Asset-based development and community health

How can an asset-based approach to local development help to deliver health and social outcomes for users and surrounding neighbourhoods?

Introduction

Asset-based development is not new, but has emerged as a concept in GroundsWell as an alternative to needs-based frameworks that focus on deficits in communities and places. Concentrating on need (socio-economic, environmental and so on) risks creating dependency cultures and a reliance on outsiders to deliver change. For example, McKnight and Kretzmann[1] focus, instead, on the building blocks of local development, rather than on measures of deprivation and symptoms of health poverty. Orangefield Park was opened in 1935 with the bowling pavilion (above) at its heart. The Pavilion was the focus of this part of GroundsWell and in particular, how it could be used more effectively to deliver a range of health and social outcomes for users and surrounding neighbourhoods.

Summary

- The research highlights the potential of an **asset-based approach** to local development and inclusion.
- Moving from need and deprivation to the assets that all communities possess offers a creative way to connect Connswater Community Greenway, Orangefield Park and the Pavilion to **address poverty and improve health and wellbeing outcomes.**
- The Pavilion has potential to offer **wraparound services across the life course** for users and adjacent neighbourhoods.
- Users demonstrate its potential to strengthen formal physical activity and informal wellbeing, especially aimed at the most **marginal and isolated groups,** including older people, children and people with disabilities.
- There is a need to **develop the enabling environment**, including asset transfer legislation, funding and capacity building to strengthen the potential of community-led health and wellbeing interventions in Northern Ireland.

Working with EastSide Greenways (ESG), the research involved a survey of **334 users**; **five participatory workshops** with local people; and a **technical analysis** of the redesign and cost of the Pavilion as a community facility. The GroundsWell Innovation Fund was crucial in supporting this work and in particular, the preparation of a full business case that shows how the Pavilion could be repurposed as a community-managed facility to deliver programmes across the life-course. The analysis identified a range of related issues in the development of asset-based approaches to health and wellbeing led by and for local communities.

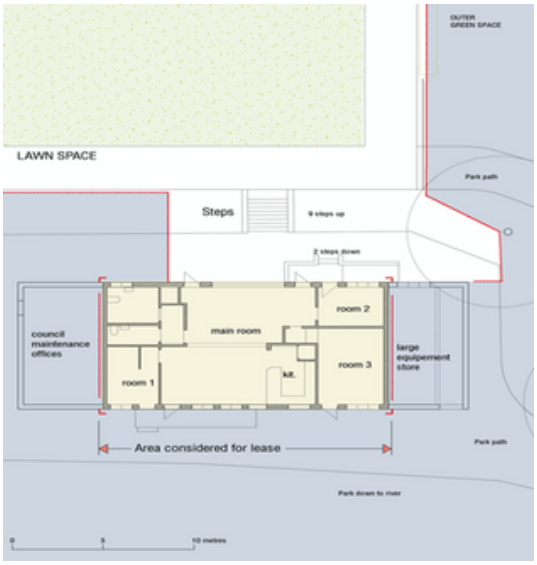
- **Promoting physical activity, wellbeing and addressing isolation.** The focus on an underused building that has value for local people; connecting the Greenway and the park within a community health approach; and enabling local people to define and deliver their own programmes raises a number of issues about community research and health planning. Formal use of the park is high for physical activity, especially on the outdoor gym (61% of users participate); football (71%) cycling (51%), the park run (76%) and skateboarding (92%). These groups want to develop the Pavilion as a hub with changing rooms, showers, sitting area, a meeting space, and coffee dock to strengthen the social as well as practical benefits to users. There is recognition that informal use of the facility also creates benefits for particular demographic groups, as a representative noted, *"it would be a lovely space to run arts and crafts classes. painting, knitting, seasonal crafts. A meeting place to get people out and mixing. Great way of dealing with anxiety and depression and getting people out of their house to mix"*. For example, 90% thought it could be used to engage older people and address loneliness and isolation; 69% thought facilities should be provided for under-5s; and 83% thought it could be a hub to strengthen mobility for people with disabilities.

- **The power of evidence**. The survey showed local people are most dissatisfied with the physical condition of the building (47%), its appearance (45%) and anti-social behaviour around the facility (44%). Only 13% are satisfied with the community's role in its management and 14% with the range of activities it offers. Five interactive workshops used the survey data to look at user concerns, see what options for redevelopment might be and discuss how different services could be accommodated on the site. A family fun session (below) allowed children to give their opinions on the building as well as ideas for its redevelopment.

- **Community wellbeing**. A persistent theme running through the analysis was the potential for community-delivered health and wellbeing interventions. The lack of a physical hub, especially to take advantage of the Greenway and its connection to the Park, was a barrier to improving health outcomes. For example, the participatory workshop showed that it could significantly ramp up formal exercise by providing a secure base for park runners, cyclists and the outdoor gym.

- **The impact of the Innovation Fund**. The GroundsWell Innovation Fund leveraged additional finance from Development Trusts NI and the Queen's Community Engagement Fund to appoint architects, quantity surveyors and financial analysts to undertake the business case for the development and potential transfer to ESG. The proposed approach is shown below, which aims to take the existing structure and turn it into a more accessible and functional space open to a diversity of users. People wanted to see a place that offered a cradle-to-grave service and prioritised play activities for children, a hang-out for young people and a warm space for the older community.

Before



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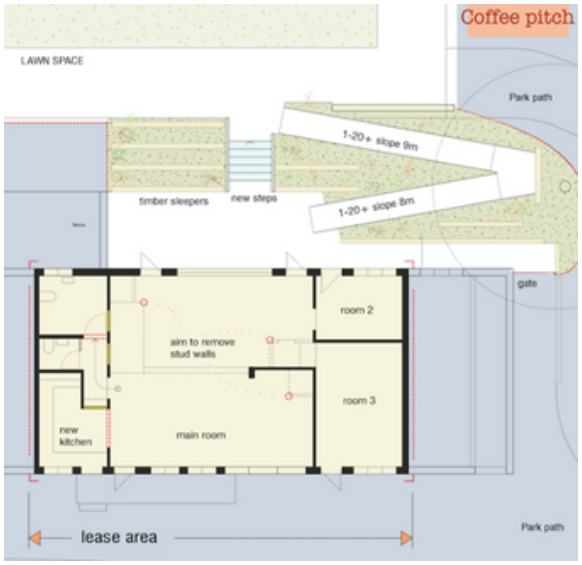

- **The importance of legislation**. The process has been slow and cumbersome with uncertainty about the Council's ability to transfer assets and on what terms (ownership, long lease, management agreement and so on). In England and Wales, the Localism Act (2011)[2] brought in a combination of rights including a Community Right to Challenge, Community Right to Bid and Community Right to Build that gave local authorities and community groups an interest in taking over a facility that could be operated more effectively. The Community Right to Buy requires local authorities to maintain a list of assets of community value, which groups and individuals will be able to buy for a community use. A critical component of the regulatory context is General Disposal Consent that gives public authorities permission to transfer public assets at less than market (nil or nominal) value. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015[3] significantly developed asset transfer by bringing in additional rights for local groups; encouraging partnership working between service providers and communities; and enabling communities to make requests, not just to local authorities, for any land or buildings they feel they could use in a better way to deliver services.

- **Understanding risks**. EastSide Partnership are a competent social enterprise with experience managing assets, including 10 properties delivering primary care, community health, counselling, and family support. But, the financial, legal and organisational risks in such transfer are significant, especially for smaller community organisations. Understanding risks, developing the competence of anchor organisations (See Policy Brief on Community Anchor Organisations and Community Health) and supporting transfer with the right mix of capital and revenue funding are critical to success.

Implications for policy and practice

Community asset transfer is not always appropriate, but the Orangefield Park case demonstrates that community control of the Pavilion has the potential to scale and integrate a health and wellbeing programme that connects the building, park and local people in more effective and efficient ways.

- **Building the regulatory environment**. In particular, the case underscores the need for legislative reform in Northern Ireland, including provision for a Right to Buy; Right to Bid and Challenge; and General Disposal Consent provisions. Government Accounting guidance in the public sector, linked to legislative change, would also be needed to enable and encourage authorities to dispose of assets at less than best value. Legislation is not an answer on its own, but without it, there is little possibility of delivering a progressive asset-based strategy for health inclusion in Northern Ireland.

- **Integrated capital and revenue funding**. The GroundsWell Innovation Fund was critical in preparing the business case as a clear ask from the community of local government. A package of funding is needed to support technical assistance; provide for capital refurbishments; and allow revenue costs for running such facilities. The return on investment, especially for preventative health and wellbeing, need to be priced into any assessment of resource planning.

- **Strengthening links with the statutory sector**. Building a strong link with officials and politicians in the city council is critical for success. A range of statutory bodies in housing, transport, industrial development and the health estate hold surplus assets that could be used and managed more effectively by social enterprises. A strategic approach is needed and as the Policy Brief on Community Anchor Organisations and UGBS makes clear, competent delivery bodies and partnership agreements are needed to sustain such projects.

- **Capacity building for local groups**. A range of skills in financial and business planning; understanding risk; utilities management; programme and service delivery and investment-readiness emphasises the need for an integrated approach to technical support and training. This is as important for the public sector holding the asset as it is for the proposed community user. Development Trusts Northern Ireland was crucial in supporting ESG in the development of the business case and has a range of resources, toolkits and face-to-face support that need to be scaled across community organisations working on asset-based health projects.

References

1.McKnight, J. and Kretzmann, J. P. (1990). Mapping community capacity. Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University

2.UK Parliament (2011) Localism Act 2011. UK Public General Acts. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents

3.Scottish Parliament (2015) Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/

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Video:
What Orangefield Park means to local residents

Photos © Stephanie Wynne for GroundsWell