Final Evaluation of Birmingham City Council's Local Innovation Fund Executive Summary, May 2019

Linxs Consultancy was re-commissioned in November 2018 to carry out a final evaluation of the Birmingham City Council Local Innovation Fund (hereafter LIF), having completed an initial interim evaluation the preceding year.

The interim reported focused extensively on a process critique. By contrast, this final report examined whether projects have impacted upon service delivery and active citizenship within their respective wards, with an assessment as to the extent to which they can be considered truly innovatory within the evaluation framework.

The establishment of LIF was approved by Birmingham City Council's Local Leadership Cabinet Committee in September 2016. Fundamentally the ambition of LIF was to introduce a radical shift in local democratic decision-making including a move away from the previous Community Chest approach of one-off grant funding.

Each ward received an even allocation of £48k, constituting a total available outlay of £1.92 million. Initially the projects were planned to last up to two years in length; however, in practice due to delays in the planning, selection and approval process, many commenced significantly later. Since the programme was launched there were 159 proposals submitted across the City, with 119 being recommended and taken to Local Leadership Cabinet committee for approval.

Proposals were intended to be 'innovative' with a concomitant emphasis on 'doing things differently', through investment in transformative and active citizenship programmes, enhanced partnership working and subsequent reduced reliance on Birmingham City Council services. It was instigated to represent a key citywide opportunity to mobilise the voluntary and community sector and develop an appropriate place-based model for the deployment of area-based funding, fitting with the overall City Council cultural change programme.[1] The City Council's policy for ongoing work in neighbourhoods has evolved further via the 'Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods'[2] White Paper. This White Paper was approved by the Cabinet of the City Council on the 22nd January 2019. It contains the future approach including the desire for neighbourhood based work in the city.

<u>Project Analysis</u>

A review of hard copy proposals revealed that the purported focus of the majority of LIF projects centred around Active Citizenship and Communities Stepping Up (89%) and Citizens' Independence and Well Being (80%). By contrast one fifth concerned cleaner streets (20%). In terms of City priorities, proposals were most often aligned with Health (80%). The 119 approved projects are drawn from a wide cross-section of organisational types, including residents' associations, community and voluntary groups, local partnerships, and a small number of professional organisations. The NDSU stated that though 'usual suspects' (those in receipt of previous Local Authority grant funding) had unsurprisingly been approved, it was clear that funding had also gone to those who have not previously applied for Community Chest or Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, including collaborations of smaller groups.

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[1] Birmingham City Council Public Report to Cabinet Committee – Local Leadership (20th September 2016)
[2] Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods, Policy Statement (White Paper), Birmingham City Council, January 2019 and Birmingham City Council Report to Cabinet, 22nd January 2019

To analyse the impact made, LIF projects were invited to complete an on-line survey. A further 24 were examined in more depth including via one-to-one interviews with the project leads. This highlighted a range of issues and themes which used a five stage model of innovation, comprising the following elements:

Bottom up: the majority of the projects in the cohort were able to demonstrate a proposal and project development process which sought actively to engage communities in design and the establishment of project parameters. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum there were particular projects in the cohort that represented an abject failure to utilise a 'bottom up' approach. In the wards in question the vision of LIF proposals being developed by communities and grass roots organisations in conjunction with councillors as part of their local leadership role was far from reality.

Collaboration: across the cohort it was encouraging to note that 17 out of 24 were able to demonstrate high levels of collaboration, either in terms of active partnership working or the creation of formal links in working arrangements to meet priorities. This was also reflected in an associated survey finding where all respondents were asked to rate retrospectively on a scale of 1-10 how well they felt their project had managed to work with other organisations and groups since inception. The average response was 8.18 (range 3-10). This is almost identical to the initial response provided in the interim report. Examples of collaboration included those relating to active partnership working and the formalisation of working arrangements.

Transformation/Active Citizenship: the fundamental aim of the LIF funding regime was to see the introduction of projects that sought significantly to promote active citizenship. The most 'innovative' projects against this criterion therefore are those that can demonstrate extensive community involvement in decision-making scrutiny and

delivery, show a high social value return on investment (e.g. through volunteering hours) and/or transform service delivery at the local level.

Most projects of the cohort for analysis have shown good evidence of achievement and intentions in this regard. There appears to be a strong correlation with collaboration, with the majority of projects scoring very similarly across the two categories. Respondents were asked in the survey to stipulate the extent to which community engagement was a continued important factor in project set-up and ongoing delivery. There was an overwhelmingly positive response from the projects consulted, with an average ranking of 8.82 (range 3-10).

A range of good practice examples of active citizenship were explored and split thematically, though it should be noted that there are considerably more which could have been selected (which is a testament to the endeavour and creativity of Birmingham's community sector). These examples included those relating to community hubs, communities stepping up and health interventions.

The vision of LIF was to see the expansion of locality based active citizenship with community organisations coming to the fore to manage assets and deliver projects which complement existing public services such as library services, environmental improvements, social care and jobs/skills. It was very pleasing to note that there have been a significant number of LIF projects that have succeeded in this vein. The health interventions projects were aimed at reducing the burden on health care providers through the promotion of healthy lifestyles and social prescribing.

There were, however, numerous LIF projects that appeared much more towards the bottom end of the engagement spectrum and therefore more functional than visionary in orientation. This was a weakness which the NDSU team also regularly identified as part of their assessment and scrutiny role, with most of these projects RAG rated as red or amber (thus encouraging the relevant councillors to embrace their local leadership role and work with the community groups and local organisations to enhance their proposals or indeed to select different ones). That these proposals were still advanced appears indicative of certain ward representatives' affinity with the format and remit of the former Community Chest regime. It should be noted that by no means are we suggesting that the projects cited as examples were without merit, but that they should not have been considered as innovation within the parameters of LIF or deemed appropriate for this particular funding stream.

Sustainability: in assessing sustainability it was readily apparent that there was a wide disparity in sustainability strategies and progress made towards their fruition. A couple of projects from the cohort analysed have not been sustained due to circumstances outside of their control. There are a group of projects which appear to be either short-term (and one-off) in orientation by design, or without a totally coherent plan outside of the possibility of exploring future funding applications, some of which are present within the cohort for in-depth analysis.

By contrast, there are LIF examples which have sought to enhance social capital, embed skills and create an infrastructure through which delivery can be perpetuated without further external funding, or at least have enhanced community capacity to such an

extent that future funding has been more easily leveraged. In some cases it was reported that the intensity of interventions might need to be scaled down slightly post the LIF funding period but that the learning and approaches developed would be integrated into future service delivery. There also are a range of examples of projects where successful delivery has led to the securing of future funding which has guaranteed futures and the implementation of community partnerships. As outlined in the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper these partnerships can comprise a variety of different models and indeed develop more over time.

Outcomes: the focus of this element was examining the extent to which projects have achieved good 'outputs' and/or met their stipulated 'targets' and provide a more in-depth focus as to the wider impacts of LIF funded initiatives.

Respondents were asked in the survey to self-assess the extent to which they had met their proposal 'outcomes' (noting that these were more output in orientation). A vast majority of those consulted felt they had been successful, with an average of 8.64 (range 3-10).

There were some particular examples of good output and/or target achievements along with a wide range of examples of LIF projects which have reported achievements that are far more outcome focused, demonstrating that they have developed skills and capacity within their communities, created a sustainable community resource and are having a significant impact on transforming service design and delivery. These are showcase achievements that reflect fully the ethos of LIF as originally intended. There were also examples of projects which amended and adapted their work, aims and activities as they have been implemented. This is to be welcomed as clearly a project is more likely to make an impact if it reacts to new circumstances and events rather than carrying on with the initial plan regardless.

A small number of projects from the participants of the evaluation have been ultimately unsuccessful and a small number of others have made limited progress due to delays.

Conclusions and Recommendations: this report, and to an extent the interim report, contains a series of conclusions and recommendations. These have been designed to highlight key themes that have emerged from LIF and also that can then be used in shaping future work, including the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods policy.

Conclusions

The LIF Experience: the LIF programme and its broad successes clearly demonstrate the importance of neighbourhood-based grant funding (vis-à-vis a commissioning model). In areas where Elected Members have truly embraced their local leadership role and democratic accountability as part of localisation, some truly innovative projects that have revamped the future of neighbourhoods and service delivery have emerged.

Benefits of a Bottom-up Approach: as well as being a crucial element in an innovatory project, those projects that were developed in a bottom up fashion were generally those

which were more successful in delivering sustainability and locality outcomes. As these outcomes covered a range of aspects such as developing skills and capacity within communities, creating a sustainable community resource and transforming service design/delivery, this is an important lesson for future neighbourhood based work. It also shows the importance of a funding regime (and indeed officer resource) dedicated to a bottom-up approach.

Development of Sustainability Models: a wide range of sustainability models are evident within LIF projects to continue either the project in its entirety or to mainstream successful elements therein. That these sustainability models are not restricted solely to accessing additional (external) funding was further testament to the impact made by LIF. In itself the fact that many community based projects will continue is also a useful bedrock to build on for ongoing neighbourhood based work including, specifically, the implementation of Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods.

Supporting Levels of Engagement: the LIF experience stretches across the spectrum of community engagement from consultation through to empowerment. Whilst it is the higher end projects which should be considered more 'innovative', it should still be recognised that individual communities may want to engage with influencing, delivering and controlling local services to a greater or lesser extent. This spectrum is not dissimilar to the 'Framework of Relationships' from the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper which outlines a range of options for future neighbourhood work. In addition what was clear was that the LIF process has positioned well many areas of Birmingham to encompass these approaches.

Personal Development: there are numerous examples where the LIF projects have enhanced individuals' lives and their skills. This relates both to the beneficiaries of the projects but also to those involved in implementing them. There are many examples where their skills have been enhanced and individuals are now in a place where they may be able to develop other schemes, whether by replicating or continuing current work or in testing themselves with other modes of delivery and citizen control.

Range of Active Citizenship Models: a wide range of different active citizenship models have been developed. These related both to specific themes such as health, environment, and employment as well as functions such as making community facilities more viable and individuals directing strands of work. These can be seen as good practice which can be drawn on so that future activities have local context, sources of advice and models to adapt in work in the future.

Departure from Previous Grant Regimes: LIF did mark a change from previous grant regimes. In particular it moved away from a 'stop/start' regime whereby small grants funded worthwhile yet time limited activities towards an outcome focussed regime, including an element of payment by results (rather than just demonstrating spend) and a more hands-on relationship through the NDSU. Further work is required in educating projects and officers as to the purpose and scope of outcomes vis-à-vis outputs, but this culture change can be built on in future neighbourhood work.

Impact of Boundary Changes: the decision to reduce the number of Councillors and make changes in ward numbers and boundaries had an impact upon the link between LIF

projects and local members. These issues included projects being approved by Councillors other than the current ones and vice versa for Councillors including, in some cases, the project now being in a different ward than previously. This situation created a lack of continuity for both projects and Councillors with the need to build up new relationships and project knowledge.

Clarifying Innovation: throughout this and the interim report we developed the 5-stage model which enabled us to judge whether a project could be seen to be innovatory. What became clear from this, and from the participants of both evaluations, was that there was a misunderstanding amongst some projects and Councillors alike as to what exactly was meant by innovation. In certain wards it even appeared that the innovation concept was largely ignored in favour of piecemeal funding of smaller projects (in sync with the former Community Chest model).

In itself misunderstanding was perhaps not surprising as it is self-evident that if you are trying to do something new then there is no blueprint to enable this to be implemented. However it was clear that some stakeholders took innovation to be doing different activities rather than a sophisticated and involved process of doing things differently, resulting in radically different models of service delivery. It would thus be helpful for the future if more clarity could be provided and understood by all involved on what is meant by community-based innovation such as the components of the 5-stage model utilised here.

Learning from 'Failure': whilst there were very few projects from those analysed in depth which palpably did not deliver all or much of what was intended, those that did 'fail' should not necessarily be seen as a negative. With a new and innovative initiative it should be expected that some projects would not work fully. Indeed the analysis shows that it can be argued that fewer projects than may be expected have not worked and this was pleasing to see. However what was important was that the learning from these projects should not be lost and that only the good practice is shared. If all practice is shared this means that positive aspects can be replicated and adapted to local circumstances and the negative aspects are not tried again with the increased potential that they will 'fail.'

Recommendations

Ward Plans and Forums: to ensure local accountability is maintained all area based initiatives should be required to report to local ward forums, or similar structures that may evolve. There should also be absolute synergy with ward plans: projects should reflect area based needs and priorities, but project learning and outcomes should also be included within ward plans to help shape future priorities and potential delivery models.

Future Funding Model: if future funding regimes and programmes are developed then two distinct elements should be in place. This would comprise firstly a small grant fund type arrangement whereby community groups apply for support for micro but worthwhile activities as determined by local elected members. Secondly a further pot should be in place where larger amounts are available. This second element would be to support innovative work that develops new forms of local service delivery and is based

on achieving clear social change outcomes. The timescale for this second element should also reflect that meaningful change cannot always be achieved quickly.

The accountability and processes that accompany these regimes should be commensurate to the scale of the funding and also the level of risk attached to each scheme. There should be a commitment that such processes are as simple as possible so as not to be off-putting for community groups, often run by volunteers, to manoeuvre.

Consideration also should be given in future regimes as to the process for accessing the funding, especially the larger innovation element. A strictly equal allocation to wards may not be in keeping with the desire to achieve social change. The inclusion of a central allocation for which projects can apply to should be considered.

Sharing of Good Practice: there is now much local (and indeed national) expertise, experience and practice available to shape and support neighbourhood based work. Measures should be put in place to ensure that expertise is available to be drawn on and used in project development. These measures could cover a variety of forms from access to experienced officers, on-line portals of good practice, workshops, published case studies and having a pool of peer mentors available for other community groups.

The creation of a LIF network or LIF community movement could be considered so that the lessons learnt by these projects and individuals are maintained and developed. This network can be added to as future neighbourhood work is implemented. The NDSU clearly has already much expertise and local track record and this unit should be seen as the basis for developing future support.

Information Packs for New Councillors: a simple measure which would assist new Councillors when they take responsibility for area based initiatives would be to provide an information pack and/or briefing on these projects as they take office. This would assist in making contact between projects and Councillors and initiate the future relationship development process.

Ongoing Flexibility: articulated throughout the evaluation, the White Paper and Central Government work different communities want different things and are at different stages in development. Future local policy should continue to reflect this and should not rule any group out from participating in enhancing the life of their area. This should range from supporting groups who wish to undertake small, maybe one-off activities through to Parish Councils and the devolution of local services. The framework of relationships should be seen as a fundamental element in developing neighbourhood based work.

Toolkit for Proposal Evaluation: an appropriate model should be used in the future where a competitive regime is being used to evaluate proposals. This would ensure, or at least make it more likely, that proposals are recommended for approval that have the potential to be transformative and innovatory. The 5 element model used in this evaluation is one potential framework as is Locality's also referred to in the evaluation. These models should be used in such a way as to strengthen local accountability and democracy in future funding regimes, rather than reverting back to an arbitrary Elected Member decision-making system.