💬 Story: Understanding and harnessing influence in Barking and Dagenham

When facing cohesion challenges in 2007, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham undertook a major research programme to better understand the nature of the lack of cohesion and the potential for interventions to assist.

The insight identified particular areas in the locality where issues were at their most acute. Residents reported that they were more likely to believe and trust people known to them who they respected rather than what they read in the local papers or indeed were told by the council or other agencies.

A programme to recruit local 'influencers' was launched in eight target areas. This consisted of identification of local people who held positions of influence – from parent teacher association activists, residents' representatives to local publicans and shopkeepers. This 'formal' list was supplemented by doorstep and telephone contact where residents were asked if there was anyone locally who they would look to if issues arose in the neighbourhood. Through this more 'informal' influencers were identified.

Influencers were then approached to participate in a Community Communicators Project where they were asked in the first instance to share their own views and those of their networks of friends, customers and others about a range of local issues. They were not asked to 'champion' the Council, but rather to work with them to improve understanding and services for local people. Over 50 per cent agreed to participate on that basis. Dedicated officers were tasked with establishing and maintaining good relationships with the influencers and gathering regular insight. Over time some influencers were able and willing to disseminate information on behalf of the council about planned initiatives – changes or improvements in services – or in response to rumour and misinformation.

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The programme led to improvements in the insight and intelligence capability of the council – enabling quicker and more resonant communications to be made using trusted channels. It demonstrated to residents that the council was making a determined effort to listen to local opinion. Key policy initiatives arose from the project, which succeeded in rebuilding confidence and trust in the council to the extent that there was an increase in the NI1 rating of nearly 20 per cent in three years.[1] The principles were subsequently further tested in a project funded by London Councils and independently evaluated.[2]

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1   National Indicators or NIs were measured through regular resident surveys. NI1 describes "What percentage of people believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area". National Indicators no longer exist but while in use they were codified in the National Indicators Handbook for Local Authorities 2007
2   Using Community Communicators to build trust and understanding between local councils and residents, Matt Wood, University of Brighton Business School, 2009