



Reactions and reflections from 'Building a New Era for Wigan Borough'

Introduction

Over summer 2023 the council embarked on a process to take stock and re-set how to work together for the good of our borough, to understand the context we're operating in now and to build on the learning of the last ten years and 'The Deal'. Collaborate CIC and IPPR North undertook an engagement process including conversations with people from our community, colleagues in the VCFSE, staff, politicians and partners, and online surveys for residents and staff, to seek to understand what people think the 'New Era' should look like and what it will take to get there.

On 21 November 2023, people who had been part of that engagement process came together at the 'Building a New Era for Wigan Borough' event. At the event, we reflected back what we learned and shared the developing thinking about where to go from here. This was an opportunity for a range of stakeholders to continue to input into the development of a collaborative approach as well as building connections with peers and partners from across different sectors. More events and conversations to socialise these findings and develop the plans for the future are also taking place with other partners and stakeholders.

This document is a synthesis of the notes captured from discussions following the presentation and showcase at the event on 21 November. This sets out the reactions and responses we captured, including people's responses to the questions:

- What resonates most with your experience of the borough and feelings about the future?
- What's missing? What might you have hoped or expected to hear but didn't?
- What elements are you most excited about as having the potential for the biggest impact?
- What concerns or doubts do you have?
- What questions would you like to explore further?
- How do we build on what's already happening in this spirit? What's needed to enable this?



Reactions and reflections

There was a lot in the narrative presented that resonated and that people were in agreement with in terms of core ideas and principles. Particularly that:

- Relationships, partnership and reciprocity need to be central to the New Era.
- This is the right time for a re-fresh, re-commitment and re-energising.
- The New Era must be about the whole borough, not just the Council. There is a strong shared desire to move away from 'us and them' attitudes and siloed approaches to 'together we will...'
- Addressing basic needs and tackling economic inequality are a prerequisite for building trust and community capacity, and enabling residents to engage as active participants in their place.
- Many of the values and core DNA that sit behind the Council's approach in recent years and that they want to carry into the New Era do align with those of other partners.

While the core ideas and principles are generally right, there are lots of questions about how and what this will look like in practice. As well as hope and optimism, the conversations surfaced some doubts, concern and scepticism about whether real and meaningful change towards true collaboration and a shift in power will be made by all parties (e.g. within the NHS/health as well as the Council).

Questions people are holding and which need to be responded to include:

- What does this really mean for me?
- How will accountability operate? How will we ensure we're transparent and accountable to the community, and hold one another to account for our individual and shared responsibilities?
- How will we measure and articulate progress – especially to the community? What impacts are we expecting to see?
- How will we get beyond 'us and them' thinking that is still entrenched in some instances? What behaviour/policy changes are people willing to make to really enable an equal partnership (particularly between Council and community sector)? What will this look like in practice in different contexts? What might need to be reinstated to support this that fell by the wayside during/post-Covid (e.g. Community Investment Fund)?



In order to embody the 'New Era' and do the work to get there, participants identified a number of needs:

- **Real and meaningful engagement**
 - More and continuous listening (not one-off exercises).
 - Thinking purposefully about which voices are centred and continually checking and guarding against 'those who shout the loudest' or those who are already 'insiders' being the most influential. Be on guard against creating echo chambers or falling into old defaults and patterns of who is and isn't heard.
 - While the event and the engagement to this point has been a good start in terms of the people in the room, we need to acknowledge who has and hasn't been part of engagement to date, the limitations of this (e.g. reliance on digital channels for wider community participation) and work to engage with those who haven't been reached or are under-represented e.g. young people, faith communities.

- **Transparency and honesty**
 - With each other and with the community about what we are committing to and how well we're delivering that
 - Honesty and acknowledgement about what the very real constraints and limitations people and organisations are facing are, including the back-drop of austerity, funding crises, national politics and policies etc.
 - The ability to have difficult conversations and build trust through seeing and feeling changes in behaviours that signal a true shift in mindset and understanding (e.g. of how the power of the community is valued)

- **Agreement on what key terms and ideas mean.** The current iteration is lacking specificity and to really enable joint action we will need to come to a shared understanding of what we mean by things like:
 - 'Community'
 - A 'neighbourhood' and what the model of neighbourhood/locality working actually looks like in practice
 - 'Basic services' – shared understanding of what the basics are and how to deliver them effectively, and who has what roles and responsibilities to do this



- Responding to inequality – how to target resources and balancing co-production with proportional responses to needs
 - The ‘core DNA of the approach’ – while there is much alignment in terms of the values and behaviours between the Council and others, the language of a ‘Wigan Way’ did not resonate with all because of the different identities within the borough, and didn’t feel in line with a borough-wide (not just Council) approach
- **Clear and consistent communication**
 - A clearer and more accessible articulation of how this will be delivered, and an effective way to communicate this to the public
 - Joined up and consistent messaging from the Council and across partners
 - Communication and collaboration between teams and partners at an operational level
 - **Acknowledging and building on experience and learning that already exists** e.g. around co-production
 - **A deeper understanding** of who is at risk and where the most urgent needs are at a local level by more effectively joining up different data and insight sources
 - **Effective partnership with businesses and the private sector** not just public sector and community partners

Overall, there was a sense of support and receptiveness to the ideas, and commitment from those in the room to playing their part in delivering the reforms for the New Era. It felt like there was an energy and momentum towards the next phase of development, and a desire to get into the ‘devil in the detail’, and in doing so surface and address more of what needs to be grappled with to make the ideas of the New Era a reality.