



Our Early Insights

October 2024

We're excited to be up and running at Connect! Since July, we've been working to address social isolation in Barking and Dagenham, by connecting one-to-one with local residents who've spent time in hospital. We know that many people are leaving hospital without a networks of friends and family to support their recovery. So we've been working with people to help rebuild their circles of care together, pull in the strengths and assets of local neighbourhoods, and help people envisage new roles for themselves in their community.

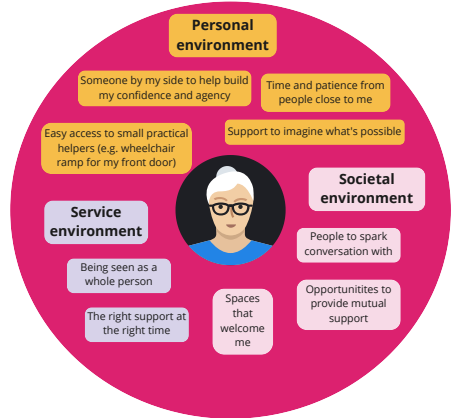
We began as a partnership of five organisations - Care City, Community Resources, Harmony House, Independent Living Agency and Humourisk - working together with London Borough of Barking and Dagenham council. But we're growing our learning community all the time. And through the project, we're determined to discover how we can better work together as a place to shape environments that spark connection.

In mid September, we came together for a morning of lively discussion to identify our biggest learnings so far and agree what we most wanted to share with the world. Here you can read about those insights, some questions we're wrestling with, and some things we want to experiment with in the weeks ahead.

We'd like to invite you into the conversation about how we can shape a positive environment for connection in Barking and Dagenham. **So please share your reflections and questions based on what's here, and suggestions about what we should do next.**



Learning together in the Independent Living Agency offices.



Our model for thinking about what's needed in a person's environment to support connection

We want to learn what people need in their environment to help spark and sustain connections. We're thinking about this in terms of what they need in their **personal** sphere, what they need in the **society** around them, and what they need from local **services**. Above you can see some of our assumptions about these, going in to the project, which we'll be testing and revising as we go. In the below, we also share some colour-coded reflections and questions emerging about each one.

1. "Treat people as an asset and great things happen"

The above is a direct quote from our learning session and points to the power unleashed once people can reconnect with and advocate for their own strengths and needs.

In our early conversations with residents, we've been struck by how much each person has to offer. Some have spent their entire lives supporting people, and others are simply great company to be around. We fear these qualities being lost to the borough, as people are isolated. We also know that residents are hungry to connect and help other people around them - no-one we've encountered wants to live a life on state benefits. We've seen that people welcome support that helps them believe in their strengths and advocate for themselves, so we're trying to shape interactions around that ambition, rather than focusing on people's limitations.

Is it possible to shape social support systems so that people don't have to play up their incapacity, or lose touch with their strengths, to receive benefits they're entitled to?

Questions we're thinking about

What this looks like:

- **Making time for people's stories:** By dedicating proper time with residents, together we've been able to identify the things that matter to them which aren't immediately apparent, and get a better joint sense of what people want to offer their community.

"You don't know what knowledge and assets people have until you start listening to them" - **Connect 1:1 Supporter**

- **Finding small opportunities for people to give back:** We're learning that opportunities for residents to volunteer time don't need to be big and official for people to value them - it doesn't take much for people to start feeling valuable and connected.

- **Releasing the "service" and "expert" mindsets:** Given the importance of building residents' abilities to advocate for themselves, we've reflected long and hard on how we can shake off the idea (for both ourselves and people we're working with) that Connect is a service there to do things for people or to offer expert advice. This means getting comfortable with not knowing everything (we're far from there yet!) and encouraging people to say if something doesn't sit right. Saying "no" - for instance to an untimely visit, or a step into community that they're not ready for - can be a sign of growing agency. Understanding this has reinforced our decision to provide no time limits to 1:1 relationships. Trusting people to go at their own pace doesn't mean slower progress - it can be more effective.

"I popped my shoes off, got comfortable on the sofa, and then [the resident I'm paired with] suddenly clicked - that I'm not there just as a service to do things for her! - **Connect 1:1 Supporter**

2. Authentic connections come from a sense of common and mutual humanity

We're keen to help people build their connections in ways that feel natural and replicate how community forms organically. Supporting these connections requires us to loosen the sense of a big difference between those who *need* help and those who *give* help (an "us and them" mindset). It means building a sense of common humanity between everyone who lives in the borough.

What this looks like:

- **Encouraging two-way support:** We're creating opportunities for residents to help each other out. We've noticed how, as professionals, it can help to play up our own need for assistance ("I'm rubbish at...") and

encourage people to support us in return ("Could you help me with...?"), if and when they're ready.

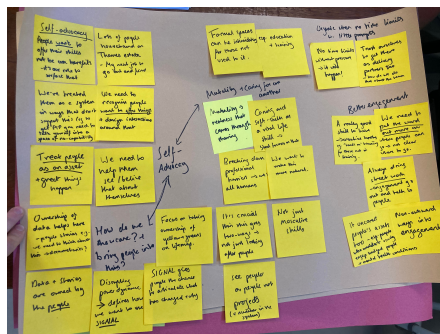
- **Loosening professional boundaries:** We're trying to make space for "realness" in Connect. This means creating time for residents to be honest about how they are feeling, so they know they are understood. To build even stronger trust though, it's also invaluable to be more real ourselves. Just as we're intent on seeing residents as people (rather than "projects") we're also trying to be open, where comfortable and appropriate, about own lives, limitations and needs.

- **Support a wider range of skills:** We've reflected that it's important for people to have opportunities to share and develop more than just their practical skills. If we want to build communities of mutual support, then softer, *care-centred* skills are also important to focus on together, especially given those are often too narrowly considered as appropriate only to certain genders.

- **"Filling our own cup"** - We don't always talk about or manage this, but we need time as professionals to look after ourselves and acknowledge our limits and uncertainties - we're realising that *we too need to trust ourselves* to be able to support people over the long-run, even if we're not 100% what that should look like now. A mini mindfulness exercise in our meeting helped us to stay grounded in these things.

- **Making connection part of the outreach:** We've asked ourselves how we can better reach people who might benefit from Connect. We're wondering whether engagement that involves actually *doing things together* in creative ways might draw in a wider range of people. Some of us have tried street hand-painting to do this previously, and we're wondering what else is possible. We're also questioning how we might find people who are housebound, in ways that embody the same.

How might we do community engagement that's alive with connection and creativity, rather than engagement that just signposts towards these?
Questions we're thinking about



Insights being co-produced in our September learning session

3. We need to find new ways to tell stories and share that align to Connect's values



One point that we've agreed we need to work on ahead is *how we share learnings* in this project. How do we bring the stories of our work in the borough to life in ways that chime with the other learnings and values we've shared here?

We've pulled out these insights together, but we've reflected on a need to give more ownership of our learnings to the broader community, and convey the benefits of Connect in more compelling ways. To do this, there are two big things we're going to work on, before our next learning share:

- (1) building in more **quantitative data** to help strengthen our insights and make the case to others
- (2) Rolling out wider **channels for the experience of residents** to shape what we share

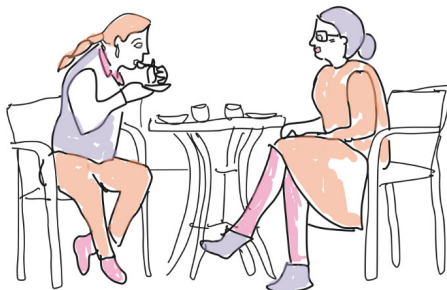
We plan to build momentum around these by using SIGNAL's life-mapping tool with more residents. We hope this will help give us good quantitative data while also, thanks to its design, bring residents into the process of making sense of that data and shaping their own stories.

We'll also be acting on some of the great work done by Sarah Trott, recent Care City intern, on establishing channels for residents' experiences to shape the project and our learning.

Now that we're up and running, it's time to double down on sharing the impact of this way of working (and perhaps, what might have happened otherwise) to bring more people on the learning journey with us. Experimenting with this will be a big focus of ours in the next 6-8 weeks.

How might we collect data in ways that don't reinforce the "service" mindset and add to the endless list of forms that residents are asked to complete?

Questions we're thinking about



Care City

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Community Resources



HUMOURISK CIO



Independent Living Agency

S signal

BD COLLECTIVE

Barking & Dagenham