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Pilot project

“Forward Together” - Unlocking community assets and talents in the south of the city

Proposal

To combine the time, talents and enthusiasm of local people with the City Council’s assets to look at new ways of delivering projects and services and to support existing and create new economic, social and cultural activity.

Context

The city is full of talented people and volunteers interested in improving or helping to manage the areas in which they live. They have time, enthusiasm, skills, knowledge and commitment and as such are a huge asset to the city. In south Birmingham this has found expression in a number of ways, including (but by no means exclusively):

- the first neighbourhood plan in the city being brought forward in Balsall Heath,
- the Moseley Supplementary Planning Document SPD being led and prepared by a local group,
- campaigning groups to save Moseley Road Baths, safeguard Highbury Hall, explore community use/management of Holders Lane playing fields, redevelop the former Ritz Ballroom etc
- A CDT in Moseley
- Active local groups such as the Balsall Heath Forum, Moseley Regeneration group
- Various community initiatives and volunteering projects: Heartbeat, Kings Heath Village Square, The Print Works, Balsall Heath is Our Planet, Streetplay etc.
- Flourishing creative, arts and cultural sectors led by community groups and individuals.

Some of the City Council’s many land and building assets in the area are under-used. They can often be seen as liabilities, being hard to manage, costly to maintain and their use and development constrained by red tape and bureaucracy. Opportunities are being missed to unlock their value, such as promoting better cafes in our parks, greater community use of playing fields, or using our assets for community development and training.

Examples from elsewhere in the UK or around the world point to potential future directions we could take. Three useful examples include;

- 1) Plymouth has become the capital of social enterprise with over 150 groups working across a huge range of sectors including; education, health, arts, environment, food, finance, housing, business support, sport, social care and many more. These businesses employ over 7,000 people and bring in an income of over £500m. Social

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and environmental benefits are now key criteria that must be considered alongside finance in any procurement process and Plymouth use this to help maximise local expenditure.

- 2) In the USA, the Cleveland Evergreen Cooperative Initiative which works to create living wage jobs in six low income neighbourhoods by creating businesses owned by their employees, recruits local people and then trains them. It is a means to Community wealth building.
- 3) The Liveable Cities initiative which is a five year programme researching how to develop methods of designing and changing cities to promote sustainability and wellbeing, both at the city and individual level. Lancaster University with whom we have working links are leading on this in the UK.

Similarly, lessons can be learnt from the One Public Estate pilot schemes around the country.

Given the recent Kerslake review of the council and its recommendations on governance, organisational capabilities, community engagement and the need to have focus on the inner city and suburbs as well as the city centre; the scope and aspiration of this initiative is most timely.

Background

Given the changing face of local service delivery in the light of austerity, budget cuts and legislative changes; local politicians and officers have, over the last twelve months, been exploring whether an asset based approach to some service delivery may be possible. Building on an existing drive to better utilise the green spaces in Moseley and Kings Heath an officer/member working group was established, which led to a full day community event being held at Highbury Hall in February, attended by over 70 local groups and residents. Wide-ranging discussions about both the concept and the potential issues and opportunities led to a commitment from all present that they were keen to participate in a pilot project. It was agreed this should explore short, medium and long term ways of combining local social capital and community enthusiasm with BCC assets and officer experience to deliver local benefits. Inherent in the concept is that of the City Council becoming more of a facilitator helping to co-ordinate local action. A working title of Chamberlain 21 was agreed by the meeting and a series of follow up actions identified with commitment to meet again.

In September a group of politicians, officers, local community leaders and residents discussed similar issues covering a wider area including Balsall Heath, Sparkbrook and Hall Green. Similar aspirations were discussed but with the addition of the need to capitalise on the investment spilling into the area from major investments in the city core such as HS2 and the Enterprise Zone. There was also a unanimous view that some form of pilot initiative should be endorsed to help develop these ideas and progress to implementation.

As a result of these two discussions, the following pilot project is proposed.

The Concept.

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Using an asset based model to develop responsible stewardship and ownership, increase capacity building and engagement, promote wellbeing and assist in the devolution of local service delivery. Asset based development is built around a place's existing strengths and resources such as buildings, green spaces, social capital and skills. The proposed model would build on 5 key themes:

Environmental: Including parks, open spaces, allotments, rivers, trees and play areas etc

Wellbeing: including the use of buildings and spaces to promote opportunities for health and wellbeing, social groups and networks, community initiatives, social capital, community empowerment etc.

Economic: encouraging social enterprise, local training initiatives, growth of creative industries and small businesses, links to growth area such as HS2 and Life Sciences etc – with a specific emphasis on retaining local value from local assets.

Social capacity and community: building on undoubted strengths of existing local communities and groups, yet developing new ways of participation and inclusion, particularly amongst harder to reach group; and

Transport networks and infrastructure: improving local transport networks, increasing cycling, walking and the use of public transport, helping promote green travel districts etc.

Sustainability should be a driving influence and embedded into all projects, building upon existing policies and programmes such as the Green Commission and Smart City Road Map.

Land and building assets should be available for community use/management/ownership where a suitable business case has been made. Community groups and leaders should be empowered and take the lead but with BCC officers working alongside as enablers and technical advisors. There should be a commitment to a cross council approach with the full range of local government powers and services being available to assist and any funding and/or loan opportunities maximised for viable proposals.

The concept may best be described as a series of actions and initiatives that form multi-layers of activity, each contributing to the vision and key themes. A key aspect of the approach is that it does not need to work to or have a specific boundary (it should have “fuzzy boundaries”), nor should it find expression in a single plan.

Outcome

Working in partnership with local stakeholders should lead to better and more imaginative decision making by: providing opportunities to identify issues and problems; in formulating and evaluating alternatives and ensuring decisions on the use of assets in the delivery of local services are made in the most open and transparent manner. With local involvement and engagement, local communities should feel enabled and empowered, a sense of ownership and responsibility and improved wellbeing.

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It is believed a number of ideas, opportunities and practices will come forward ranging from community asset transfers, community management, involvement and volunteering, training initiatives and opportunities, new ideas for BCC delivery and longer term aims and projects. It is hoped that in this way financial and efficiency savings can be made whilst empowering local people. The concept is wholly in line with the Kerslake review's recommendations regarding *communities and partnership* and in line with the triple devolution concept.

If the pilot is successful, the model will be directly transferable to other geographical areas of the city.

Making It Happen

It is recommended that a steering group of members, officers and community volunteers is initially established to guide the pilot's roll out. It should also work towards putting in place the mechanisms to enable the lead to rapidly transfer to the local community with the Council playing a supporting role. Apart from officer time, the project is cost neutral, but could lead to significant long term financial savings being made.

To give visual focus to the concept, it is believed some form of flexible and enabling framework is necessary to be used both to record what is being achieved and as a tool to steer further active participation and decision making. It could, for example, take the form of continually updated folder with background facts and statistics about the area's assets and make-up, leading to sections describing issues, needs, opportunities, actions, projects, campaigns and an overall vision and recommendations for the area. It would also keep a record of all decisions taken in or affecting the area. It could highlight community groups, services and facilities and list a "who's who" of campaigners and community champions leading on local initiatives. It would also make clear what other adopted plans exist (eg Moseley SPD, Kings Heath Local Action Plan etc) and how this initiative relates to and complements them. The folder would primarily be electronic, thus capable of easy updating but with scope for a few hard folder copies kept in key locations.

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Recommendation and Future Focus

That approval is given to work up a Cabinet report, based upon this paper, seeking authority to undertake a pilot project in South Birmingham exploring an asset based service planning model, encouraging active citizenship and participation and new ways of service delivery and decision making.

Using examples from the One Public Estate programme, links to other public sector bodies should be forged to extend the impact of this initiative. This could include scoping whether multi use/occupancy of buildings and facilities in the area are possible, particularly where this could lead to further savings. In the longer term the underuse of private sector assets could be considered and how they may help contribute towards the vision.