

# Lessons on Inclusive Growth: Barking and beyond



Growth and  
Reform Network

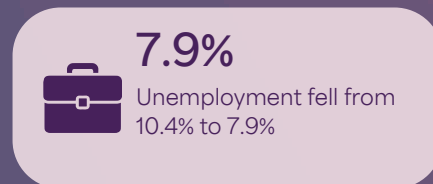
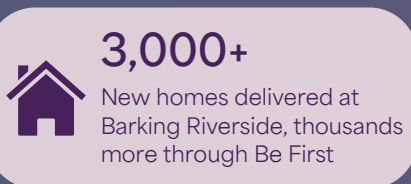
## About this briefing

This briefing draws on discussions held at an event jointly hosted by the Growth and Reform Network and The Open University, marking ten years since the publication of No One Left Behind - Barking and Dagenham's landmark inclusive growth commission report. The event brought together council leaders, practitioners, community and voluntary sector organisations, academics, and national policy thinkers to reflect honestly on what a decade of ambition has taught us, and what it means for places across the country.

## Context: A decade of ambition in Barking and Dagenham

Ten years ago, Barking and Dagenham set out a twenty-year vision for inclusive growth that sought to harness the borough's unique position at the eastern edge of London to transform life chances for residents who had felt, for too long, left behind. The borough had lived through decades of industrial decline, the 2006 BNP opposition, and deep community dislocation. The No One Left Behind report was a serious attempt to change direction.

Over the last decade (from 2015 to 2024):



Yet the structural indicators - including poverty, inequality and deprivation - have hardly moved.

This briefing summarises the lessons that can be drawn from Barking and Dagenham's experience for other places looking to drive inclusive local economic growth. A new paper by Dr Dan Taylor, Senior Lecturer in Social and Political Thought at the Open University, reflects on the experience of Barking and Dagenham itself in more detail.

# Lessons for the next decade of Inclusive Growth

1

## Lesson on Leadership

Long-term commitment and political courage are prerequisites for inclusive growth

Inclusive growth is not delivered through short political cycles. It requires leadership that is sustained over time, holds a clear long-term vision, and is willing to navigate financial shocks, political pressure, and changing national priorities without abandoning core goals.

It is critical that leadership extends beyond the council. Effective inclusive growth requires leaders across the public, voluntary, and community sectors to develop shared **purpose**, invest in **relationships** over time, and be willing to share **power** - not just coordinate. Leadership that prioritises short-term outputs over long-term community cohesion and trust, ultimately undermines the very outcomes it is trying to achieve



### Spotlight

In **Barking and Dagenham**, long-term and consistent political leadership over many years was identified as a critical factor in the region's ability to deliver at scale. The borough's trajectory - from the BNP's 2006 breakthrough to a decade of ambitious regeneration - was shaped by leadership that held a **long-term** vision through successive financial shocks, political pressures, and changing national contexts.



## 2

## Lesson on Regeneration

Building places is not the same as improving lives

Building homes and physical infrastructure is necessary, but not sufficient, for inclusive growth. Parallel investment in the quality of employment, public health, skills, and social infrastructure must sit alongside – and not ‘trickle down’ from physical development.

Inclusive growth requires intentional alignment between the built environment and the socioeconomic systems that enable residents to thrive and improve their everyday life. It also requires, where possible, long-term funding to support and protect the capacity of community and voluntary organisations to work with local authorities to support and empower residents, particularly during periods of economic change. Without this, regeneration can deepen inequalities rather than address them.



### Spotlight

In **Barking and Dagenham**, significant housing delivery was not matched by improvements in poverty, wages or health outcomes. For example, child poverty remained – from 43% in 2015 to 42% in 2024 – despite Barking’s exceptional housing delivery programme.

Other local and regional authorities, such as **West Midlands Combined Authority**, have pursued a more integrated approach to regeneration through the [region’s Inclusive Growth Strategy](#), combining economic development with targeted interventions in skills, health, and low-income communities.

## 3

## Lesson on Community Partnership

Genuine partnership requires power-sharing, not just engagement

Community organisations are often asked to play a bridging role between policy and residents while being underfunded, lacking influence and being disengaged from the decision-making power to do so effectively.

Participation that is tokenistic - where communities are consulted on decisions that have already been made - erodes trust over time. Real partnership means devolving resources and decision-making to community organisations, building relationships over years, and creating the structures and institutions in which community voices are driving strategy rather than merely responding to it.



### Spotlight

Programmes such as [Barking and Dagenham Giving](#), a participatory grantmaker, transfer decision-making power to residents over how funding is allocated to community-led initiatives; they have distributed over £1m in grants to date.

In [Liverpool](#), the [Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust](#) creates vibrant mixed communities, including through the renovation of housing alongside housing providers and developers, creating high quality green public and social spaces, and renovating empty local businesses as the basis of productive community and retail areas.



## 4

## Lesson on Place-Making

Culture and community identity are undervalued drivers of inclusive growth

Arts, culture, and community identity are dimensions of inclusive growth that are too often treated as secondary to physical development or economic metrics. They do not show up in GVA, and are among the first things cut when budgets tighten - yet they are central to how residents experience **belonging, safety, and agency** in their place.

Placemaking strategies that neglect these elements risk creating spaces that function economically, but not socially. When residents are given genuine power, support, and time to engage actively, the outcomes reflect community priorities in ways that top-down approaches rarely achieve. Embedding culture and community voice into development leads to more resilient and meaningful places.



### Spotlight

Creative **Barking and Dagenham's** pilot of citizen-led decision-making at the Galleon Arts Centre - where sortition was used to recruit a representative panel of residents who deliberated on the future of a local arts space - offers an example of an innovative approach to placemaking.

In **Glasgow**, the Creative Communities Glasgow programme, funded by the GCPF as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, aims to use the power of art and culture to connect and transform people's lives in the city. The programme has supported 10 charities and community organisations, giving participants a shared sense of purpose and connection to their neighbourhoods.



## 5

## Lesson on Communication & Narrative

Policy language must connect with the people it is about

A recurring challenge is the gap between the language used to describe ‘inclusive growth’ - regeneration, affordable housing, GVA, - and the terms in which residents actually experience growth in their everyday lives. When policy is communicated in ways that are inaccessible or abstract, it creates distance and erodes trust, leaving space for alternative narratives to take hold.

Equally, the framing of communities matters. Framing communities that experience deep disadvantages as ‘left behind’ obscures the structural causes of inequality and risks shaping ineffective responses. In some cases, these are not communities that were passively passed over - they are communities that were **asset stripped**, as industries withdrew, public services contracted, and social infrastructure was not replaced. The loss of such assets points to the need for targeted investment in what is being lost: social infrastructure, community institutions and local anchors. Using the right narrative is not just a communications question but leads to better-designed interventions and stronger public legitimacy.



### Spotlight

**West Midlands Combined Authority** has taken a different approach in communicating its Local Growth Plan, which includes a more accessible “Prologue” written by Steven Knight CBE, the creator of BBC’s *Peaky Blinders* series. Rather than leading with technical policy language, the strategy opens with a story rooted in the region’s identity, history, and lived experience.

This makes the strategy more relatable and grounded in place, helping residents connect with the why behind the policy. This approach demonstrates how policy can be translated into narrative without losing substance. By anchoring strategy in a story people recognise, it becomes more accessible, more engaging, and more likely to build public understanding and legitimacy.

## About the Growth and Reform Network

The **Growth and Reform Network** is an ambitious new initiative building on the legacy of the Centre for Progressive Policy and its Inclusive Growth Network, in partnership with the **Future Governance Forum** and **Metro Dynamics**. Our mission is to bridge the gap between national policy development and implementation at the local and regional levels across the UK. We bring together mayors, local leaders and practitioners with national policymakers to develop the innovative ideas, policy and practice to drive local growth and reform.

We provide Network members with a unique three-pillar offer of support to equip them with the practical tools and expertise to deliver inclusive growth and public service reform. You can find more about our work on [inclusive growth](#) here.



Read the toolkit by the CPP and its Inclusive Growth Network on Mainstreaming Inclusive Growth into key strategies and institutions.

