

“Forward Together / Chamberlain 21”
Unlocking community assets and talents in the south of the city

Introduction

Following considerable discussion with local elected Members, community groups and residents of the Hall Green Constituency, a report was presented to Hall Green District Committee in January 2016, exploring the potential for a pilot project to develop the thinking behind combining the time, talents and enthusiasm of local people, with the City Council’s assets (both physical and human). The outcome of this project would be to look at new ways of delivering projects and services, and support existing (and create new) economic, environmental, social and cultural activity.

The setting up of the ‘Locale Board,’ gave the project greater emphasis, with the proposal re-shaped to reflect the ‘localisation’ direction the Council wishes to pursue. Authority is now sought to progress with initiative, but some fundamental questions need to be posed and answered before proceeding.

Background

Given the changing face of local service delivery in the light of austerity, budget cuts and legislative changes, Hall Green District councillors and officers have (since February 2015) been exploring whether an asset based approach to some service delivery may be possible. Under the working title of ‘Chamberlain 21,’ the group have been exploring short, medium and long term ways of combining local social capital, community enthusiasm and skills with BCC assets and officer experience to deliver local benefits. Inherent in the concept is the City Council becoming more of a facilitator and enabler helping to co-ordinate local action - a move from ‘civic to civil’, as outlined in the Standing Up for Birmingham Workshop at Highbury 4.

In September 2015, local ward councillors, officers, community leaders, residents and other key stakeholders discussed similar issues covering a wider area including Balsall Heath, Sparkbrook and Hall Green. Similar aspirations were expressed but with the addition of the need to capitalise on investment spilling into the area from major investments in the city centre core, such as HS2 and the Enterprise Zone. There was a unanimous view that some form of pilot initiative should be established to help develop these ideas and progress to implementation. A draft paper outlining how this may be achieved was produced and circulated amongst participants.

As a result of the widespread support in the District, the following pilot project is proposed in order to test the concept.

The Concept

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

Some of the City Council's land and building assets 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. Opportunities to connect local enthusiasm and skills with publically owned assets must be explored and encouraged further, building on the revitalised community asset transfer protocol developed in 2011 and some of the SU4B Community Conversations in 2013-15. There are good local examples of an asset based approach along with many pioneering projects or innovative research from elsewhere in the UK or around the world (see appendix), that point to potential future directions we could take.

The aim of the pilot is therefore to further develop a place based approach, focusing (in the first instance) on City Council owned assets, to develop responsible local stewardship and ownership, increase capacity building and engagement, promote wellbeing, and assist in the devolution of local service delivery.

The proposed model would build on 5 key themes:

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

Wellbeing: Using 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 areas such as HS2 and Life Sciences etc – with a specific emphasis on generating local value from local assets.

Social capacity and community: building on undoubted strengths of exiting 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 and learning 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. The default position for the project should be that where appropriate, land and building assets can become 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, with BCC officers working alongside as enablers and technical advisors. And there should be a commitment to a cross Council, cross organisations approach with the full range of local government powers and services being available to assist with 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, physical and / or thematic, each contributing to the vision and key themes; effectively creating a suite of engagements to respond to different community needs, be they geographic or demographic.

A key aspect of the approach is that it does not need to find expression in a single city wide plan. Although initially based on Hall Green District, initiatives should not be constrained by the concept of administrative or geographic boundaries; links to surrounding “capital” such as the Hospitals, Universities, employment hubs, the city centre, river corridors etc., should be encouraged. In contextual sense it is the looking at Hall Green District from the perspective of a wider zone that runs from City Centre to Druids Heath in South Birmingham.

Outcome and Issues

Working in partnership with local stakeholders should lead to better and more imaginative decision making, and ensure 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, achieving a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to improved wellbeing. Furthermore, it is believed a number of ideas, opportunities and practices will come forward which will achieve financial and efficiency savings, 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 operational model and the way of working will be directly transferable to other places and neighbourhoods in the city.

However, in order for meaningful progress to be made in the pilot, high level consideration, acknowledgement and direction needs to be provided on a number of issues:

- The silo mentality of different ‘place based’ services and those with operational responsibilities in the District/ locality need to be modified to embrace the approach.
- Generating best capital value returns, or minimising revenue costs on Council assets, should not be the sole consideration, when seeking the disposal of its land and buildings.
- The need to take into account the “worth” and “social value” of community organisations and an area’s social capital. These need to be accounted for in the same way and given a similar weighting as a capital value of physical assets
- The need to strike a balance between recycling of receipts (capital and revenue) generated locally and the contributions needed for corporate purposes.
- The measure of ‘due diligence’ when considering disposal of assets or transferring services to third sector organisations or voluntary groups, should be reviewed / relaxed (not abandoned) to maintain interest and sustain future activity.
- The establishment of area based, multi-disciplinary officer teams (former Urban Renewal style) should be considered, to better interact and integrate with secondments from other organisations (Police, Health etc.) and community groups.
- Political leadership and Executive agreement is necessary for this initiative to succeed.

Experience gained in the operation of the Community Asset Transfer Protocol and the community led spatial planning exercises in Balsall Heath (Neighbourhood Development Plan) and Moseley (Supplementary Planning Document), has shown that whereas community interest in local place based plans is high, progress can only proceed at the pace of local people. This sea change must be acknowledged and agreed at all levels, which means that the pilot could take 3 /5 years before meaningful quantifiable outputs are available / visible.

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, and establish links with existing local initiatives such as "Neighbourly Neighbours /Near Neighbour Schemes" and "Healthy Villages". It should also work towards putting in place the mechanisms to enable the pilot lead to rapidly transfer to the local community, with the Council playing a supporting role. Apart from officer time, the initial phase of the project is expected to be cost neutral, but could lead to significant long term financial savings being made.

To give visual focus to the concept, it is considered that some form of flexible, web based mechanism is necessary, to be used both to reference what is being achieved, and as a tool to steer further active participation and decision making. Cost implications of this will need further consideration but could be possibly funded through the Local Innovation Fund..

A DCLG funded community planning and engagement toolkit and "ward explorer" has already recently been developed through a collaboration between local community organisations - Chamberlain Forum and Moseley Community Development Trust, Birmingham City Council – Planning and Regeneration and Hall Green District, Local Services and locally elected Members – (Sparkbrook and Moseley / Kings Heath). By using this toolkit and the accompanying Ward data base - a continually updated folder (comprising background facts and statistics about the area's assets and make-up, issues, needs, opportunities, actions, projects, campaigns and an overall vision and recommendations for the area), would keep a record of progress with the pilot and all decisions taken in or affecting the area. The successful launch of the toolkit, , "Making better places to live.." took place on 19 October, 2016 at Stirchley Baths attended by Community organisations, BCC officers and councillors and DCLG

Recommendation and Future Focus

- A refreshed vision looking at a more holistic, creative, imaginative and practical approach is taken when looking at neighbourhood assets to meet local aspirations. Using both good local examples and those from elsewhere in the country (and abroad), including the One Public Estate Programme, links to other public sector bodies could be forged to extend the scope and 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 improved service delivery as well as financial savings. In the longer term the underuse of private sector assets could also be considered, and how they may help contribute towards the vision
- This Cabinet Committee – Local Leadership Discussion Paper is presented to the newly formed Property Board at one of its meetings before Christmas, either November 16th or December 21st for discussion and endorsement.

- The updating of ward based asset maps (both BCC, other public agencies, private and community) are prepared by Property Services by the end of December 2016
- A short explanation paper is produced by Property Services for Cabinet Committee – Local Leadership meeting on 20 December 2016 on the continuum for the potential usage of BCC assets i.e. From management agreements (such as the successful ones with a number of the bowls clubs in Sutton Coldfield) through to licence arrangements and then on to leases including Community Asset Transfers, with short case study examples of each in Birmingham and finally the process of the selling of Council Assets
- The setting up of a pilot project in Hall Green District and South Birmingham exploring an asset based service planning model encouraging active citizenship and participation and new ways of service delivery and decision making . This pilot would soon be followed by a cross section of different neighbourhoods across the City.
- The newly established Local Innovation Fund (LIF) could help facilitate this innovative asset based approach to neighbourhoods – including supporting and developing the capabilities within a local neighbourhood through a capacity building programme.

CONTACTS

- Ghaz Hussain – Area Planning and Regeneration Manager
Tel 0121 464 7738
- Karen Cheney District Head – Hall Green and Selly Oak Districts
Tel 0121 675 8519

APPENDIX – EXAMPLES OF PIONEERING PROJECTS AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

- 1) **Plymouth**, which 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 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.
- 4) **Locality Planning** – an alternative strategy which proposes that public services should be “local by default”, that they should help people help themselves, that they should focus on underlying purpose rather than outcome and that they should manage value not cost.
- 5) **Innovation Districts** being developed in the USA and Europe – a concept where economic, physical and networking assets are maximised to: build collaborative leadership, set out visions for growth, pursue talent and technology, enhance access to capital and promote inclusive growth.
- 6) **Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)** - a concept that builds on the human assets that are already found in the community and mobilises individuals, groups and institutions to come together to build on these not concentrate on their needs.
- 7) **“Locality”** – a national network of ambitious and enterprising community-led organisations working together to help neighbourhoods thrive. Their report “Local by Default” sets out an alternative strategy to the traditional delivery of local services in which collaboration with the 3rd and community sectors reaps joint benefits.
- 8) The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s work around **“Inclusive Growth”** and shaping local economies as an alternative to more traditional agglomeration economics.

Although not directly comparable lessons could also be learnt from the **One Public Estate** pilot schemes around the country – a government initiative which brings public sector bodies together to develop a joined up approach to managing their land and property.