

Reframing controversial austerity budget cuts and service closures for an inner London Borough

The Health & Care Cabinet Member of an Inner-London Council engaged in multi-billion regeneration programmes wanted to close and sell several Council-owned day centres serving hundreds of older and disabled people, to achieve an ambitious financial savings target on operating budgets and bring in millions of pounds in capital receipts from the sale of ageing institutional buildings.

The proposal was expected to meet with a major anti-austerity public opposition campaign. A proposal two years earlier to close one underperforming day centre (operating at 50% capacity) had failed following a high profile opposition campaign led by a Hollywood celebrity.

Catherine Searle undertook detailed data gathering and analysis, capacity modelling and financial modelling to identify that the Council's clients used a total of 60 day centres, including voluntary sector services – far more than anyone expected - which were collectively operating at 70% capacity. This translated to the 'wastage' of more than £1.4m per year of the Council's budget on vacant Council-owned or commissioned day centre places, and the potential to realise capital savings in the tens of millions. The findings surprised everyone, and significantly bolstered the case for change.

Catherine Searle led an 'active listening' phase of stakeholder engagement with more than 100 community groups and day centres, using an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, identifying the particular skills, resources and interests of the community. It identified growing support for the inclusion of older and disabled people in mainstream community activities, and a shift away from institutional care.



Campaigners outside the town hall. 'It is not a numbers thing. We are talking about people,' said one

In response to the feedback, Catherine reframed the proposal to close day centres, instead drafting an “Inclusive Communities” strategy, which celebrated the rich, diverse and cosmopolitan character of the Borough and the wealth of opportunities for older and disabled people. She developed a taster programme of more than 1,500 activities from which day centre users could sample alternative activities and services, before going public with any proposal for day centre closures. This approach further reduced the numbers of people using traditional day centres, as people found preferred alternatives.

When formal consultation was undertaken on the Inclusive Communities Strategy, stakeholders overwhelmingly proposed the merger of day centres into fewer buildings, the promotion of direct payments for older and disabled people to buy the activities of their choice, and development of a catalogue of community opportunities. This outcome gave politicians a clear mandate to reduce the number of day centre buildings, without having to put forward the proposal themselves as an ‘austerity measure’.

Strategic Principle (developed by residents):

We believe that the best way to prevent social isolation and its’ detrimental impact on health and wellbeing is:


- a strong, supportive network of friends and family
- doing activity which is meaningful for the individual
- a sense of being an equal, valued part of the local community
- the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution

“The day centre wasn’t for me. I want stimulation, mental and physical.”

“I haven’t been out somewhere different for ages. I didn’t think I could, but I have and I want more.”

“I was pleased to be outside. It’s better than being stuck indoors and in the same surroundings.”






Camden

Adult Social Care

**Inclusive Communities
Commissioning Strategy**



Catherine Searle
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