felt were most pressing in the borough. They then began to think of ways they could take action together to respond. Six parents decided there was a fundamental gap in spaces for parents to talk to one another safely and openly about the difficulties that came with being a parent in the borough.*

*Through the co-creation process, they developed a set of principles to guide them, worked on a safeguarding document, and formalised their structure with two Co-Chairs, a Secretary and a Treasurer taking the lead. They also thought about how to make it as accessible as possible, so contacted their local school to support them, along with a parent-run café to host their meetings. The co-creation process brought them together to think both about their immediate concern, and the larger context it fit within. From this, they were able to target their response and meet with other local parents.*

That said, it is also important to acknowledge that residents often cannot achieve change alone – and certainly not systemic change - nor should they be solely responsible for doing so. In the first instalment of workshops, the focus was on presenting residents with the data the Amplifiers had collected so that they could prioritise together which issue to act on, anywhere in the borough. In many ways, this task was too large, placing too much onus on the residents to take charge. The Amplifiers themselves also felt limited in their ability to provide other residents with support to grow and deliver on their plans, after the initial design phase. We learned from this, and in the second instalment focused instead on engaging residents at a hyper-local scale on issues that had come up in the research as being particularly important or contentious. We also prioritised linking residents keen to take action together with other local organisations already working in those communities or to tackle that challenge, both to increase support and sustainability of the actions.

Although this second phase was somewhat stalled by the lockdown in London as a result of COVID-19, we are hopeful that the links remain, and that the spark that was there will continue as communities shift to re-open in the coming year.



Among most residents, there is a strong sense that Barking and Dagenham is on the up. This is true across varying groups of different backgrounds. People see opportunity in the change that is occurring, and many want to be involved in driving this in a positive direction. There is a sense that there is still much room to build out this future possibility.

Including even the more apprehensive residents in a narrative that empowers people to take shape a new, more inclusive form of community, while moving away from the perception that cohesion is something created or 'delivered' primarily by 'others', is key in moving towards a more cohesive borough.

"The area that I live in gives me a sense of encouragement for the future."  
(Male, 55+, White British)

"It's become a mixed community now and I'm seeing chances but would love to see more."  
(Female, 35-44, Indian/British)

Amplify Barking and Dagenham was an 18-month journey which put local people in control of sharing experiences, listening to each other, reflecting on what matters, and starting to take action on issues they care about. The work of the Amplifiers and everyone who took part in the research, attended an event, or helped to create new ideas is part of a wider programme of activity in the borough which aims to bring people together and create a more connected community.

The Covid-19 pandemic swept into the UK just as Amplify Barking and Dagenham came to a close – the policy of physical (social) distancing presents a direct challenge, literally, to bringing people together from different parts of the community. However, it is also an opportunity. Local mutual aid and community support groups have sprung up across the borough and traditional boundaries are shifting as communities rally round. The Amplifiers are also using their networks and skills to contribute to the community response. As lockdown lifts, it is to be hoped that from the crisis part of the 'new normal' in Barking and Dagenham will be a fresh perspective on what people share, rather than what divides them, and on the power of collective action to create the kind of community where everyone wants to live.



# Appendix

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