The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, located approximately 11 miles east of Central London, is home to initiatives aimed at building a child-friendly community in one of the most challenging urban environments in the United Kingdom.

Situated on the north bank of the River Thames, the outer London borough has a population of over 179,000, of which around 30 per cent are under 20 years old. The 0–19 age group is one of the fastest growing in the country, placing great pressure on services for children. Over half of school pupils are from ethnic minorities – a significant increase from around 15 per cent just a decade ago. More than a hundred languages are spoken in the borough, and English is a second language for more than one third of its students.

Barking and Dagenham faces considerable challenges. The borough is the twenty-second most deprived local authority in the country (out of a total of 354); it ranks ninth in terms of child poverty. The facets of deprivation are many: lower life expectancy, people leaving school without qualifications, nearly one quarter of 10- and 11-year-olds recorded as obese, and high levels of pregnancy among girls below 18 years of age – 55.2 per cent higher than the average for England and Wales.

In the face of such challenges, the Barking and Dagenham Children’s Trust places the rights of children and young people at the heart of its work. Its vision is to “create a borough where every child is valued, supported and challenged so that they develop the ambition, skills and resilience to succeed and where every child knows that they are a part of, and have a responsibility to contribute to building, a strong, empowered

FOCUS ON
INCLUSION IN OUTER LONDON

Poster from the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham’s Youth Forum campaign, ‘No to Dark, Light the Park’, asking local authorities to make parks safer by installing lighting. Photo courtesy of Laurence Davis Photography.
and cohesive community.” To this end, members of the Trust engage with children, young people and parents.

Over the past decade, an elected Youth Forum, which reports directly to the borough council leader, has focused on issues of importance to local young people. Its recent work includes a short film tackling homophobic bullying and a series of films about alcohol abuse. The Forum has also led a successful campaign to light the borough’s parks in order to make them safer after dark. Lighting has already been installed in 2 of the borough’s 25 parks, and there are plans to extend this. By translating young people’s concerns into formal policymaking, the Forum is a tangible way for young people to contribute – 91 per cent of members felt that taking part enabled them to make a difference.

A Disabled Children’s Parliament, run in partnership with the voluntary sector, is a way for those with learning difficulties and disabilities to make their voices heard. A consultation on childcare led directly to the provision of over 50 after-school activities for children with disabilities in mainstream schools for the first time. Participants, aged 11–25, also assessed the borough’s new leisure centre development to ensure accessibility.

A range of other activities involve children and young people in more specialized fields. The Young People’s Safety Group, the first entity of its kind in London, forms part of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Chaired by a young person, it plays an important role in shaping local safeguarding policy, including the borough’s e-safety policy. It also works on improving relationships between young people and law enforcement agencies. For example, after young people attending a workshop on gangs said they did not feel safe talking to the police, officers led a series of information sessions on the issue of reporting crime.

In another initiative, around 40 young people have been trained to act as young inspectors for local services such as children’s centres, libraries, health services, housing and leisure centres. Young inspectors have also worked with local pharmacies to ensure easy access to contraception, as part of the borough’s strategy to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy. The scheme allows young people to gain confidence and learn new skills, including communication and teamwork.

Adult involvement is crucial to creating a child-friendly community. Parent forums associated with 16 active children’s centres involve parents in fundraising and delivering community projects to improve outcomes for the youngest children in areas such as healthy eating and play. Community members also run 5 youth clubs, attended by hundreds of young people each week. Overseeing this work is the Borough Wide Parents’ Board, which includes a subgroup for parents of children with disabilities.

The impact of a participatory approach is confirmed by national TellUs surveys of young people. Between 2007 and 2010, young people in Barking and Dagenham reported that they felt listened to significantly more than their peers around the country. The borough was also awarded a Local Government Chronicle award in 2011, in recognition of its engagement with children and young people.

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