

# BUILDING ALLIANCES AROUND A COMMON CAUSE



**By Lara Rufus-Fayemi**

One of the themes emerging from our Sharing and Building Power cell has been the importance of building wider alliances around a common cause, ensuring these reflect the full diversity of our society and are equitable and inclusive. Lara Rufus-Fayemi shares insights from the London Borough of Newham.

## Collaboration is the new normal...

Joining the London Borough of Newham in April last year has been both an exciting and exhilarating experience all in one! A paradoxical statement, I know, but joining the Council in the midst of a global pandemic, with the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic being more severe in Newham than anywhere else in the country, you'll understand my opening sentence. Newham, which has historically been seen as the hub of East London in terms of culture and tourism, tragically experienced the highest death rate due to Covid-19 in England and Wales. Working together with local people and organisations was a step in the right direction and one that would bear much fruit.

Having spent several years in the voluntary sector and a further five years at the National Lottery Community Fund, I was

really heartened by the Council's ethos of having 'people at the heart of everything we do', which suitably chimes with the Lottery's 'People in the Lead' ambition.

This was duly demonstrated by the Council and its partners; residents and local businesses were supported through these extraordinary times and circumstances. For example, the Council immediately launched the #HelpNewham programme to deliver support to residents who were most in need, supporting vulnerable residents to gain access to supermarket delivery slots at Iceland or Tesco, arranging home delivery of food and essential items (such as toothpaste and sanitary items), as well as having someone to talk to via our befriending telephone chat service.

We all know that the pandemic really shone the spotlight on some of the stark inequalities and inequity experienced by

disadvantaged groups. As a result of this, albeit inadvertently, new collaborations have emerged, enabling multidisciplinary groups to begin to come together to construct a systems approach, for example, to the complex immigration issues at play in the borough.

Newham contributed to the formation of several alliances – by which I mean an informal partnership between a group of organisations for mutual benefit – such as Newham’s Anti-Poverty alliance, seeking to identify transformational change for an all-borough approach, working across different themes. Newham’s Social Welfare Alliance, to give another example, focused on supporting all front-line workers in the borough and centred on understanding the issues and sign posting individuals to the correct advice. The Newham Food Alliance is another example, where we worked collaboratively with 33 cross-sector organisations within and beyond Newham to deliver over 200,000 parcels to those who couldn’t afford to get food and supported up to 6,000 households at any one time. Overall, with every £1 the council invested we got £10 worth of food for residents, at a total value of £3.9 million.

All in all, this has resulted in Newham Council having much better, more productive and richer relationships with the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

Newham Council is now building on some of the groundswell and the momentum that has emerged in the midst of these adverse circumstances, creating a spirit of collaboration and solidarity, to collectively develop an approach to achieve better

outcomes for the borough, as well as test and learn new initiatives. For example, we’ve worked with University College London to create Newham Sparks, with the ambition to create many open data jobs in the borough and be a leader in this field. In recent months, Newham has also, in partnership with London Funders, formed the Newham Funders’ Forum – a collaboration of between 15 to 20 diverse (in size and scope) funders which are all investing in Newham – with the purpose of being able to share insights and explore opportunities to discuss how we might better support greater collaboration in the future.

Importantly, the borough is spearheading many initiatives which are designed to be equitable and inclusive and give local people power. For example, we have local Community Assemblies, one of the largest participatory budgeting programmes in the country, where local groups can decide how funds should be spent in the borough. We have also established the first Permanent Standing Citizens assembly in the country, currently focused on developing 15-minute neighbourhoods. The Council has recently worked with University College London, Compost and other partners to train up residents to be researchers in their communities and are developing a Citizen Science Academy.

It’s clear that in these strange times, we can no longer afford to work in isolation. None of the above initiatives could have happened in silos or in a bubble. We hear a lot about the ‘new normal’. For me ‘collaboration’ is the new normal!

During this process, I've learnt a lot not just about the importance of alliances but also how to make them work. My top tips for effective collaborations would be in the form of an acronym PERROIL:

**P**eople – the main ingredient: it's going to take people and their commitment to a common purpose to make collaborations work!

**E**nergy – needs passion and optimism to get things started.

**R**espect – respect people's views and experiences.

**R**isk – don't be afraid to take risks and trial new initiatives.

**O**pen – people appreciate openness and honesty, the good the bad and the warts too.

**I**nvestment – whether that is time or funding or both – whatever it takes to make the partnership work.

**L**isten – don't just hear, but really listen to what people have to say!

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