

Jon Morris, Chair, Localise West Midlands

Localise West Midlands is a thinktank and campaign group working towards social justice and sustainability through localising and decentralising our economy. We do this by bringing people together to explore ideas and take action, and by research and consultancy. Our research on what makes local economies successful highlighted the crucial importance of having key decisions about the local economy being made by people who understand and are committed to its success. The least successful local economies in the long term tend to be those that have concentrated on attracting inward investment from companies that have no reason beyond subsidies to remaining in that area. In the past Birmingham has used its property portfolios to promote sustainable investment through for instance developing the first sheltered employment schemes and via projects in which the Council keeps a key stake such as the NIA and Convention centre. We work with local communities on economic development, and were a partner in the USE-IT! project, working across Smethwick and Ladywood. We have also carried out work for the West Midlands Combined Authority.

In order to bring economic power to local neighbourhoods, there needs to be access to the resources needed. This includes training and access to funding, but also access to suitable premises to start community and social enterprises, and other start-ups across many sectors.

Birmingham City Council needs to recognise its responsibility to use its property assets to support these aims, in order to deliver genuinely inclusive and long term growth.

Community buildings

Where community buildings are no longer in use, community asset transfers should be encouraged, including repurposing buildings for community and social businesses. There are great examples across the region of buildings being adapted for new uses, whether it's BCC's own Stirchley Baths, faith buildings as in Smethwick, or industrial buildings such as the Old Printworks on the Moseley Road. The health of the hyper local economy must be a consideration in disposing of property, particularly in areas with significant unemployment. However consideration needs to be given to ensuring that it is genuine assets and not liabilities that are transferred.

Catering

In the current climate of COVID-19, and with Brexit imminent, food provision has been a key priority across the city, through food banks, community kitchens and delivery services. BCC property with modern catering kitchens should be considered as an important asset, and this use retained and supported. Food businesses are also a key area for social enterprise and co-operatives, and BCC assets should be used to support this.

Office and workshop premises /start ups

Some of the city's growth sectors have well established routes for start-ups, such as the bio-science provision at University of Birmingham where someone with an idea can start by renting a bench and move on as their business grows. BCU's Steamhouse also provides a great range of opportunities. BCC's commercial premises could also be used to provide start-up opportunities where people live, giving not only a direct benefit but also an example and inspiration to young people .

Local centres

BCC owns high street properties across many local centres and smaller shopping areas. Whether

these are rented out or the council is the freeholder on longer leased buildings, this is an important opportunity to use the city's influence in pursuit of policy on thriving local centres. Community-led plans should be woven into this process. Covid has accelerated the ongoing decline of local centres. There needs to be a rethinking of how they operate and remain as centres for local communities. They need new ways of attracting people into them which in turn will help to keep its commercial activities viable. The increase in home working will undoubtedly hurt the city centre economy but could provide opportunities for smaller centres with people working from home wanting more local social outlets and meeting places. The Council can use its properties to help make this happen.

The City Centre

Plans for the city centre tend to be at the larger scale, but it will be crucial to the future health of the city that space is made for start-ups and growing businesses. The impact of COVID-19 and changing patterns of business mean that a review of what the city centre is for is required. This may lead to identified gaps in services and services: if there is a shift from commercial to residential, schools and primary healthcare will be needed, and development of BCC assets in the centre must take this into account.