



BARKING LEARNING CENTRE

IT'S A PEOPLE THING



Chris Oliver outlines the borough of Barking and Dagenham's enterprising efforts to connect its inhabitants with the opportunities springing up around them

Much of the Thames Gateway project, quite rightly, is about the regeneration of the physical infrastructure – roads, buildings, bridges and utilities. The region is, after all, the biggest urban renewal programme in Europe.

However, as chairman of Barking & Dagenham Enterprise (BDE) and as a businessman based in this Gateway borough, I'm well aware that physical structures alone do not deliver the regeneration goods.

Physical infrastructure is one kind of capital, indeed an indispensable one, but physical infrastructure cannot be put to productive work without another and equally essential asset. This is "the people thing", the human infrastructure, or the social capital that puts life and purpose into the built environment.

People are what infrastructure is for - and not the other way around. It is our job at BDE to connect our borough's people with the opportunities for enterprise that are now springing up all around them.

Over 165,000 people live

in culturally-diverse Barking & Dagenham, a figure we at BDE expect to see increase by 30,000 over the next 10 years, much of it in the younger age groups.

About two-thirds of our residents are economically active. There is great scope for encouraging more people, both absolutely and as a percentage of the population, to enter or return to work, to reskill to qualify for better-paid work, to create their own work or to continue learning.

Entrepreneurs are only some of the people that executive director Judy Chapman and the BDE team are interested in reaching. Enterprise is also about having a flexible approach to working life, being willing to retrain, to go and do something different – and better.

BDE is about connecting people to the opportunities that abound in Barking & Dagenham by encouraging a far wider definition of enterprise than classic entrepreneurship.

Enterprise Barking & Dagenham-style is about encouraging all sorts of people to be bold and dynamic – be it to take responsibility for their lives, manage their own finances, ►

or to grasp the many kinds of life-change that are within their reach for the first time in a generation.

The lynchpin of the enterprise effort in Barking & Dagenham is the government's Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI). LEGI is a neighbourhood renewal programme funded jointly by the new Department for Communities and local government, HM Treasury and the new Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

The aim of LEGI is to create prosperous, inclusive and sustainable communities – places where people want to live, that promote opportunity and a better quality of life for all.

Local authorities in the most deprived areas of the country were invited to bid for LEGI funding for their plans to stimulate economic growth through enterprise development. This is what the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham did, through Barking & Dagenham Enterprise (BDE).

BDE, a co-operation between community-minded local business, education/ training, voluntary and public sector interests, was both Barking & Dagenham's enterprising vehicle for the successful bid, and is now the engine for delivery of LEGI-approved enterprise development.

BDE won £15.5 million under the LEGI programme for its first three years, of which 2007 is the first. Depending upon results, this sum could more than double over the 10-year life of the LEGI scheme.

Barking & Dagenham is one of only 10 UK local authorities to mount a winning LEGI bid, and of these, is the only borough within the Thames Gateway.

BDE fosters the enterprise culture by making people aware of the new opportunities within their reach, helping them to grasp those opportunities by connecting them with the necessary support, and adding to the stock of space in which enterprise can start or grow.

We also believe in catching 'em young. While there are schemes to help older residents, we also have Enterprise Advisory Teachers spreading the message in both primary as well as in secondary schools; if we lay out the enterprise options early on, we can but add to the buzz around enterprise that we're already creating locally.

All 10 of the LEGI first-round winners may have the same problems as Barking & Dagenham, but the businessman in me says that none can represent the same opportunity: We're just minutes away from the City, on the Thames, and superbly placed for Tube and rail connections to major London rail termini, Canary Wharf and London City Airport, as well as to the A12, A13, the M11 and Stansted and Heathrow airports. And we have the 2012 Olympic development programme next door, together with the prosperity that is creating.

But flip the coin, and we have businesses edged out by the pre-Olympics redevelopment looking for new homes.

Was ever so much of benefit to people's lives happening within a few square miles? But location, location, location, like the physical infrastructure, can only be part of the enterprise story in Barking & Dagenham.

What we also have and, thanks to LEGI, are in a position to do something about it, are people who are up for enterprise. There is, my years in Barking & Dagenham have convinced me, a pent-up demand among local people of all ages and social origins for ways to do better for themselves, their families and their community.

The BDE team and its business-minded board of 10 private-sector people and 10 from other agencies, is putting out the word that enterprise, properly funded and managed, is the way that that residents will have more money in their pockets, better job prospects and all the benefits that flow from living in an area where businesses are thriving.

Barking & Dagenham Small Business Centre (BDSBC), one of BDE's 14 services, was inundated with queries when it opened its doors in January this year. BDSBC has quickly notched up its 100th new business start-up.

At the time of writing, BDE has 23 projects under management and a further seven in the pipeline. No doubt the figures will have changed by the time you read this.

For years, Barking & Dagenham people have been starved of the opportunities to do better for themselves. Not any more.

Readers will have seen in the

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summer issue of Gateway that the Architectural Review Future Project Mixed-Use Award was clinched by the Barking Learning Centre, a flagship development at the heart of the multi-million pound regeneration of Barking Town Square. The Barking Learning Centre project beat an international field of 217 entries from over 30 countries.

The latest news is that the matchstick men and women in the architects' impression have been replaced by the stream of real, live Barking & Dagenham people now flowing through the doors of BLC to make full use of its three-stage learning facilities.

I believe that we can look back with some satisfaction on what has been achieved over the past year and look forward with real confidence to the opportunities that lie ahead. ■

Chris Oliver chairs Barking & Dagenham Enterprise and is managing director of AJC Wilson Bodyshop

To find out more about Barking & Dagenham Enterprise and the services on offer, call 020 8724 8292 or email paul.bishop@boldanddynamic.co.uk

