

Senedd 
Elections '26

**Barnet's outsourcing nightmare:
Dan Thomas' track record
in local government**

Executive summary

Reform UK appointed Dan Thomas as its leader in Wales in February 2026.

In his party's manifesto, he says Reform wants councils to "rebuild in-house capability and stop outsourcing core functions". But Thomas spent more than a decade as a senior Conservative in a London council where disastrous outsourcing cost hundreds of millions.

Thomas served as a Conservative councillor in the London Borough of Barnet, rising to deputy leader in 2011 and council leader in 2019. He held senior office throughout Barnet's radical experiment in mass outsourcing of public services to Capita. This report documents what happened.

£500 million — in decade-long Capita contracts signed in 2013

790 jobs — transferred into the private sector

£229 million — over budget, according to Barnet's incoming Labour leadership

Two frauds — totalling over £2.1 million, both linked to outsourced operations

First local authority — to be fined by the Pensions Regulator under the outsourced arrangements

Services scattered — across Darlington, Carlisle, Belfast, Croydon and Coventry.

In October 2012, as deputy leader, he told *The Guardian*: "I don't think Mr and Mrs Resident are too bothered about who delivers the services." He added: "There's nothing wrong with being first."

Barnet's Conservative leadership signed two ten-year Capita contracts in 2013, covering back-office functions, planning, highways, environmental health and regulatory services. Thomas was deputy leader at the time and a vocal champion of the programme. The contracts promised £165 million in savings. By 2022, Barnet's incoming Labour leadership said the council had paid £229 million more than the original contracts envisaged. A £2 million fraud went undetected by both Capita and the council; a second fraud followed in the Darlington pensions office. Thomas is not accused of any involvement in either of the frauds.

Pensions administration became so poor that Barnet became the first local authority fined by the Pensions Regulator. Roads fell into disrepair. Committee reports recorded repeated service failures. When Thomas became council leader in May 2019, the council made constitutional changes that capped public questions at two per agenda item. Campaigners called it a "gagging" move. A petition argued that the change would restrict scrutiny of the Capita fraud and the contractor's poor performance.

Around 790 jobs moved into the private sector. Workers lost their direct relationship with the council, and in many cases their route into a public-sector pension and access to occupational sick pay. When Labour began insourcing services after winning control in 2022, staff returning to the council still faced inequalities in pay and conditions. By February 2025, Barnet UNISON reported that outsourced workers in housing, social care, cleaning, parking enforcement, security, schools catering and education still had no occupational sick pay and no access to the Local Government Pension Scheme.

In 2022, voters removed Barnet's Conservative administration in the biggest swing the borough had seen since local government reorganisation. Labour won 41 seats, taking 16 from the Tories. Thomas did not accept local responsibility. On election night he said his colleagues had "lost through no fault of their own" and blamed the cost of living crisis, "partygate" and boundary changes. He defected to Reform UK in June 2025 and resigned his council seat in December 2025, the timing of his departure avoided triggering a by-election.

Thomas now asks Welsh voters to trust him on public services. Reform UK's Welsh manifesto includes a commitment to remove social value clauses from procurement and bring academies to Wales. Barnet is the best evidence available of how Thomas used power when he had it. The record shows ideology sold as practicality, savings promised and not delivered, democratic scrutiny curtailed, workers left to absorb the consequences, and a later administration forced to spend years dismantling the arrangement.

Foreword

Barnet's ideologically-driven outsourcing disaster shows what happens when politicians hand public services to contractors, weaken scrutiny and call the damage reform.

UNISON members in Wales know what public services mean because they deliver them. They care for older people, support children and families, keep hospitals running and hold councils, schools and care services together. When services are cut or outsourced, our members see the result first. Communities wait longer, staff carry more and standards fall.

That is what makes this election so important. Wales needs public services that are properly funded, publicly delivered and accountable to the public. It needs decent pay, secure jobs and investment that stays in our communities.

Reform now asks people in Wales to trust its leadership with our future. Dan Thomas' track-record as a Conservative in Barnet shows what happens when voters put their trust in him. Core services were outsourced on a huge scale, costs rose, oversight weakened, workers paid the price and residents were left to deal with the consequences. Thomas' record as a Conservative politician speaks for itself.

This matters because people are tired of politicians and parties who promise voters change while making life harder. Public service workers want pay that covers the bills, secure work, a strong NHS and councils that function. They want honesty, responsibility and decisions that improve the places they live in. They have every right to judge politicians by what they have done when they had power.

Across Wales, people feel the pressure of the cost of living crisis, overstretched services and years of underfunding. There is pride in Welsh public services, but there is also real frustration. That frustration creates an opening for the wrong answers. The job for the labour movement is to meet it with facts, confidence and a better offer: fair pay, social partnership, strong public services and public money used for public good.

UNISON Cymru stands for a Wales that looks after its people. We stand for services run for communities, not profit. We stand for workers having a real voice in the decisions that shape their jobs and the services they provide. We stand for a politics that strengthens Wales instead of stripping it back.

That is why this report is important. It gives Welsh voters the chance to look at the record and make their own judgement about the kind of future Reform would bring.

Jess Turner, regional secretary, UNISON Cymru

Introduction

When Reform UK introduced Dan Thomas as its leader in Wales in February, the party presented him as a politician with experience, someone who had already run things, taken difficult decisions and come through pressure intact.

For nearly two decades, Thomas served as a Conservative councillor in the London Borough of Barnet, the authority that became one of the most radical outsourcing experiments in British local government. He was elected in 2006, became deputy leader in 2011 and council leader in 2019. He held senior office while Barnet signed huge contracts with outsourcing company Capita, moved core services out of the borough, suffered two fraud cases linked to those arrangements and, eventually, saw voters remove the Conservative administration that had championed the whole experiment.

Thomas is now asking Welsh voters to trust him on public services, competence and change. Barnet offers the longest, clearest record of how he used power when he had it. It shows what happened when a council treated outsourcing as a governing creed. It shows what happened to accountability, to costs and to the workers who kept services going.

This report draws from court records, council minutes, union statements, first-hand testimony from Barnet UNISON's branch secretary John Burgess, and reporting by *The Guardian*, the BBC, local newspapers and Barnet campaigners who spent years documenting what was happening in front of them.

Barnet signed decade-long Capita contracts worth about £500 million. Around 790 full-time jobs moved into the private sector. Pension queries went to Darlington, payroll to Carlisle, planning staff to Belfast and the council call centre to Coventry. By 2022, according to Barnet's incoming Labour leadership, the council had paid £229 million more than the original contracts envisaged. A court heard evidence of more than £2 million stolen through one fraud linked to the outsourced structure. A second fraud followed. Thomas is not accused of any personal wrongdoing or involvement in fraud.



A London borough as laboratory

In the mid-2000s, the borough's Conservative leadership began promoting a vision that came to be known as "easyCouncil." The name was borrowed from the budget-airline model: residents would get the bare minimum as standard and pay more for anything extra. Behind the slogan sat a more radical ambition. Barry Rawlings, who later led Labour in Barnet and became council leader after the Conservatives fell, told *The Guardian* that the ideal was a council with no more than 200 direct employees, with private firms running most of the rest.

Conservative politicians before and after austerity believed public institutions were bloated and needed discipline from the market. Barnet's leaders shared that belief. In Barnet, the council would cut, contract out and remake itself as a commissioning body rather than a provider.

Mike Freer, then the council leader, gave the project its first political force. Richard Cornelius, who succeeded him, carried it into the contract stage. Dan Thomas, elected in 2006 for Finchley Church End, rose with that administration. By 2011 he was deputy leader, holding office as Barnet made the decisions that would define the next decade.

"Thomas was part of a new breed of right-wing Tories who were very ideological. He used to call us ideological because we were promoting insourcing, but he was vociferous in his defence of outsourcing, even in the face of mounting evidence that it was failing."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

The crucial move came in 2013. Barnet signed two ten-year contracts with Capita worth about £500 million to the company. One covered planning, regeneration, environmental health, highways and related services. The other covered customer and support functions including payroll, HR, IT and call handling. *The Guardian* reported that around 790 full-time jobs would move into the private sector under the arrangements.

The sums alone made Barnet unusual. The legal fight around the contracts made that clearer still. In April 2013, *The Guardian* reported that Maria Nash, a severely disabled Barnet resident, challenged the council for failing to consult before outsourcing. The challenge was backed by residents, trade unions and activist bloggers. Lord Justice Underhill ruled the case had been brought too late, but he also found that the council had failed to consult residents about the outsourcing itself. The judgment said the council "never set out to consult about its outsourcing" and that residents should have had the chance to express their concerns before those services were handed away.

The 'Barnet spring'

Residents, trade unionists and a cluster of local bloggers fought the new model. The bloggers, operating in the space left by a weakened local press, brought stubborn, forensic attention.

At a packed public meeting in 2012, with the so-called "Barnet spring" gathering force, Cornelius tried to tell residents that the programme would deliver savings without the public noticing. A woman in the audience cut through him: "Do you think we're going to put up with you signing away our future for 10 years?" Residents wanted to know whether they could still influence the public institutions that governed their lives.

Thomas spoke in similar terms that year. Defending cuts to Barnet's library service, which saw the council close Friern Barnet library and hand others to volunteers, he told *The Guardian*: "I don't think Mr and Mrs Resident are too bothered about who delivers the services." He added: "Yes, it's a bold move because it is the first time some of these services have been outsourced in local government, but there's nothing wrong with being first."

Outsourcing at this scale changes the texture of local democracy. A council can be voted out, a ten-year contract cannot. If services start to fail, if residents cannot get answers, if workers complain that the new arrangements are not working, the formal machinery of democracy stays in place, but residents lose their practical leverage.

Theresa Musgrove, the Barnet writer and researcher who blogged under the name Mrs Angry on Broken Barnet, described that shift to *The Guardian*. Ordinary dealings with the council became harder as people were pushed online and away from direct human contact. What the authority described as temporary problems became a normal way of working. Residents could no longer assume they would reach someone who knew the borough, knew the service or had enough authority to solve the problem there and then.

John Dix, another long-time Barnet blogger who wrote as Mr Reasonable, made the democratic case. The Capita contracts, he said, threatened "very, very basic aspects of democracy" because once services moved inside fixed commercial agreements, voters could no longer punish failure and expect change to follow.



The map of a hollowed-out council

Pension queries were handled in Darlington. Parking notices were dealt with in Croydon. Payroll for Barnet school staff was administered from Carlisle. Some planning staff worked in Belfast. The call centre was in Coventry.

This is the geography of outsourcing stripped of jargon. Barnet residents paid Barnet council tax and voted in Barnet elections, but many of the people administering their services no longer worked in Barnet at all. The borough still appeared on the headed paper. Behind it sat a private contractor operating through dispersed offices, different internal systems and a chain of accountability that did not run straight back to the public.

If a resident spent days trying to fix a council tax problem, chase a planning matter or resolve a payroll mistake, the person on the other end of the system might sit hundreds of miles away, with no local knowledge, working inside a commercial structure built to standardise process rather than answer to the borough.

Rawlings later said: councillors and officers answer to local residents; Capita answers to its shareholders. That is its legal obligation. Rawlings was describing what happens when a contractor becomes too large a part of the state's everyday machinery.

Barnet's leaders had presented the model as a choice forced by economic reality. In 2013, Cornelius said the contracts would save £12 million a year in back-office costs and spare the borough horrendous cuts to frontline services. This was the standard script of the age.

Outsourcing looked like the practical alternative to decline. Anyone who opposed it risked being blamed for defending old structures while the money ran out.

The money did not add up

For a long time, Barnet's outsourcing programme survived because it could still claim the language of efficiency. The argument was simple enough to fit on a leaflet: local government had to become leaner; private providers could deliver services more cheaply; savings would protect the frontline.

By the time Labour took control of the council in 2022, that arithmetic had broken down.

Rawlings told *The Guardian* that Barnet had paid £229 million more than the original contracts had set out. Capita attributed the overrun to "special projects." £229 million over budget: the experiment failed on the terms its champions chose. Barnet did not endure controversy while banking savings. The council paid far more than planned.

The finding was not Labour's alone. A 2021 Grant Thornton report, prepared for Barnet council itself, stated that outsourcing was not always the most cost-effective option by default, because the gap between public and private delivery had narrowed sharply over the previous decade. The council leadership had let doctrine outrun evidence.

There were warning signs before the final political collapse. *The Guardian* reported that some services, including finance and human resources, came back in-house in 2018, several years before Labour's broader reversal. Once a council starts pulling services back under direct control, the argument that the outsourced model represents a settled success becomes hard to sustain.

Fraud and the meaning of responsibility

In 2018, it emerged that Trishul Shah, a worker linked to the Capita joint venture handling planning, regeneration and highways functions, had stolen £2,063,972 by making 62 fraudulent payments related to compulsory purchase orders between July 2016 and December 2017. The more striking detail is how it came to light. The fraud was identified by Shah's bank rather than by Barnet or Capita's own controls.

The council had been told that outsourcing would modernise public administration and improve financial discipline. More than £2 million left the system before anyone in that system noticed.

Shah pleaded guilty to two counts of fraud by abuse of position and was sentenced to five years at Harrow Crown Court in July 2018. A subsequent review found that the council's and Capita's financial controls had been "inadequate." Capita accepted that the case "highlighted failings."

Rawlings, then leader of Labour's group on the council, said the case revealed "incompetence of scandalous proportions" and called on Richard Cornelius and deputy leader Dan Thomas to "take responsibility" and step down.

They did not.

"He's the only council leader in 31 years who I've not been able to have any sort of relationship with at all. Very arrogant. He definitely doesn't like trade unions."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

Thomas is not accused of personal wrongdoing. The issue raised here is political and institutional responsibility during a period when he held senior office. He was deputy leader when the outsourced structure operated and when the fraud came to light. He held one of the highest offices in the authority. As deputy leader at the time, Thomas held one of the most senior political roles in the authority when those failures came to light.

The second fraud reinforced the pattern. A worker in Capita's Darlington pensions office stole £70,596 from Barnet's pension fund through fraudulent payments and misuse of system access. He received a two-year suspended sentence.

Two frauds, two different Capita offices, over £2 million of public money gone. A single case might have been dismissed as isolated. Taken together, the two cases raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the outsourced controls. Barnet had already lost the argument on cost. Fraud and weak controls took the argument on competence as well.

"Basic financial controls were in tatters. Nobody knew what their jobs were. Good people left, they promised new people they'd train them, and then they didn't. We became the first local authority to be fined by the pensions regulator. That's his badge of honour."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

Thomas's register of gifts and hospitality shows that after the fraud cases had come to light, he accepted Capita hospitality on 22 August 2019 at Lord's for Middlesex v Hampshire, where the home side lost by seven wickets, as well as a dinner earlier that summer.



The people underneath the contracts

Around 790 full-time jobs moved into the private sector under the Capita arrangements. Behind that figure sat hundreds of people whose relationship to the council changed overnight. Their employer changed, their terms and conditions could diverge from colleagues who remained in direct public employment. Their route into a public-sector pension could be weakened or cut off. Their bargaining power shifted because they no longer sat inside one public organisation, answerable through one political structure.

Outsourcing works like this in practice. Its defenders describe transformation, efficiency and strategic commissioning. Workers encounter the change at the level of wages, sick pay, pensions, workloads and job security.

UNISON spent years pressing that case. When Barnet finally began bringing parts of the operation back in-house after Labour's election victory, the union described it as the result of a decade-long campaign. In January 2023, UNISON said 330 workers in the Capita Re joint venture, including staff in planning, highways, environmental health and trading standards, would transfer back into council employment on 1 April that year.

John Burgess, secretary of Barnet UNISON's local government branch, welcomed the decision as good news for staff, residents and services. He also pointed to what the return could not immediately fix. Staff coming back into the council still faced inequalities in pay and conditions. The outsourced decade had left the workforce unevenly treated and administratively fragmented.

"We are a very loud, noisy, organised branch. You've got to stand up and stand by your principles and be prepared to fight. There have been times when the politicians tried to silence us and we've had those battles, but we're still here. We didn't diminish as a branch. We grew."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

Even when the politics changed, the damage did not vanish on election night. Different groups of workers ended up on different terms. Skills and institutional memory had eroded. Confidence in management had been damaged. Residents had already spent years living with worse service. Unwinding the contracts took longer than announcing the decision to unwind them.

These workers deliver public services. Their employers told them their work mattered, then treated them as disposable.

For a Welsh audience, this is probably the sharpest part of Thomas' Barnet record. Outsourcing changes more than the logo at the top of a payslip. It alters the social contract around public service work. It strips away the things that make such work stable and worth defending: occupational sick pay, pension rights, collective bargaining and a clear line between the worker, the service and the public they serve.

The voters' verdict

By 2022, Barnet's outsourcing model had become politically toxic. Labour took control of the council after 20 years of Conservative rule, winning 41 seats in total and taking 16 from the Tories. Rawlings called the Capita deal a "failed experiment." In July of that year, the new administration voted to end the mass outsourcing of services and begin bringing them back in-house.

The reversal could not be swift. Contracts on this scale leave a long tail of legal, financial and administrative dependency. But the meaning of the election was plain. Barnet voters had watched the experiment for years, lived with its consequences and chosen to remove the administration that built it.

Thomas did not accept local responsibility for the result. On election night he said his colleagues had "lost through no fault of their own" and blamed the cost of living crisis and the Conservative Party's "partygate" scandal. He also pointed to ward boundary changes, claiming they favoured Labour.

UNISON reported in early 2023 that the council had accelerated the return of the regulatory services workforce by six months. Other services followed. But by 2025, significant work remained outsourced, and UNISON was still fighting for the lowest-paid workers caught in a privatisation system built more than a decade earlier.

Thomas had become council leader in May 2019, after the contracts were already entrenched, and remained in office until voters removed the Conservatives in 2022. He did not alone author every decision that led Barnet there. But he cannot claim distance from the record. He reached the top of the administration while the model was still operating, defended that administration's stewardship of the borough and left leadership only when the electorate ended Conservative control.

He then left Barnet itself. Thomas defected from the Conservative Party to Reform UK in June 2025 and resigned his council seat at the end of that year, the timing of his departure avoided

triggering a by-election for his constituents. In February 2026, he was announced as Reform UK's leader in Wales.

"He presided over the shutting down of public questions at council meetings. They absolutely shut down democracy in terms of public scrutiny. It was a tremendous piece of public engagement. They stopped it."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

Within weeks of becoming council leader in May 2019, the council made constitutional changes that capped public questions at committee meetings to two per agenda item. A petition against what campaigners called a "gagging" move gathered thousands of signatures. The Save Barnet Libraries campaign pointed out that testimony from 30 library users, which had recently changed councillors' minds at a committee meeting, could not have happened under the new rules. The petition argued that the new rules would restrict scrutiny of the £2 million Capita fraud and Capita's performance in highways and pensions administration.

What this means for Wales

Barnet offers the clearest publicly documented record of Dan Thomas' period in senior local government office. People boil political careers down to a few neat claims: he ran a council, made hard choices, delivered change. But his record in Barnet, the north London borough he helped run, tells a fuller story.

The council signed decade-long outsourcing contracts worth about £500 million. Around 790 jobs transferred into the private sector. Core public functions scattered across the country, away from the community the council served. The council paid £229 million more than the contracts envisaged. Professional scrutiny reminded the council that procurement could often be "ideologically driven and highly political." One fraud cost just over £2 million and another more than £70,000, both linked to outsourced operations. The opposition leader called on Thomas to take responsibility and resign. Workers are still, years later, fighting for occupational sick pay and access to public-sector pensions.

Reform UK presents itself as a party of practicality and common sense. Thomas' Barnet record points instead to outsourcing presented as practical reform, disputed savings claims, weaker public accountability and years of remedial work afterwards.

"Their manifesto talks about rebuilding council capacity and stopping outsourcing costs. That is absolutely the opposite of what he did running Barnet Council, being a senior member of the cabinet. From 2019, we were still throwing money away. The spend on consultants was astronomical, really out of control."

John Burgess, branch secretary, Barnet UNISON

Welsh voters can look at the record for themselves. A politician now asking to be trusted with major public services in Wales spent years in senior office in a borough associated with large-scale outsourcing, disputed cost overruns, weak controls and a later move back towards insourcing.

One question, at least, has an answer. When Thomas held senior responsibility in local government, the defining experiment around him left a mess that residents, workers and the next administration spent years clearing up.

Schools and academies in Barnet

Reform's manifesto proposes bringing academies to the Welsh school system. Barnet has around 130 schools. All but one of its secondary schools are now academies, run independently of the local authority. The primary sector fared better, with a substantial number of community schools still in place, but the damage from academisation and outsourcing combined has left the council struggling to maintain basic oversight of its own school workforce.

The outsourcing of payroll and HR added to the pressures already reshaping Barnet's schools landscape. As schools moved away from local authority services, some made alternative arrangements. Critics of the outsourcing programme said weaknesses in the outsourced back-office service made it harder to sustain the traditional local authority relationship.



Once that bond between schools and the council broke, academisation followed. A handful of secondaries converted first, and the rest followed in quick succession. The appeal to governors was partly financial: as academies, schools could acquire the land they sat on, which had been held by the local authority. Some used it as collateral to fund building extensions. Others used it to develop housing on school land. The conversions gathered pace around 2012 and 2013, at the same moment the Capita contracts were being pushed through, and the two processes fed each other. Schools that might have resisted academisation found themselves cut off from functional council services and looking for alternatives.

For Wales, the lesson is pointed. Barnet shows what happens when academisation runs alongside an outsourcing programme driven by the same political leadership. Schools drift away from the local authority. The council loses its ability to support, monitor and protect the workforce. Payroll and pension administration fragment. Workers end up on different terms, with different providers, under different management structures, and the combined effect was to make workforce oversight more fragmented and harder for the council to manage.

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