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– Daniel BRIDGE, Royal Docks London

Image Source: Aerial view of the Royal Docks with the Crystal Building in the foreground. Image by Tian Khee Siong, all rights reserved ©.





Daniel BRIDGE  
Co-authored by  
Robert Baffour-Awuah  
Royal Docks  
London  
the United-Kingdom

## The people's plan for the Royal Docks

1. 2021 will present major tests for London's Covid recovery ambitions. Not only is the city coming to terms with the impacts of the pandemic, it will also need to reconfigure its position as a world city outside of the European Union.

London's communities, its civil society organisations and other sub-city level partners will need to play a leading role in recovery plans. It is in the neighbourhoods that these groups and individuals live and work where the impacts of the pandemic have been most acutely felt. They are also the places where the ingenuity, enthusiasm and networks reside that can build back neighbourhoods and cities on an equitable basis.

The Royal Docks Enterprise Zone regeneration programme is one of the most significant urban transformation projects in Europe. For at least the next twenty years, the area will see major investment, helping to transform the area as a

centre of growth for London. Over the last two years of the programme, the Royal Docks Team (RDT), a joint initiative from the Mayor of London and Mayor of Newham, has been exploring ways that decision making around investment can be democratised. These efforts aim to address imbalances in power relations and socio-spatial inequalities caused by historic patterns of investment in the area, and establish a sustainable response to Covid-19.

2. The Royal Docks sits within Newham, a local authority area in East London, and one of the most diverse and deprived parts of the UK. At one point during the height of the first wave of Covid-19, Newham had the worst mortality rate of any local authority in England and Wales.

The Royal Docks were once the largest enclosed docks in the world. During the late 19th and 20th centuries, the docks were the gateway for cargo from around the world. In 1981, after the decline in dock activity, the national government created a development corporation that had responsibility for regenerating the Royal Docks, particularly focussed on infrastructure investment.

These early investment projects were geared towards creating the conditions for private sector development. There was some success in this approach. London City Airport and the ExCeL Exhibition Centre are two major organisations that were established in the Royal Docks during and just after that early phase of investment.

Despite these positives, early investment was criticized for not involving local communities in decision making. New roads and railways resulted in social-spatial severance and didn't deliver the community and social infrastructure that communities had articulated through the People's Plan for the Royal Docks - a document that captured the spirit of local community activism through alternative proposals for a post-industrial Royal Docks.

When the RDT was established in 2017, it was envisaged as a predominantly development focused vehicle that would accelerate private sector led investment in the area. While this is still one of the team's priorities, it was clear that to avoid the mistakes of the past, and achieve the maximum possible socio-economic benefit for the area, a more balanced approach was needed.

3. The Royal Docks sits not only at the intersection of significant regional growth corridors, but also at the juncture of policies that place communities at the heart of regeneration. In addition to the Mayor of London's Good Growth agenda, Newham's Community Wealth Building strategy is part of a growing global movement and the first of its kind to be rolled out in London. Embedded across the Council's work, it aims to build an inclusive economy, tackle poverty, race and gender inequality, and address the climate emergency. Newham's Covid recovery strategy adopts a similarly progressive approach - it is the first London Borough to place Health and Wellbeing metrics at the heart

of measuring prosperity and economic recovery.

A Communities Strategy for the Royal Docks Delivery Programme responds to this policy landscape, capitalising on the Royal Docks status as an Enterprise Zone to galvanise innovation and be a place for purpose driven investment. As a project whose success is dependent on driving investment, this poses both a challenge and an opportunity.

A two-person Communities Team works across the Programme to integrate outcomes for communities into each of the RDTs strategic work streams. Work to co-develop a Communities Strategy with stakeholders and communities was set to begin when the pandemic broke out. Responding to local demand, the Team convened regular multi-stakeholder video-calls providing a forum for local and city authorities, businesses, developers, education institutions and community organisations to support each other in their Covid response.

Amid the crisis new neighbourhood networks formed, producing an 'infrastructure of care.' Multi-stakeholder collaborations supported the rapid construction of the NHS Nightingale emergency hospital; created a makerspace to produce PPE equipment and coordinated local food and essentials distribution by patching gaps in supply chains. This opened a new horizon of possibilities for how multiple stakeholders might work together post-covid, in a long-term project place-based transformation, built on resil-

ience and shared prosperity.

This experience affirmed the role of the RDT as a convenor and coordinator. It also facilitated multi-stakeholder co-development of the Communities Strategy with a shared Vision, Principles and Guidelines which include co-design and capacity building, and four key approaches:

Knowledge: Facilitate the transfer of knowledges

Relations: Cultivate collaborative relationships

Innovation: Catalyse experiments and learning

Leadership: Influence investment and decision-making

4. The priority for the RDT over the next five years is to ensure the needs and ambitions of communities can support sustainable infrastructure projects. As highlighted above, the docks maritime history and early wave of infrastructure investment left a legacy of urban fragmentation.

Over the next five years major transport infrastructure projects will open in the Royal Docks, including a new river tunnel crossing and a high speed rail project. In 2019, the RDT began working with a wide range of local partners, architects and planners, to develop design guides that would provide overarching guidance for investment in the public realm.

Using the opportunity to pilot a co-design approach, the guides were developed using human-centred design

methodologies which emphasised local people's everyday experiences of public spaces. Community organisations and residents built their capacity to contribute in informed and creative ways to an urban design process that will determine the look and feel of their neighbourhoods. The Guides are intended to serve as tools for local stakeholders and community groups to commission their own public realm projects.

The challenge now is to transform the outcomes from this and other community centred processes into governance and accountability mechanisms. Within complex stakeholder and land-ownership environments, like the Royal Docks, 'reconstituting urban governance networks' is difficult to achieve. However, through detailed decision and influence mapping, the RDT is exploring how to use their position to either support new spaces for communities to have an equal voice with other local stakeholders, or to shift power within existing structures to facilitate more balanced outcomes from investment decisions.

This is just the start of a new chapter in the journey for the Royal Docks. Like similar neighbourhoods across the globe, Covid-19 has badly impacted the area but the strong links and new relationships that communities and different stakeholders formed to support their neighbours through the crises have provided clear examples of ways to create new partnerships that build resilient places for the future.