



An Asset based approach or ABCD (EFFIGY)

A response to Forward Together
Presented at Hall Green District Committee

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This 'long' blog is an initial response to a paper presented to Hall Green District committee, Jan 20th 2015, concerning the development of a pilot asset based approach to future developments in the district. In it I seek to explore if the City's proposal is an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), approach, or an asset approach which is exploring how the City and its partners develop services differently in the future, within an 'austerity framework'

1. OUTLINE OF CITY REPORT

The Council Paper ***'Forward Together'*** explores ways in which ***"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"***.

It lists a number of groups and initiatives, and outlines the under-usage of land and buildings as a possible liability to the Council, with an emphasis on unlocking this potential.

The report lists some examples of 'asset development' and partnership activity, predominantly from the district, and, while I appreciate this report focused on Hall Green District, lessons could also be learned from other local initiatives in other areas of the City e.g. Castle Vale, Shard End etc, as well as developing links to other City initiatives e.g. the Smart Cities Alliance.

The report builds on a previous meeting at Highbury Hall, and the focus of the community engagement and asset based development seems resolute on exploring alternative approaches to services because of austerity and public sector cuts to service provision. There seems to be an emphasis on assets as a physical or service asset, with individuals being referenced as partners in new services, programme development or asset management. There is little reference to individuals as assets after the first paragraph.

In the section identified ***'The Concept'*** the report states ***"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"***. These are **Environment, Wellbeing, Economic, Social capacity and community** (*focused on greater participation and hard to reach groups*) and **Transport**

The report continues to focus on community to take the lead concerning land and building assets, with support from City Officers which will lead to ***"more imaginative decision making"***

The proposed action at the end of the report is 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."***

The report concludes with a recommendation that a Cabinet Report is developed ***"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."***

This process, and therefore the proposal, is not an asset based approach - it is not ABCD.

2. WHAT IS ASSET BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ABCD)?

In a recent blog in NURTURE DEVELOPMENT, 20th Jan 2016¹, Cormac Russell expresses a concern that ***"ABCD rhetoric is being bandied about in some quarters as a quick fix solution"***.

The blog emphasises that ABCD is not an answer to shrinking public sector services, but a process for developing community engagement in delivery of a wider range of services and processes. He references the work of Dan Duncan, and provides an example of 'The new paradigm for effective community impact'

ABCD – a basic introduction

In his article Building from Strength - Asset Based Community Development² John E. Walker provides clear guidance as to how ABCD was developed in the mid-90s, and how that influenced the development of Northeast Assets Leadership Project in 2003 (*Appendix 1 additional reading Appendix 3*) which helps leaders to implement strength based strategies for community and youth development. He argues that the egalitarian nature of the ABCD approach was a natural fit to town government and community stewardship - "people learn about ABCD, they warm to its practicality and the way it elicits the voices of diverse constituencies"

Walker outlines 7 principles:

1. Asset lens Utilises the principle of an asset lens “Instead of looking through a *needs lens*, look through an *assets lens* to profile a community; look for strengths that can be employed for progress”
2. Be inclusive This concept challenges everyone to be a leader in the development process. Walker argues that welcoming all citizens creates productive matches between individuals and groups.
3. Mapping the assets Creating the data, an asset map can be a detailed inventory of strengths, or just a preliminary scan. New tools and processes are able to interrogate data enabling groups to adapt the process to specific needs, and are improving the usefulness of the data for the end user, whether an individual, a civic group, a public entity, or a private organization. Open and shared data becomes crucial to any ABCD programme.
4. Be action orientated The ideal ABCD initiative channels the interest generated by mapping into immediate improvement efforts
5. Let Citizens direct the spending Too often, the plans started by community groups are not realized because actual investment remains in the hands of major developers or city departments. This includes officers developing and applying for external bids.
6. Lead by stepping back Successful ABCD entails coordinated, spirited, multiparty, bottom-up deliberations. Any experts who join the deliberations should play a supportive, not a leadership or ‘know better’ role. Recognise what skills exist within the community you are working with
7. Nurture sense of ownership A sense of ownership inevitably leads to accountability. People work harder at goals and are more willing to commit time, money, and personal influence to ensure that projects are completed well.

This article appears within the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Communities banking Volume 17 Number 1, (*Appendix 5*), which also includes articles on social finance. This article, written in 2006, shows just how far behind some other communities and countries we in the UK may be in our thinking.

3. EXAMPLES OUTLINED IN THE REPORT

Delivery Processes

Cleveland Evergreen Co-ops, Plymouth and active estates are all mentioned within the report as well as a number of other examples. While these examples are ‘economically’ interesting they are not technically asset based developments but economic and community engagement processes.

The Evergreen Cooperative Initiative of Cleveland, Ohio (*Appendix 3*) is an example of a community taking the initiative in developing an economic model, following the closure of local industry. But it is a co-operative, and it received millions in federal aid and loans. The Evergreen Model was built on Mondragon Corporation in Spain (*Appendix 4*), also a co-operative, which has been functioning since the mid-1950s and now has a turnover of £11,875 million - 260 affiliated co-operatives employing 74,115 people. Exploring this model, which started as a grass roots process may be more relevant to our needs than the Cleveland one.

These may be models that can be explored for economic development but they cannot be imposed or lead by a City Council. In both of these cases the starting impetus came from the community, and was not necessarily about civic functions but economic activity.

Plymouth is cited as an example in the UK to be explored. It is seen as a hot-spot for social enterprise activity in the UK and is developing as a global ‘social enterprise city’. Plymouth does have a very active social enterprise network supported by a variety of partners. The City Council also facilitate this process through a grants and loans programme accessed and promoted by the City through its web site. The local council sees itself as a ‘co-operative council’ – is a strong supporter of social enterprise and is developing a range of initiatives to promote social enterprise in the city.

There are around 150 social enterprises in Plymouth (*Appendix 5*), working in a huge range of sectors including in education, health, arts, environment, food, finance, housing, business support, sport, social care and many more. These businesses employ around 7,000 people and bring in an income of over £500 million. There are mega-social enterprises such as the University, Plymouth Community Homes, PLUSS and Plymouth Community Healthcare but there is also a burgeoning economy of smaller businesses - 1 in 3 turn over under £50,000. Plymouth became a Social Enterprise City in September 2013.

However in Birmingham, Digbeth, immediately adjacent to Hall Green District, has been designated as a Social Enterprise Quarter¹. There are an estimated 50+ social enterprises based in the area, some with turnovers of over £1m. While this quarter has received support from BCC, unlike Plymouth it has received little funding and there are few grants or loans available.

There are already a number of social enterprises operating within the Hall Green District, many run by and for community people. While I would always advocate a wide research base before any programme is developed I believe we also need to learn from City developments. Plymouth works because of that City's commitment to Social Enterprises, including financial. If this model is to be pursued, is BCC capable of providing such support?

Brief outline / objective of One Public Estate programme, more details in are referenced below³



Community groups named in report

Several local community groups and initiatives were mentioned within the **'Forward Together'** report - these are only part of the 'assets' within the district. Some of these groups are constituted and some are not. Some are delivery organisations / vehicles, some purely campaigning groups. Only some could fulfil the outlined ambition of the document - some would not want to manage / develop physical assets. None of the groups could be described as fulfilling an ABCD model. However they, and a whole host of other groups not mentioned (or alluded to?), would form a fundamental part of any ABCD role.

It is acknowledged that the list in the report is not representative and it is not clear how that representation would be 'grown' and engaged.

The groups / initiatives mentioned are

Balsall Heath	Balsall Heath Forum, Neighbourhood Plan
Moseley	Moseley Regeneration groups, Moseley CDT, Moseley Supplementary Planning Document
Campaigning groups	Moseley Road Baths, Highbury Hall
Community initiatives	Heartbeat, Kings Heath Village Square, The Print Works, Balsall Heath is Our Planet, Streetplay etc
Hall Green Arts	Led by St Pauls Community Trust

4. CLARIFYING THE PROCESS / THE EXPECTATION

The Report

The outcome of the discussion at Hall Green District committee was that a report would be prepared for cabinet for Hall Green District to become a pilot. I have concerns that, while some Councillors had a grasp of the issues, there seemed to be a porosity of understanding of ABCD. Partnership and asset based activity were clearly being linked to shrinking public sector funding.

In its conclusion, concerning the development of a report to cabinet, the ***'Forward Together'*** report states the need for a steering group of members, officers and community volunteers to be established to guide the pilot's roll out.

I believe there is a need for this steering group to have as wide a brief as possible, focused on the outlined definitions of ABCD, and the possibility of modifications to procurement and commissioning and access to finance, and not just focused on the assumption outlined in the report that ***"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"*** This is not ABCD.

Developing a service or developing ABCD?

Developing an ABCD process is not just about managing services and physical assets differently or through 'a third party'. The report does acknowledge that ***"The city is full of talented people and volunteers interested in improving or helping to manage the areas in which they live."*** This however is partly contradicted later in the report ***"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."*** This statement continues the belief that City officers need to assist local groups and that any development is always related to (public) finance.

If the final proposal is to develop an ABCD process, one of the most important principles to be established is disrupting the myth that groups need Council officers to develop skills.

Individuals and community groups have a wide range of skills, and if the process only focuses on doing current provision differently, these skills will not be utilised, only curtailed. An ABCD process is not a capacity building process.

The report identifies an outcome that ***"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"***

However, it goes on to list activities ***"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."***

This is not a process of Discussion, Analysis and Synthesis of ideas but a focus on current process and 'product' - it is more of a directory development process.

The section 'Makin it Happen' is not 'The Asset Lens' 'Mapping The Asset' or inclusive practice outlined in Walkers article²

5. **A BIT OF A CONCLUSION**

- The issue at the heart of ABCD is about asset development - it is not an economic or public sector management solution but the development of, and engagement with, individual and groups in civic activity. It could be argued that Birmingham hasn't been good at in the past
 - There is a need to widen the field of consultation.
 - Is the Hall Green pilot going to be developed by City officials focusing on city services and resources with established, and in some cases 'favoured', groups and organisations?
 - Councillors and Officers need to recognise the difference between leading the development of skills and engagement, and widening involvement in the understanding and delivery of governance issues
 - How is involvement going to be decided and which 'community leaders' and community activists (terms used in the report) are going to be chosen / invited?
 - If done properly, this process may enable Birmingham to explore, develop and redefine new welfare and service provision centred on communities. This isn't the City or State doing everything, or leading on programme partnerships through an appointed professional. This is about communities being believed in, trusted and subsequently funded to lead activity and development in their communities.
 - Birmingham may need to take a bit of a 'deep knee bend' and think how to progress this properly. ABCD is not just about infrastructure, buildings or planning engagement. It is about recognising the skills of the community and treating that as an asset – not just a partnership
 - ABCD is more than community engagement in the design – ABCD cannot be imposed on communities it is developed through developing skills within community groups and individuals.
 - There may be a need to compartmentalise objectives but this should be decided by the community - this will enable the process to build on best practice with a wide range of groups and not just selected groups.
 - ABCD is not an economic answer to austerity and, while there needs to be an acknowledgement of the swingeing cuts to Local Authorities, and the dismantling of 'welfare state' services, any asset based development should aspire to follow ABCD best practice.
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References

¹ Cormac Russell <http://blog.nurtureddevelopment.org/2016/01/20/asset-based-community-development-is-not-an-alternative-to-services-abcd/>

² Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Communities Banking volume 17 number 1 Winter 2006
<http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2006/winter/c&bwinter06.pdf>

³ One Public Estate Programme Prospectus

- i. http://www.local.gov.uk/onepublicestate/-/journal_content/56/10180/6678286/ARTICLE
- ii. <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6077975/One+Public+Estate+-+Transforming+Property+and+Services+final/90cb0148-868e-4f94-a7b4-210bca66ca45>
- iii. <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6077975/One+public+estate+programme+prospectus+24+April+2014/236ec600-73bf-4518-995c-5d09c2e471c2>

⁴ Digbeth Social Enterprise Quarter
<http://digbethsocialenterprisequarter.co.uk/>

APPENDIX

Some other reading and references – not a comprehensive list but a start

1. **Northwestern University – Asset Based Community Development Institute Downloadable Resources**
<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable/>
2. **ABCD - Asset Based Community Development (Leeds)**
<http://preventionlibraryforum.scie.org.uk/blog/abcd-asset-based-community-development-leeds>
3. **Evergreen Co-operatives**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evergreen_Cooperatives
4. **Mondragon Corporation – another co-operative model**
<http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/>
5. **Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Communities banking Volume 17 Number 1 – Other articles about social financing**
<http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2006/winter/c&bwinter06.pdf>
6. **Dan Duncan**
[http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/B%20-%20The%20New%20Paradigm%20-%20Asset%20Based\(1\)\(2\).pdf](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/B%20-%20The%20New%20Paradigm%20-%20Asset%20Based(1)(2).pdf)
7. **Plymouth – some information and references**
<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/socialenterprises.htm>
<http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/social-enterprise-places/certified-places/plymouth>