Northampton Borough Council
Community Centres Programme
Background

Northampton Borough Council has 21 community centres spread right across the town, many of which were being underutilised and/or were not accessible by our wider communities. Many of the community centres lacked a strong ethos of community involvement and inclusivity. They were deemed to belong to the Council rather than to the People. Local communities did not have sufficient input into how they were run or what went on within them.

The Council believes that voluntary and community organisations are often better able to understand and respond effectively to local need. We wanted to apply this principle to the Council’s community centres. Some already had local management committees with a limited role; others were run directly by the Council.

An Overview and Scrutiny panel, a working group of councillors (all parties) and representatives of the local voluntary and community sector developed a framework for transferring management of community centres to suitable voluntary and community organisations, on the basis of a partnership with the Council, to achieve agreed local outcomes, backed up by a 30-year lease. This work was supported by Community Matters, Locality and Enterprise Solutions, support bodies for neighbourhood and community organisations.

Local voluntary and community organisations were the focus of the review. There was fortunately an abundance of such organisations in our town, many of which were well established and had been making an excellent contribution to the people of Northampton for many years. Others were in their infancy, but had the ability and capacity to be developed.

It was this rich supply of voluntary and community organisations that made the community centres partnership programme possible. The willingness of community organisations to so actively take part in the programme enabled our vision to be converted into reality.

With our key voluntary and community organisations on board, we used them as an interface to local people. They brought with them an understanding of the needs and aspirations of Northampton’s residents and the experience and ability to develop and empower community capacity. Strong emphasis has been placed on engaging those groups that can be hard to reach such as young people, older people and those with disabilities.

The Council is keen that community organisations do not feel that the Council is ‘abandoning’ them.

As well as transferring a budget for running costs, an additional transitional fund was voted through to support the organisations in the early years of new arrangements. We have also emphasised that we want the managing organisations and the Council to see each other as partners in serving the community, and that we will have regular dialogue about how best to achieve this throughout the period of the lease.

Improvements & Benefits Achieved

The Community Centres Programme has delivered many benefits for the people of Northampton and continues to do so:

• The successful transfer of 19 of the Council’s 21 community centres, with the remaining two set to transfer shortly
• Being the catalyst for the establishment of an innovative community consortium, Community Spaces Northampton (CSN), which is managing multiple centres and doing amazing work in our communities
• The delivery of a wide range of community activities, projects and initiatives that are having positive impacts on local communities
• 17% room utilisation increase across all 7 CSN centres
• 3-5 new regular user groups at each CSN centre including BME and youth groups
• Taster youth groups are being run at four CSN centres where no youth provision existed before
• Numbers attending existing regular user groups have also increased
• Three CSN centres have been redecorated free of charge by a children’s group, a local supermarket and the local college
• Compliments are now replacing complaints
• The programme was shortlisted for an LGC award and for an APSE award recently. In addition, it is being used as an exemplar case study by Locality/Asset Transfer Unit, NCVO and by Community Matters
• The delivery of well over £1m of revenue savings to the Council in the next 5 years
• The levering into Northampton’s local communities of over £200k of external funding
The bringing back into full operation 7 community centres that had almost fallen out of use by the community

A ten-fold increase in active volunteers in our community centres

The Council in partnership with the Third sector has clearly demonstrated the benefits of devolving management of community facilities through a variety of models – centres run by the community for the community. The programme has empowered individuals and communities to take responsibility for community development. It has encouraged cooperation and provided support to the voluntary and community sector.

The Asset Transfer Unit became interested in the programme and has provided a support package, match funded by the Council, to enable the CSN consortium to be set-up properly from the start, and to have professional input from legal and property advisers. The CSN consortium brings together two voluntary organisations which were already working in Northampton, providing a range of community activities and support. Their joint experience, knowledge and understanding of the pertinent issues has contributed to informed decisions, based on local knowledge of an area and a particular range of services. Their proposal is balanced and considered, which is maximising current expertise within the organisations involved, and is providing value for money for the management and delivery of a range of professional and relevant services to our communities.

Independent Endorsements

The Council has been praised for its Community Centres Programme by independent organisations representing the voluntary and community sector:

Naomi Diamond of Locality wrote:

“The Council has done an excellent job at making this a fair and transparent process with the potential for improved outcomes for the communities. I am confident that the process which has been introduced to put in place clear, transparent and consistent arrangements for the management and ownership of community centres, is in the best interests of the communities served. A great deal of work has gone on by officers and members to get to this point.”

Al Bell of Community Matters wrote:

“The work that has gone on over the last 12 months has been positive and there is renewed trust in the Council and the current process as it has been consultative, clearly communicated and deadlines adhered to. These groups are delivering many services for their local communities and doing this in collaboration with the Council can only be a good thing.”

Challenges Overcome

The large number of community centres, 21 in total, as well as the limited experience of local voluntary and community groups in applying to run public facilities, were two of the main challenges to be overcome. We therefore needed a process that was both robust and simple. So to make the application process easier to use for interested community groups, template business plans and pro-forma financial forecasts were provided. We also provided a pro-forma lease and management agreement so that community organisations were fully aware of the terms and conditions we expected them to enter into.

CSN is a registered charity and was set up in 2011 specifically to take over and run multiple NBC community facilities in Northampton – they now run 8 of our centres. CSN consists of people who very successfully ran one of our other community centres for 15 years, Alliston Gardens Youth & Community Centre, as well as someone who ran another very large and successful community facility in Northampton, the Doddridge Centre, for many years. Locality provided support in setting up CSN and NBC provided match funding to support them in their first year.

More details on CSN can be found at http://locality.org.uk/asset-transfer-unit/case-studies/community-spaces-northampton/

CSN’s new HQ is a building that Northampton Borough Council has leased to CSN for 20 years under advantageous terms including 12 months rent free and limited repairing responsibilities. CSN plans to develop one part of the building as a central kitchen to cook food to be sold from community cafes at many of their centres;
they also plan to sell food to other community organisations running community facilities in Northampton. CSN is applying for a Community Ownership and Management of Assets Grant to develop the building and for other community building developments and acquisitions.

COMMUNITY SPACES NORTHAMPTON

History

Community Spaces Northampton (CSN) was appointed to run seven community centres previously managed by Northampton Borough Council in March 2012. These are predominantly in the Eastern District – Bellinge, Standens Barn, Southfields, Rectory Farm; in other areas of the town – Kingsthorpe, Briar Hill and Vernon Terrace. This was followed by Lodge Farm, a centre previously managed by a committee, also in the Eastern District in March 2013. We have just concluded a lease with NBC and moved into the Farmhouse at Rectory Farm which will provide us with a central office space and community rooms.

This project is the culmination of several years of discussion and research by us as the management committee of a community centre, and Northampton Borough Council when, in 2009, the Council was seeking to reduce spending on the community centres’ budget. The seven centres that we applied for were all directly managed by the Council and in June 2011 a five year business plan and financial projections were submitted. In late 2011 the trustees began work, with advisors from Locality and Community Matters, to register as a charity and company limited by guarantee. An organisational development plan was put in place with funding from the Asset Transfer Unit and the Borough Council; this paid for a programme of support to set up the organisation, prepare for transfer of the buildings and the two TUPEd caretaking staff.

Organisational Benefits

The writing of the business plan and subsequent meetings with NBC helped us to focus and carefully consider our objectives, core beliefs and our vision. It has been a challenging and rigorous process and we, as an organisation, have learnt a great deal. We are now familiar with the implications of employment law, TUPE, management agreements, contracts, leases, company and charity applications and the law pertaining to these as well as a full raft of policies. As there was no previous model nationally to follow we had to learn very quickly.

Community Benefits

Throughout this development it was important never to lose sight of the reasons for undertaking this journey. We want all our community centres to be busy places for all sections of the local community to meet for recreation, education, exercise, health activities, lunch clubs, pre-schools, after school activities, youth activities and the list is endless.

By taking control of these buildings we are encouraging and enabling members of local communities to work together to promote social inclusion and a sense of belonging. The benefits local people and the community have received include:

- Strong links have been developed with existing users and the local communities including Residents’ Forums, councillors, safer community teams and health professionals.
- Some residents’ groups and councillors have provided funding to support a number of projects.
- We are involved in partnership work with other community organisations and agencies to deliver an expanding range of activities.
- Our first year of operation has seen a 17% increase in regular groups.
- Five new youth projects have been set up since starting, along with a number of new health activity groups.
- There has also been an increase in the range of pre-school activities, educational courses and sessions for the over 55s.

Building Improvements

There are many obstacles to overcome, not least creaking boilers and draughty windows, but with imagination and resourcefulness we are investigating energy saving solutions and improvements in conjunction with a research group from the local university. A programme of re-decoration and gradual refurbishment is taking place with the help of community organisations and commercial companies. Currently two community centres have been redecorated and three more are in the process of redecoration. We are also Charity of the Year for Asda supermarket who are supporting us with redecoration and replacement of kitchen items, furniture, notice boards and a new boiler.

We are driven by wanting the best possible range of services and groups for people to access in buildings that are accessible, welcoming and friendly, well maintained, safe, marketed well and affordable to book. This will not be easy and we are continuing to work in partnership with NBC and local councillors to improve the facilities we can offer to local communities. It is a challenge, but one
that we feel we have the capacity to tackle. We have started to improve aspects of community provision and create sustainable, vibrant and viable centres for the community.

**Overview & Next Steps**

At the end of our first year, we have delivered the outcomes specified in our business plan and we are now finalising our business plan for the next twelve months for all nine centres and the development of our new HQ.

Our next step is to seek funding grants from national bodies to further update and improve the energy efficiency of the buildings and to appoint a community development worker. We also plan to join the Community Organisers network.

We are the first group in the country to embark on this journey and the successful transfer could be a model for other groups. We have already been visited by an organisation from the north of England where we delivered a workshop to help and advise them on setting up a similar transfer. This is to be followed by a second visit by local councillors. We have undertaken a presentation at a community conference in Birmingham and are currently being used as a case study for Locality and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

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