

HOUSING



London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

Becontree Forever - 30,000+ residents mark century of world's biggest council estate and start to reimagine its future

Becontree Forever was a radical programme of art, architecture and new infrastructure which the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) launched in 2021 in collaboration with residents and local partners. It marks 100 years of the innovative Becontree Estate: the most ambitious interwar housing estate and the UK's biggest council housing estate – housing around 85,000 people (around 40% of the Borough's population).

Becontree Forever celebrated the estate's bold beginnings, but also reimaged its future as the population continues to evolve and change. The project acknowledged the importance of the place and the aspirations it was built with a century ago, while increasing the level of social and cultural engagement within the diverse community who call it home now.

This ambitious programme ran throughout 2021, in collaboration with local people, to bring arts and culture into the everyday life of the estate and had extra resonance in bringing the community together after the period of isolation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Led by a Becontree Steering Group comprised of community partners and residents, the *Becontree Forever* programme:

- Ran public festivals and events attended by **over 30,000 people**, delivered in partnership with more than **75 local arts and community organisations**;

- Worked with **59 local schools** to shape and deliver programming across the Borough including workshops, exhibitions and collaborative artist-led commissions;
- Collaborated with **thousands** of students, families, young and elderly people to take part in initiatives focussing on heritage, culture and equality;
- Developed a **visual identity** for the programme and comprehensive online tools at www.becontreeforever.uk to make participation viable and accessible throughout the pandemic;



Becontree 100 Festival - UKON Carnival Arts by Jimmy Lee

Cultural activity for Becontree Forever has focused on key themes and programming strands to promote greater civic pride and community cohesion. Examples include:

- **Girls Like Us** - a digital programme for young Black women aged 16 -18 focusing on careers in the fashion industry to challenge colonial beauty standards and **Speak Up!** - a programme for young Black and South Asian men aged 14–21 led by Green Shoes Arts, using VR technology to explore mental health)
- **Intergenerational programming** including: craft toolkits designed by emerging artists for elderly residents in Care Homes; TikTok Tea Dance Challenges choreographed by Barking and Dagenham Youth Dance; and Arc Theatre’s In Our Own Words Verbatim Theatre project exploring the local history of Becontree through experiences of participants young and old.
- **Becontree 100 Festival Weekender**, a free arts and music festival in Parsloes Park (August 2021), produced in collaboration with Love Music Hate Racism and local partners. Promoting unity through the power of music, it featured community exhibitions, food stalls, and a heritage-inspired tearoom. Drawing on the history of the Roundhouse pub which in the 1960’s hosted Queen, Led Zeppelin and Pink

Floyd, artists performing included: Boomtown Rats, Frank Turner, YolanDa Brown, Don Letts and Neville Staple from The Specials.

- **A Winter Lantern Parade** (November 2021) organised with local schools and Creative Barking & Dagenham who led a series of free lantern making workshops. **370 students and their families** paraded to Valence Park with music and street performances enroute, followed by a fireworks display attended by over **6,000 residents**;
- Public realm commissions by artists including playgrounds by Yinka Ilori and Eva Rothschild, street furniture by Studio Morison, commemorative plaques by Leonor Antunes and community green spaces by nintim Architects. Commissioned with Create London, works have been developed with insight from residents and are being installed across the Estate;

LBBD worked in close collaboration with the Becontree Steering Group, residents and local partners including care homes, schools, local organisations (including Arc Theatre, Barking & Dagenham Youth Dance, East End Women’s Museum, Girls Like Us, Green Shoes Arts, Studio 3 Arts, Soul&Sound and The White House) and national partners (including Love Music Hate Racism, Create London, London Jazz Festival, Focal Point Gallery, Serpentine Galleries, Arts Council England and Wellcome Trust). Becontree was heavily impacted by declining 20th century manufacturing industries and austerity, so residents have been faced with complex economic and social factors that have impacted their daily lives over recent decades. Through *Becontree Forever* we collaborated with communities to ensure that people in this Borough know they matter, to highlight the history and aspiration which can be unlocked by looking at the roots from which the Becontree Estate was born.



Credit Jimmy Lee Photography



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While the centenary celebrated the past, it also reimagined Becontree for the 21st century. LBBB has committed to rebuilding the estate for current and future generations, starting with investments in retrofitting, parks, transport and community spaces. Ongoing projects include extending Kingsley Hall (Becontree's first community centre), a substantial investment in sporting areas through the Parklife programme and the purchase of Dagenham Heathway Shopping Centre.

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