



# Co-operative Councils

## Innovation Network

### COMMUNITY



## Birmingham City Council

### Save Birmingham Campaign to Protect Community Places

In September 2023 Birmingham City Council was forced to make a momentous decision. The largest local authority in Europe declared itself unable to balance its budget and issued a Section 114 Notice. The council’s financial crisis is part of the wider pressure on local authorities, through rapidly increasing service demand combined with long-term underfunding and the recent spike in inflation. But it was made worse by mistakes made in Birmingham, resulting in significant potential liabilities for equal pay claims and costs to put right a failed IT system.

The crisis meant that Birmingham had to make savings of £300m over two years. The council also applied for £1.2bn Emergency Financial Support from the government. This comes in the form of “capitalisation” permission, giving the council the ability to sell capital assets and convert the proceeds into revenue funding. This has led to a wholesale review of property assets.

Inevitably, the sheer scale of these cuts will impact on community services and facilities that are vital to local neighbourhoods across the city. In response, the local co-operative movement, spearheaded by Co-operatives West Midlands, established the *Save Birmingham* campaign.

Bringing together a range of partners, it aims to give residents the ability and resources to protect and improve the community spaces and services they care about. The partnership

includes national organisations that are experts in providing advice and support to communities, including Co-operatives UK, Plunkett Foundation, Locality and Power to Change. Local partners include Birmingham Community Matters, Birmingham Voluntary Services Council and Birmingham Open Spaces Forum. Funding has been primarily provided by the local co-operatives and charitable funder Barrow Cadbury Trust, as well as small donations from residents.



The launch of the Save Birmingham campaign

**Protecting community places**

The Localism Act 2011 gives communities the power to have buildings, parks and other venues declared “assets of community value”. It also gives them the right to bid for these assets, should they come up for sale.

Within weeks of launching, the Save Birmingham campaign launched an interactive map on its website, to encourage residents to nominate community assets that they care about as a first step to protecting them. This led to thousands of residents nominating around 200 community places right across the city – including libraries and leisure centres, swimming pools and community centres, heritage venues and theatres, parks and open spaces, allotments and playing fields.



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As residents have nominated community places, the Save Birmingham campaign has worked with partners including support organisation Birmingham Community Matters, as well as the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit within Birmingham City Council, to support residents and community groups to officially designate community places as Assets of Community Value through a mixture of information sessions and one-to-one support.

Registering Assets of Community Value both helps to protect them from damaging 'fire sales' that would leave communities worse off, while also sending a strong signal about how much residents care about their community places.

### **Promoting Community Ownership**

But the Save Birmingham campaign is about more than demonstrating the value of community assets. Because it was born out of the co-operative movement, it also aims to promote community ownership and co-operative solutions for council-owned or run spaces and services.

This includes supporting residents to explore Community Asset Transfers, where there is local interest to take on the running or ownership of community places. Supported by partner organisations, the campaign aims to build the capacity and capability of communities to ensure that every community has the opportunity to pursue these options.

Co-operative models can also be applied at a citywide level as well as for individual community assets. As Birmingham City Council begins to fundamentally review how its services operate, it has an opportunity to work with Save Birmingham to embed co-operative principles and models.

### **Working collaboratively together**

While at first, the campaign may have seemed quite threatening to the city council, pursuing a positive and constructive approach, helped by cross-party support helped to break down barriers to collaborative working. This built on previous work by Birmingham City Council to build an approach to Community Wealth Building and existing membership of the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network.

Community ownership isn't new to the city council. It has a well-established Community Asset Transfer programme, which includes a leading approach to recognising social value through its '[valuing worth](#)' tool. But the onset of the council's financial challenges has provided an opportunity to develop a more strategic approach to community ownership.

Birmingham was not the first local authority to issue a section 114 notice, nor is it likely to be the last. But it is the first to adopt a community-led response built on co-operative and collaborative approaches, with practical and positive solutions.

While it was born of crisis and necessity, other councils may well follow what may become known as the 'Birmingham blueprint' to protect and improve their community places in the face of increasing financial challenges and uncertainty.

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**For further information contact:**

**Tony Smith**

Strategic Partnerships Lead – Birmingham City Council

[tony.smith@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:tony.smith@birmingham.gov.uk)

**Jeehan Jones and Kathy Hopkin**

Save Birmingham

[www.savebirmingham.org](http://www.savebirmingham.org)