LGA Peer Challenge – Community Solutions

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD)

Feedback report

October 2021

1. Executive summary

Community Solutions (CS) was launched in April 2018 as part of the council's Ambition 2020 transformation programme. CS brought together a wide range of front-line services to help address key local challenges, including high rates of homelessness, poverty and unemployment. Community Solutions is both a council directorate and a way of working. While each service maintains its core functionality, the greater ambition is to use a holistic approach to resolve a person's or family's underlying issues.

Three years on, Community Solutions has a strong track-record of achievement. This includes supporting performance improvement in key areas; leading an effective Covid-19 response; and providing urgent assistance to major borough incidents. Significantly, Community Solutions has managed to both deliver cashable savings and support cost avoidance.

Community Solutions demonstrates, in a practical way, how to use an individual's needs – rather than service structures – as the starting point. The building blocks that have supported Community Solutions development are clear. These include a strong vision, visible political and managerial leadership, and a willingness to experiment. There has also been exceptional work focused on organisational culture.

There is practical learning for the sector from Community Solutions' development, including both from specific initiatives and on how to build more preventative and relationship-based approaches. Community Solutions illustrates how a council directorate can be significantly more than the sum of its parts.

Community Solutions has evolved over time and will need to further iterate. CS is only just over three years old and at this point it is not possible to quantify its impact on the council's ambition to address long-term complex issues. Some key outcome areas need further improvement and the impact of Covid-19 on Barking and Dagenham has been significant. It remains a borough with high and complex needs, including significant levels of poverty, unemployment and homelessness. The council recognises that it cannot stand still and is continuing to adapt – for example, a new Community Banking Service will launch shortly.

Community Solutions has recently grown in size and taken on a number of new and important functions. Now is an opportune time for Community Solutions to consider whether and how it may need to shift its priorities and focus over the next three years – informed by an assessment of why it has worked effectively to date. In doing so, it is important to maintain a strong emphasis on Community Solutions' key strengths, including its data-driven and preventive approach. The expansion of Community Solutions also provides opportunities to further develop the model, including the potential value of greater use of asset-based and neighbourhood approaches.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

2.1.   Recommendation 1
Share Community Solutions' learning with the sector, including its leadership, cross-service working and organisational culture achievements

2.2.   Recommendation 2
Maintain a strong focus on those key outcome areas that require further improvement, e.g. employment and temporary accommodation

2.3.   Recommendation 3
Articulate how Community Solutions purpose, priorities and culture will change over the next three years – informed by an assessment of why it has worked effectively so far

2.4.   Recommendation 4
Ensure the key strengths of Community Solutions are maintained as it expands, including its focus on using data-driven, resident-centred, preventative approaches

2.5.   Recommendation 5
Use the expansion of Community Solutions to further develop the model,

including the potential value of greater use of asset-based and neighbourhood approaches.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Cllr Jack Hopkins – former Leader of London Borough of Lambeth
- Alison McKenzie-Folan – Chief Executive of Wigan Council
- Fahmida Rahman – Senior Public Policy Advocate, StepChange (National Debt Charity)
- James Rogers – Executive Director of Communities, Housing and Environment, Leeds City Council
- Zelda Wolfle – Assistant Director of Housing and Communities, Reading Borough Council
- Kevin Kewin – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following themes:

1. How effective is the Community Solutions approach?
2. What is the learning from Community Solutions for the local government sector?
3. How will the Community Solutions approach need to adapt to meet changing needs?

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and

knowledge to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent more than two days meeting people virtually before visiting Barking and Dagenham to see services and functions related to Community Solutions. During this time, peers:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings.

4. Feedback

4.1. How effective is the Community Solutions approach?

An understanding of the borough's context is essential in assessing the effectiveness of Community Solutions' approach. Barking and Dagenham has become one of the fastest-changing communities the UK. The area's population has risen by 28% over the past 15 years. The borough is becoming more diverse: 66% of residents identify as coming from black and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 19% in 2001. Barking and Dagenham is also a young place with the highest proportion of people under the age of 16 in the country.

The borough has many challenges, and this is illustrated in key metrics. Barking and Dagenham currently has the highest level of unemployment in the country.   In the government's most recent Indices of Deprivation, Barking and Dagenham had the highest overall score in London. This reflects very poor outcomes across a range of areas, including incomes, skills, health and access to affordable housing. The scale of poverty in the borough translates into very high levels of need, and the associated demand for support, that Community Solutions is seeking to address.

Community Solutions has demonstrated a strong track-record of achievement over

three years in a challenging context. Most recently, this has been illustrated by CS leading an effective Covid-19 response. During the pandemic, Community Solutions served as the single point of contact for shielding and specialist support for 8,000 residents; proactively contacted households at risk and provided help and support; delivered emergency food supplies including through a central food hub; oversaw a local financial hardship scheme; helped to mobilise test and vaccination sites; and supported more than 3,000 residents through its Homes and Money Hub, facilitating income maximisation of more than £1 million.

There has been performance improvement in key Community Solutions areas. This includes supporting a reduction of households in temporary accommodation (TA) since CS took responsibility: from 1,861 residents in 2018 to 1,469 households in April 2021. Prior to this, the council's use of temporary accommodation was increasing year-on-year. Barking and Dagenham is one of only five boroughs in London to report a reduction in TA use over the period.

CS has also led a cross-council programme of work that supports vulnerable residents with housing. Panels bring together staff from commissioning and operational services to identify housing solutions for more complex cases with a focus on prevention. Since October 2019, the panels have facilitated a housing solution for more than 130 individuals or households. In addition to identifying the most suitable accommodation option in each case, the panel process has supported financial savings including through lower rental payments, reduced care packages (enabled by more suitable accommodation) and support to access benefits. In 2020/21 the council estimated the work of the panels supported delivery of £193,00 of cost avoidance, in addition to an £183,000 reduction in actual housing costs to the council.

Community Solutions has had a positive impact on the council's No Recourse to Public Funds work. CS repositioned the services from subsistence focused support to provide a more proactive offer. The service now seeks to prepare residents for self-support with a focus on skills, employment and housing. This includes helping residents to accredit their qualifications from abroad, assisting residents to volunteer and supporting access to ESOL, adult learning and job preparation support. Community Solutions now uses council housing stock to accommodate residents with no recourse to public funds, which supports integration in the community and

ensures children do not need to move schools. The service estimates a cost avoidance saving of £200,000 using this approach.

There has also been a reduction in the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) from 4.2 (2017/18) to 3.7 (2020/21). The council has maintained its position below the London average over the past three years and Barking and Dagenham is one of the better performers in East London. Community Solutions' work in this area includes the support of the Home and Money Hub as well as its social prescribing offer that links GPs to CS and a dedicated young person's link worker.

In addition to some positive performance trends, the council has been able to deliver cashable savings, most notably £3.4m through new ways of working and £1.7m through demand reduction. These savings are in addition to cost avoidance in other areas of the council, such as adult social care, due to Community Solutions' work. Central to delivering financial savings has been efficiencies from cross-service working and a coordinated, preventive approach which has supported workforce reductions.

Community Solutions also provides the council with skilled and flexible capacity to deal with unforeseen challenges. In addition to CS' Covid-19 related work, the directorate has been at forefront of dealing with major incidents, including the Samuel Garside House fire, for example, where Community Solutions was front and centre of the council's response. This included supporting around 200 residents in the immediate aftermath, including through a physical presence at the rest centre alongside advice and support with temporary accommodation placements.

Such examples also illustrate the value of the culture developed across the directorate and the importance of Community Solutions' staff. Frontline officers and managers have consistently shown adaptability and flexibility to thrive in new roles both as part of Community Solutions general development and in relation to specific challenges, such as the pandemic and major borough incidents.

Despite these achievements, Community Solutions is only just over three years old, with significant work in progress, and at this point it is not possible to quantify its impact on the council's ambition to address long-term complex issues. In addition, residents are engaging with a range of other services – inside and outside of the

council – and there a been a series of concurrent national policy changes and initiatives (e.g. Universal Credit, Everyone In). Furthermore, the remit of Community Solutions and its initiatives have evolved over time. For example, customer contact and participation functions have recently joined the directorate, while some other areas – such as targeted early help and the multi-agency safeguarding hub – have returned to children's services.

The impact of Covid-19 is significant and has undoubtedly affected pre-existing trends. For example, Community Solutions demonstrated strong improvement in key areas such as employment assistance until the pandemic. In 2019/20, for example, more than 1,300 residents secured employment with Community Solutions' support – a 54% increase from the previous year. Inevitably, there was a drop in employment outcomes from March 2020, as well as a shift in employers' needs, reflecting a decline in retail and hospitality sectors, for example.

It is also challenging to disaggregate the relative importance of different elements of Community Solutions' approach. For example, while CS' impact on temporary accommodation performance has been positive, it is more difficult to attribute the relative importance of different elements and initiatives. This includes, for example, the respective roles of good TA service management, particular Community Solutions TA initiatives – such as rent in advance, Community Solutions broader 'no wrong door' approach and the strong focus on income maximisation.

In 2018, Community Solutions identified four key objectives: to reduce demand, realise savings, resolve early, and build resilience. The peer team felt that there was strong evidence of progress. The peer team reviewed data across a range of areas, which demonstrated a reduction in demand – from reduced adult social care referrals, to lower numbers of TA placements. The delivery of financial savings is very clear as is the evidence of resolving issues early as illustrated through performance information, case studies and the peer team's engagement with staff and partners. Significantly, there is a very strong organisational culture which provides a firm foundation for further improvements.

The building resilience priority may be the most difficult – and long term – challenge to both measure and address. In 2018, the council made clear its aim to move away from a history of paternalism, with an explicit focus on helping people to help

themselves. Notwithstanding the performance improvements highlighted above, some front-line staff talked about the ongoing difficulty of building this longer-term resilience and translating it into practice for particular individuals or households that are in need of CS support. This challenge is likely to be more difficult given the negative impact of Covid-19 on communities in Barking and Dagenham.

The peer team supports the council's increasing focus on using the community sector, neighbourhood networks and more asset-based approaches to further support independence and resilience. It is the right direction of travel with the council increasingly acting as an enabler for others, as well as a direct provider of support. This sharing of power and responsibility is potentially significant and will itself impact on the culture of Community Solutions over time.

4.2.   What is the learning for the local government sector?

Community Solutions is both a range of services and an ethos. In particular, it demonstrates the value of relationship-based, resident-centred, preventative approaches. Significantly, Community Solutions illustrates that these principles can underpin effectively core services across a diverse range of functions rather than as part of a specific prevention programme. It is clear that early work to bring together a range of different services into Community Solutions – with a focus on joined-up working – laid the foundation for improvements in resident outcomes.

Community Solutions' use of data is strong – both to inform decisions about individuals and households, and strategic decision making. The council benefits from its data capability; there has been national interest in some of the council's corporate data initiatives, including its ward-level [social progress index](#) and [borough data explorer](#). One View is central to Community Solutions operation; it brings together a single view of council debt to inform the council's support and collections activity. It has also supported broader work, including the council's Covid-19 response and delivery of the troubled families programme.

There may also be learning for the sector from some of Community Solutions' emerging practice. For example, Becontree Collection Service (BCS) is the council's new in-house debt collection and enforcement service, which is seeking to deliver an ethical approach. The council is also using behavioural science and design-thinking to improve outcomes. The peer team noted a recent service pilot which utilised data

to proactively identify households experiencing financial hardship and used text messaging at an early stage to achieve a greater level of success and prevention.

The peer team identified a number of building blocks that appear to have underpinned Community Solutions' approach, most notably:

- A clear vision for both the Directorate and Council – No One Left Behind – and being part of a broader (inclusive growth) strategy

- Strong, visible political and executive director leadership – council officers, members and partners clearly recognise and value this

- A willingness to experiment and try new approaches with limited organisational hierarchy – this was a clear theme from staff at all levels

- A commitment to more generic, and cross-service, working across a wide range of front-line functions – Community Solutions' starting point is residents' needs rather than traditional council structures

- Particularly strong and sustained work on organisational culture focused on relationships with residents and prevention – staff feel both engaged and involved with information and discussions facilitated through a range of mechanisms, including roadshows, cuppa clubs and newsletters

The peer team also recognise that the Community Solutions approach has developed over three years and reflects a particular set of local circumstances and organisational culture. The precise CS approach cannot be straightforwardly 'lifted and shifted' elsewhere. However, key lessons from Community Solutions' experience can inform the approach of other councils; the peer team has identified some potential learning for other authorities below.

Councils should consider pragmatically how to build a more preventative and relationship-based approach over time – including the sequencing of prioritised services that will most support improved outcomes. In LBBD, Community Solutions has developed in an iterative manner informed by where the interdependencies and added value are greatest. It is also important that these prioritised functions interface effectively with other parts of the council and other services residents engage with. Community Solutions has worked hard to bring together relevant services to minimise referrals, for example, but it is also recognised that residents will engage

with services outside of Community Solutions.

Councils should consider whether there is sufficient organisational commitment to drive the necessary cultural change. CS demonstrates a different way of working that requires significant leadership. The council's Strategic Director has clearly played an invaluable role in driving this change supported by HR, OD and data work. Peers were very impressed with the council's focus on culture change and the supporting activity to facilitate this. For example, despite a number of major changes that could have severely impacted on staff morale – such as a significant reduction of FTEs and a move to generic descriptions for many frontline staff in previously service specific roles – the peer team found a real commitment to Community Solutions across staff at all levels.

Councils should carefully consider the importance of residents' voice and the voluntary and community sector in developing preventative approaches. These are areas that council has previously identified as areas for development. Recent activity to ensure that Community Banking is co-designed with residents and their voices are heard – in an ongoing rather than one off way – is an example of emerging good practice and builds on other activity, including the work of the Residents' Conversations team. Similarly, the council's progress in developing stronger social infrastructure over the past three years is significant and demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement in the council's preventive approach.

It is also important that councils assess how new approaches change outcomes and evaluate their impact and success over time. As highlighted in section 4.1, while Community Solutions has overseen performance improvements across a range of areas, and adapted in an iterative way, it is difficult – without detailed evaluative work – to fully and precisely understand its performance impact, where this has been most significant and the reasons for this.

4.3.   How will the community solutions approach need to change to reflect changing needs?

Community Solutions has been a core part of the council's improvement journey from the 'traditional' authority – identified by the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014 – to a creative organisation that innovates. Forward thinking and adaptation are key strengths of Community Solutions. For example, CS recognised that its ongoing work

within council services would be insufficient to address financial exclusion; in response, it has led a programme of activity to directly intervene in the market and facilitate a new Community Banking Service for borough residents. Similarly, the council acknowledged that key barriers – such as an outsourced revenues and benefits service – hindered its ability to fully support residents and so has taken action to bring this in-house and use a new approach.

The peer team highlighted a number of key performance achievements of Community Solutions in section 4.1, such as a reduction of households in temporary accommodation and progress in supporting greater numbers of residents to achieve successful employment outcomes. Despite these achievements, there remains a need for a focus on supporting key outcome areas. In relation to temporary accommodation, for example, the rate of TA use remains higher than London averages and above that of some neighbouring boroughs. Despite year-on-year improvement in relation to Community Solutions' employment support outcomes from 2018-2020, Barking and Dagenham has the lowest employment rate in the capital and the employment rate gap with London is not narrowing.

The outcome trends highlighted above reflect the scale of the challenges in Barking and Dagenham. Despite its success and achievements, Community Solutions recognises that it cannot address these issues on its own and it will have the greatest impact in partnership with communities, the voluntary sector and other agencies. Given the council's high ambitions, the current levels of need and the impact of Covid-19, it is important that Community Solutions reports its key output and outcome metrics consistently benchmarked to others (particularly London Boroughs), as well as over time. This approach will support both the council and others to see Community Solutions' progress and the potential impact of broader socio-economic trends.

Over the past year, there has been a significant expansion of CS including: participation and engagement functions; voluntary and community sector (VCS) relationships; and customer contact. The peer team felt that this managed growth provides a number of potential opportunities. For example, the recent transfer of VCS responsibilities supports Community Solutions' ongoing work to strengthen asset-based approaches and build-in greater place-based preventative elements to CS' model. Similarly, the inclusion of customer contact and participation functions will

enhance CS' work to ensure the voice of residents is heard across service development and delivery.

The peer team also identified some potential risks with Community Solutions' expansion. Most obviously, it is important that the key characteristics of CS – such as its strong culture and data-driven approach – are maintained through its further development. For example, the peer team are pleased to note the considerable planning work already undertaken to develop the community hub programme, but feel the council should explore whether one hub presence in every ward is the optimum approach based on the available data.

The council's progress in relation to the VCS over recent years is a considerable achievement. This includes but is not limited to: assistance to allow the BD Collective to develop social infrastructure, including a network of networks; support for BD Giving to distribute resources to local causes; funding to assist Barking and Dagenham Council for Voluntary Services to grow the capacity of local organisations; and investment in Every One Every Day (EOED) – an innovative peer to peer participation platform.

As the council further develops its plans, the peer team feel it would be beneficial for the council to articulate more explicitly the links and interfaces between some of the current voluntary sector and council arrangements. This includes, for example, defining the relationships between the council-led community hub and community-led neighbourhood network programmes. In addition, while the council is not the majority funder of Every One Every Day (EOED), there is value from ensuring that, as far as possible, it is fully embedded as part of the wider social infrastructure of the borough.

Community Solutions has evolved over time and developed in an iterative way. The peer team feel there is benefit from an evaluation which considers where Community Solutions has been most successful and the reasons for this. This assessment could then inform future CS approaches and decisions. As highlighted above, the importance of effective leadership and a strong culture are very clear. It is also likely that the aligned agendas within a number of CS services has a positive impact. Debt and income maximisation, for example, are a strong galvanising focus for an existing set of functions within Community Services. It is also likely that the services that have recently joined CS will – and should – influence Community Solutions' development

going forward.

The peer team believe now is an opportune time for Community Solutions to consider and articulate how its purpose, priorities and culture will change over the next three years – informed by an assessment of why it has worked effectively so far. This could include, for example, being clear on any shift in priorities or focus, including in light of the new services joining and the impact of Covid-19. The peer team noted, for example, some discussions about a range of other issues – such as social isolation, participation, mental health and reoffending – as areas that could benefit from a more prominent focus alongside debt and income maximisation. There is potential value in articulating how the resilience agenda will be addressed at a time of potentially rising need. This might include detailing how the council will work differently over time (e.g. the move to more asset-based approaches) and defining success in terms of promoting resilience and independence.

Alongside these strategic discussions which reflect upon Community Solutions achievements and the future direction of travel, the peer team also identified a small number of practical areas for CS to consider further: One View, volunteering, leadership resilience and links to other parts of the council.

One View has been a core supporting system that has supported the successful strategic development of Community Solutions as well as its operational practice. Overall, it is a clear strength that has supported Community Solutions, including to better understand debt and support CS' preventative interventions. One View has developed over time – including, most recently, to be a core part of the new internal revenue and benefits service. Despite this, there were mixed views amongst some staff about One View that should be explored further. This included feedback from some officers unaware of One View, others who were unable to use the system and those that did not always feel they had access to the right information. It is clear to the peer team that senior leaders have a strong understanding of the key issues relating to One View, such as the importance of ensuring staff can view relevant data – but without inappropriate access to personal information – and the importance of a robust approach to information governance. As Community Solutions grows, there is potential benefit from further discussions with staff about One View, including how it can or should change to support both the larger directorate and the increasing focus on neighbourhood approaches.

There is a strong focus on volunteering within Community Solutions. For example, from July 2019 to June 2020, more than 400 volunteers provided in excess of 13,000 hours of assistance, including supporting a major vaccination site, community food clubs, libraries, children's centres and food parcel deliveries. The council has invested in training and infrastructure to support volunteers, including Better Impact – a dedicated volunteering app. There is potential value in providing additional assistance to volunteering, including more dedicated officer capacity to support the programme. For example, peers heard that being a Volunteer Coordinator was sometimes an additional duty on top of a busy Community Solutions frontline role, which can limit the support available. In addition, LBBD volunteers are not currently permitted to apply for internal council job opportunities – this may be an area that could be considered further.

The personal leadership of the Strategic Director is undoubtably a central factor in Community Solutions' progress and success – this was widely recognised across the officers, members and wider stakeholders the peer team met. While this personal leadership is of considerable benefit to the council, it is also a risk including in terms of sustainability. The peer team support plans to recruit two new director-level posts (Community Participation and Prevention, Income and Collection). These two roles could include a strong focus on providing greater strategic leadership resilience for Community Solutions as well as operational management of their respective areas.

The peer team identified very strong examples of Community Solutions working effectively with other areas of the council (e.g. adult social care) and partners (e.g. DWP) supporting a cost effective and coordinated approach beyond Community Solutions core functions. However, both partners and front-line staff highlighted the potential benefits of stronger operational relationships and interfaces with some other parts of the council – most notably parking and housing – to maximise the benefits of joined-up support. It is clear that strategic leaders in these areas understand the importance of working effectively across the council and the peer team noted some recent examples of improvements in this respect. It is also recognised that some aspects of council business – such as parking debt collection – are highly regulated with limited room for discretion. However, for some Community Solutions front-line staff there were obvious disconnects with other parts of the council. Some of these challenges could be addressed relatively easily, for example, through the regular

sharing of contact details of key non-CS staff to address particular types of resident queries.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser for London, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Kate is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be reached on kate.herbert@local.gov.uk or 07867 632404.