

## Exiting Newham Engagement

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I've given up on dialogues that go nowhere, form over substance, annoying empty slogans, and, in general official engagement. The end of 2022 was a final exit point. I've been in the borough for a decade in March 2023, maybe that's enough too? I'm rapidly becoming one of/with the very angry people I met on Margery Park Road in 2018 when I was canvassing, who said *nothing ever changes, does it?*

So this essay highlights some reasons for my 'departure' and maybe my physical departure, although I love my garden(s). Plenty of *jam today*, too. This isn't an ad-hominem attack on anyone in particular, it is an attack on a culture and (such as it is) an approach.

It is an attack on complacency, defensiveness, low-tech/low-skill, lack of process, library decline, participative democracy theatre, performative climate inaction, non-engagement, silos, sloganeering. I'm sure there are a few more.

Although, many of these can be joined up, so that 'something wicked this way comes'<sup>1</sup> (no *that* isn't in the library either, I checked), I've arranged the sections below that support the arguments, alphabetically. However the first two, complacency and defensiveness, prevent any actual 'learnings' (pace Nottingham Uni, a horrible word), so they are, to some extent, *master defects*. In the smoking, still warm ruins of 2050 (my hundredth birthday or dead, not sure which I prefer), some younger non-complacent officials can strike out in a new direction. Let's go!

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Something\\_Wicked\\_This\\_Way\\_Comes\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Something_Wicked_This_Way_Comes_(novel)) of course, this is a joke about 'wicked problems' too.

## Complacency

I've dealt with that at length in previous essays. There are now two opposition councillors and one independent socialist, but the truth is that *Newham has had a monoculture chamber for decades*. That flavour is *Labour but never socialist*, therefore currently mirroring the national party, as far as anyone can pierce its current policy opacity. Some councillors have been sitting for decades too, some of them are landlords. Apart from the static, self-satisfied nature of this configuration, there are often significant financial costs<sup>2</sup> as well. Within this, there's a certain transactional nature, doing stuff for residents (not necessarily a 'bad' thing) but no broader vision, except that expressed in prolific un-enacted reports and plans. Also, when one is shooed in each time, why stick one's neck out, say, for climate change or more veridical forms of engagement ?

Better to keep calm and carry on as before, don't rock the boat.

## Defensiveness

With the continuous noise outwards (see **Sloganeering**, later) there's no bandwidth for any messages coming in, so not much *real listening* can take place. When, for a moment, there is a little, almost ritualised listening (a meeting usually to blunt any apposite (word a day!) criticism) the result is usually defensiveness of some kind. Key phrases "that's not what we hear" (never any facts to support or dispute this), "that's not what we understand" (of course not), basically, we don't really want to do anything much about this<sup>3</sup>, whatever it is.

Of course, we have no idea of methods used for 'hearing', therefore validity, scope and breadth of conclusion. Usually, it's also figure-work, there's nothing qualitative, except perhaps admiring 'quotes' accompanied by many pictures of happy, smiling people. As the graffiti goes 'This is a Damnable Lie'.

I've actually seen a lot of this in the Tower Hamlets ALMO, THH as an estate resident, including the 'coat of aspirational lip-gloss'<sup>4</sup>. Admittedly *not listening* has been perfected at all levels of local, national government, and all associated structures. If, as a consequence, 'we' shout, we're normally tone-policed too, it is considered to be 'abuse'. Doesn't make it any better does it? That this is pervasive doesn't make it any better, look here's Labour Islington practising the 'art' of not listening too<sup>5</sup>.

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2 <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/the-cost-of-one-party-councils/>

3 Brian Martin, the civil servant effectively in charge of fire safety regulations, as "very annoying ... I just ignore him". *OK, we're not at Grenfell here, but the attitude is pervasive.*

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/03/show-me-the-bodies-how-we-let-grenfell-happen-by-peter-apps-review-a-devastating-account-of-failure>

5 You didn't 'listen'. You ran a sham consultation, refused to engage with the alternative providers that the skating community put forward, and made misleading statements about costs of reinstatement and Ally Pally having a 'new' rink. And still none of the promised mitigations. (Sobell ice rink)

## Lack of Process

For example, most email exchanges and sometimes councillor exchanges (except photo ops and tweets etc. etc.) carry on for a little while and then die. Here's an extract from a friend and gardener who lives on a Newham estate:

Why are you making me email you again xxx? You literally had a walk about here a few months ago **and tweeted about it**. Estate busters - unresolved. Major works - unresolved

It's worth saying that this is pervasive, in the East End, at least. In Tower Hamlets, I attended meeting after meeting, often full of consultant-talk 'big ask', 'concern about issues', lean in', 'take that back with us', 'engage' (of which much more later) without concrete result. This included a tenant who had had a leak into her bedroom *for ten years*. A good solution to much of the day to day items is simply, an issue tracking system<sup>6</sup>. If any official elected or paid, is actually *concerned about issues*, then ticket them (except highly personal, in which case within private system) where we can see and follow them.

These problems are both in day-to-day (repairs) and projects, looking at you, Data, Newham Sparks both of which I was prepared to help with at one stage. To have a 40 career year IT veteran pro-bono might be useful, mightn't it? I'm still at work too<sup>7</sup>.

But this isn't about me. The usual 'process' for projects is a) meeting in library or Zoom b) photo op with engagement people c) silence and dissolution.

## Library Decline and Neutering

I've dealt with this, at length, here<sup>8</sup>. Education includes self-education, especially given the cost of certification<sup>9</sup>, *going to uni to get a quali*. So well-stocked libraries are a refuge, a place of self-driven educational advancement and (dare we use the word) flourishing<sup>10</sup>. However Newham libraries are now used as a noisy substitute for the steadily closing (and usually gatekept, siloed, specialised, expensive) community spaces and bereft of any *serious* books, factual, fiction or poetry.

What do I mean by *serious*? Well, first the old, male, and stale, Kafka, Dickens, Nietzsche, and, of course, Shakespeare. No, they won't *perform* (the library algorithm is obsessed with outputs rather than outcomes (can't measure outcomes, of course), as most of government) but they will educate and inspire. For the non, old, male, and stale, CLR James (I'm reading the Black Jacobins at the moment) LeGuin, Octavia Butler, and WEB Du Bois, for example. Some serious tech books too, rather than *Ipad for Dummies* and similar.

Of course, some of these books may provoke undesirable episodes of *thinking*. *critical thinking* even (oh the horror!), something that may cause political disturbance and criticism. We wouldn't want any of that, especially now that the chamber has nicely settled down into something beige, aimless, and full of self-satisfaction.

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6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issue\\_tracking\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issue_tracking_system)

7 <https://www.horizon.ac.uk/working-with-the-mema-3-0-project/>

8 <http://hughbarnard.org/index.php/2021/10/10/library-451/>

9 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deschooling>

10 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/>

## Low-Tech/Low-Skill

In 2022 I ended up building a tiny web system to organise tens of papers that were floating around as Word documents in the working group of the community assembly. This was part of the community assembly process of which I'll say more later on. I'm not beating my own drum, just wanted life to be easier for the 'working group' of which I was one, one of my last official Newham gigs.

Apparently, the technical answer to 'anything' is a is Excel (simple but loads of spurious formatting, colours, backgrounds etc.) or Google forms (oh, the privacy horror!) because these are only technologies understood (I use *technologies* and *understood* pretty loosely) at grass roots level in/for/by the borough. Zoom meetings often chaotic too. I don't know how far up this goes, but given the non-answers and non-availability of requested figures to an official community assembly project<sup>11</sup>, suggests *quite a long way*, see also 'neutering the community assembly'<sup>12</sup>.

I'd also say that this doesn't bode well for any of the projects (see **Lack of Process**) that I've either attempted to engage with or been ask to engage with. Given the salaries in the City, I have some sympathy for lack of borough technicity, but there are (were) people prepared to help.

Incidentally, I've suggested, several times, (see **Defensiveness**) two bits of tech for the borough:

- Meeting room booking system<sup>13</sup>, to start to suppress all the faith group, special interest group etc. gatekeeping of all these physical resources. Make some money for the borough as well.
- Opening up all the estates work ticket<sup>14</sup> and complaint systems so that everyone can see whether anything is being progressed. Now very much *of the hour* after the recent mould and decay problems in other boroughs.

Neither of these will get done, of course (I'm not volunteering, I'm busy elsewhere)

## Participative Democracy Theatre

I originally thought that, with the introduction of the DemSoc, the Sortition Foundation, and the democracy commission that there might be a visible break with the Wales years.

Alas, the big assembly is now 'aligned' with borough KPIs (can't re-find the reference to this, so happy to be contradicted) and the smaller assemblies (about which I've written<sup>15</sup>) are increasingly tied in red tape and the convoluted, (ready for a chorus of "that's not what we are hearing") tortuous and over complex co-create platform. Actually the current citizen value-add is 'ideas' that the borough then, in some cases, hijack and use for 'comms' and photo-ops.

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11 <https://newham-meadows.org.uk/>

12 <http://hughbarnard.org/index.php/2022/07/15/neutering-the-participative-budget-process/>

13 <https://mrbs.sourceforge.io/> for example, oldest and used by many universities

14 <https://osticket.com/> though I expect the HAs to have made multiple incompatible, closed-source 'choices'

15 <http://hughbarnard.org/index.php/2022/07/15/neutering-the-participative-budget-process/>

The hijack, usually without acknowledgement, of assembly generated ideas is a symptom of the barren, complacent (no) thought landscape. However, when hijacked, there usually deformed into 'festivals', celebrations or some other idiot thing<sup>16</sup>. Nothing that will be a enduring initiative, feeble flashes in a heavily stained pan. One conversation that I've had, a couple of times, is that the assemblies output initiatives that the council should *already have identified and acted upon using* (wait for it) *their own initiative*. If they weren't so comms obsessed maybe that would 'happen'.

We should just be grateful that there's no face painting (sometimes). To sum up, or to let Bill Hicks sum up, 'you are free to do as we tell you'.

## Performative Climate Inaction

One word and that word is *planters*, the borough loves them and their favourite community groups (including one of which I was one of the founders, nearly a decade ago) love them. But meanwhile, they don't contribute in any meaningful way to greenicity<sup>17</sup> and their disadvantages are summed up here.

Any current climate 'action' is usually related to the timid and performative actions in the community assemblies not from the council. Also local activists like me. Meanwhile there are (apparently) pollution sensors in the borough, but we don't know where they are (if they exist, even) and there's no public reporting on either council website or social media. I suspect because the results are stubbornly and consistently bad. Yes Martha, reporting does seem to make a difference<sup>18</sup>.

Meanwhile much of the rest of the borough is covered with black-as-possible tarmac. Looking at you, specifically, St James' School on Odessa Road. Looking at you, too, Talbot Road, recently resurfaced. There's some effort made in the centre of Stratford near St Johns, maybe some of that is meant to be SUDs too? But it's all timid and any dialogue is impossible, since it's merely **Defensive**.

Actually the recent community assembly is focused (or meant to be focused) on green issues, but here we have nicey-nicey, cutesie-pie parks and parklets, no measurement, very few trees, short life trees (rowans) cheap trees (even sycamores in some places, as if there weren't enough in Forest Gate already) and low canopy cover trees. As the signs say in They Live<sup>19</sup> *No Thought*.

Actually, as I write this, I've just found some huge red planters outside the Theatre Royal where there's room for a good stand of trees, *remember those things that grow in the ground*, and some seating. It's not over a road, so some fruit trees, even?

Astroturf<sup>20</sup> used extensively on Forest Gate Community school. They've blocked me on social media, presumably because I *dared criticise* some of their decisions. Woodgrange Road after ten years and also £1.9m from TfL (where, on earth, did *that* go?) is still a nightmare of traffic, randomly parked and suddenly unparked cars (looking at you, just by Mansons), chewing gum, pollution, and broken pavement slabs.

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16 Step 6: We celebrate our achievements. (from the co-create website)

17 Ok, I've invented this word, nice though, isn't it green + city?

18 <https://arstechnica.com/science/2022/10/us-embassies-may-have-accidentally-improved-air-quality/>

19 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/They\\_Live](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/They_Live)

20 <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/02/turf-it-out-is-it-time-to-say-goodbye-to-artificial-grass>

Meanwhile more planters<sup>21</sup>! and 'volunteers' (AKA 'champions'). The planter at Forest Gate station is especially amusing as it stops people crossing where they used to, it's *actually anti-pedestrian*.

As I finish writing this we now have an American director of climate action originally from Lendlease<sup>22</sup> (an Australian real estate company busy gentrifying and displacing current residents in south London<sup>23</sup>). Currently, all I see is a collaboration with an American (!) charity<sup>24</sup> to plant a few Miyawaki forests in the borough. I'd be more enthusiastic, *if in the hands of the UK actors*, so that the knowledge was fixed here. Looking around, other local councils have managed this<sup>25</sup>.

## Sloganeering

We've moved from the meaningless 'putting people at the heart of everything we do' (they clearly don't, if you listen, for a single moment, to the 'street', see **Defensiveness** also) to the equally meaningless 'we are Newham', 'Building a Fairer Newham' and a number of its unattractive cousins 'we are x' where x is some abstract noun. Again, with so much of this chaff<sup>26</sup> pumped out, it's very difficult for any signal to enter.

Now we're 'building a fairer Newham', actually given Rawls<sup>27</sup>, that's not too bad, but it's very abstract and theoretical, what kind of fairness?<sup>28</sup>. How to enact that as running policy, rather than top down 'workstreams' or 'strategy papers'.

So far, I've resisted putting in an FOI to find out how much has been paid for these, but they are meaningless and in their meaninglessness *they breed anger and cynicism*. I'm looking forward to the day when all councils and their associated contractors just have the name of body on their artwork, nothing more (as in the 1960s, so Tories should love it), no more offensive, ridiculous invasive noise. Incidentally the housing associations and 'partners' are no better, either.

## Non-Engagement

I have some sympathy for the officers who have been made to reapply for their jobs and moved into *quadrants*, another excrescence of jargon. Concerning engagement, I'll let Dilbert have the last word here<sup>29</sup>. Dilbert, of course, treats employee engagement, but the principles are very much the same. If we need the very word, it's failed.

Of course, one solution is that the silos themselves choose to *engage*. However that means a fragmentation of knowledge at the coal face. But since *no knowledge is collected anyway* (see Defensiveness, this is not a learning organisation) there's no real loss. Actually, recent conversations have highlighted the difficulties of operating from engagement into *heavily protected and fortified* silos.

21 <http://hughbarnard.org/index.php/2021/08/04/why-i-hate-planters/>

22 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lendlease> (see the Controversies section, especially)

23 <https://planning.southwark.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=neighbourComments&keyVal=QTPPZDKB03Q00&neighbourCommentsPager.page=2>

24 SUGi is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (from their website)

25 <https://tinyforest.earthwatch.org.uk/images/documents/Tiny-Forest-Tiny-Fact-File-2022.pdf>

26 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaff\\_\(countermeasure\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaff_(countermeasure))

27 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#JusFaiJusWitLibSoc>

28 For example 'Sen's most important critique on Rawlsian justice concerns the inflexibility of social primary goods as the metric of justice.': <https://academic.oup.com/book/3302/chapter-abstract/144331741?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

29 [https://dilbert.com/search\\_results?terms=Employee+Engagement](https://dilbert.com/search_results?terms=Employee+Engagement)

## Non-Conclusion

I've given up making myself available for Newham projects now. If they want something, they'll have to pay for it, as Nottingham Uni and all ordinary customers. It's the only way to get any work valued within some kind of defined relationship.

Meanwhile, I have two or three projects that are self (non grant, another trap, since it's given with one hand and taken away with the other) funded. Potentially, the biggest one is here<sup>30</sup>.

I'm going to France later on, bath in the sea whilst it's cool enough to bathe in.

*Hugh Barnard* July 2023