



A community canvas - building the case for community infrastructure 2022-2026

Introduction

It is a well-established principle that investing in assets at local level makes for more cohesive, healthy and sustainable communities, helping people to thrive - economically, culturally and socially.

Research from [national agencies such as Locality](#) has shown that, through community ownership, these places thrive - harnessing the energy, ideas and expertise within our neighbourhoods to create the inclusive spaces which are the lifeblood of our communities. Chancellor Rishi Sunak's announcement of the Community Ownership Fund as part the government's Spring Budget 2021 provides further endorsement of investing in community-led asset management.

As one such asset guardian for almost 20 years, Trinity Community Arts have developed a nuanced perspective of the benefits and challenges on community asset management. With the impact of COVID19 still playing out across communities, we want to contribute our experience to support collective recovery efforts.

This report presents findings from our May 2021 concessionary lettings survey to provide essential baseline data, with recommendations to support Bristol City Council's wider efforts to develop an infrastructure and investment strategy that will improve the sustainability and viability of Bristol's community assets.



Local Context

Bristol City Council's (BCC) property portfolio consists of over 1,500 properties, 1/4 of which are community, cultural and/or heritage assets including schools and nurseries, youth, sport and recreation spaces, libraries, museums, theatres and other civic spaces. BCC grant 117 lettings at 'less than market value' to voluntary, community and social enterprises.

This invaluable in-kind support provided annually to Bristol's third sector means local organisations can deliver facilities where they are most needed and focus financial resources on service provision and staffing, creating vital paid jobs and contributing to neighbourhoods as local economic multipliers. This scheme has proved even more important during the pandemic, with many community spaces helping to underpin localised responses such as food distribution.

BCC carefully balances the granting of concessionary tenancies with the potential capital receipt they could generate, by considering the social, economic and environmental benefits they produce for Bristol.

Bristol's **One City Plan** is underpinned by references to such spaces, including:

- establishing accessible local learning hubs where learners of any age can be provided with the resources, skills and encouragement they need to engage in learning, boost their skills, and apply for employment opportunities
- developing place focused initiatives through community hubs, concentrating engagement in deprived areas with existing poor transition routes.



Communities Left behind

In a report [published in 2019](#) the Local Trust identified that:

'A lack of places to meet (whether community centres, pubs or village halls); the absence of an engaged and active community; and poor connectivity to the wider economy - physical and digital - make a significant difference to social and economic outcomes for deprived communities. Deprived areas which lack these assets have higher rates of unemployment, ill health and child poverty than other deprived areas. And they appear to be falling further behind them. This adds up to these areas being some of the most 'left behind'.

"Resourced community assets allow for communities to invest time in making things happen in their community (not just managing failing assets)"

"The Council has realised over the pandemic how valuable the community are in managing their response to covid through food and medicine deliveries, tackling social isolation and in the long tail of covid managing poor mental health - these CATs are the equivalent of hospitals for the community but without the resource, training and development, leadership or support; staff are usually poorly paid but passionate."

Concessionary Lettings Survey Findings 2021

In May 2021, Trinity invited tenants of the City's concessionary lettings portfolio to contribute to an online survey. The dataset was limited and we were also very much aware of resource limitations of survey participants. We avoided direct questions such as 'how much do you need to repair/renovate your building?' - as figures without input from external contractors or consultants would only serve to present a misleading case - and instead focused on gathering information to establish a baseline for collective impact and need.

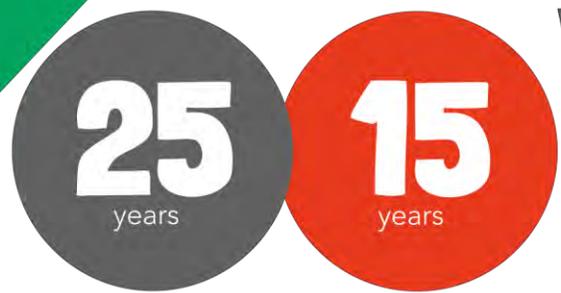
Survey responses

Ideally with such a small sample size we would speak to all involved but this was not possible:

- 117 lettings are listed on the [public register of concessionary tenancies \(Dec 2019\)](#)
- We were able to obtain contact information for 63 lettings (54%), however it could not be determined how many details were up-to-date
- 24% were scout huts and/or had no online presence or publicly available contact info
- Of the 63 lettings invited to participate in the survey, we had a 1 in 4 response rate (26%)

Lettings Survey 2021

"Our site is the canvas in which childcare, adult social care and other services are painted"



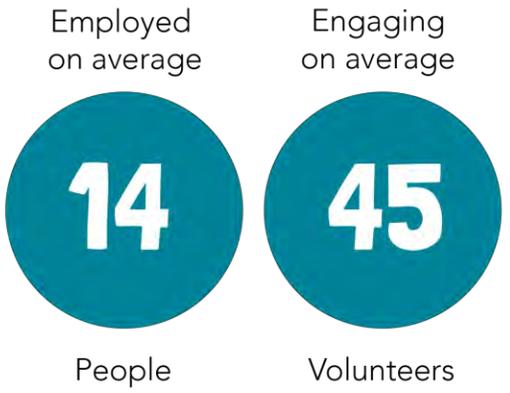
Lease required for most national funders Average length of remaining lease from respondents

INVESTMENT NEEDED (In order of priority)

- 1 Renovation & Building Development
- 2 Structural Repairs & General Maintenance
- 3 Green measures
- 4 Accessibility improvements
- 5 Digital infrastructure
- 6 Fixings and fittings

"Imagine what we could do with a safe and secure building and more staff members in place"

ORGANISATIONS



GENERATING (on average)



Of respondents told us they had active community buildings



Of organisations told us they are user led



of buildings are reported by respondents to be in an average or poor state of repair



The average spent on capital repairs/improvements during leaseholds



of this coming from funds outside of the city

"We need an approach to regeneration that is not about maximising houses but about houses plus all the things we need to make a community"

TRINITY:

A community canvas

Survey respondents gave multiple examples of their buildings making a positive impact, through:

- **civic responsibility** - "developing community pride", "changing perceptions", "bringing people together to create a sense of community", "serving as a base for neighbourhood meetings", "hosts community forums and residents planning groups supporting residents to influence where they live, hold BCC and Councillors to account and connect with neighbours"
- **economic regeneration** - "growing investment, making the area a destination and putting us on the map", "affordable office space to micro-organisations, freelancers and support organisations"
- **social interconnectivity** - "support for dealing with mental health issues", "workshops and social activities for people who are isolated", "giving local residents the chance to come together, take a class, meet their neighbours and make new friends", "a place of recreation for the local community", "provide mutual support and well-being"
- **intergenerational activity** - "activities for all ages and also many children's and family parties throughout the year", "It has brought local people together to socialise and do activities for all ages"
- **employability pathways** - "get people into employment, further education and training", "training for people with multi barriers", "increasing confidence in returning to work", "supporting and celebrating local talent"
- **asset based community development (ABCD)** - "host community events and functions", "home to a whole range of groups and activities", "a space for community led activities to take place cheaply or freely"

A response to the pandemic

Bristol's **Economic Recovery Strategy** identifies the need to equip communities with the shared resources that could address many of their COVID19 recovery needs. These buildings are already being utilised as part of localised responses, including:

- running COVID-Secure face-to-face support groups for new parents, which have continued throughout lockdowns. We are currently serving around 50 families a week across several sessions. During lockdown we have also been working in partnership with Catch 22, who work with young offenders. They have been doing volunteer work around the centre, tidying our garden, painting etc, getting us ready for reopening.
- used as a Food Hub to address food poverty...it had a massive impact as individuals who were suffering in silence before had a dignified service delivered to them.
- supported many local organisations access funding to support their own work and are using our current stability to help develop the wider needs of the area (building nursery to reduce waiting lists, supporting 200+ homeless friends weekly social (Pre-pandemic).



Challenges

1. Condition

The challenge in realising our One City vision via our community assets, as with many cities, lies in, "the quality and quantity of public space is insufficient to meet our needs for recreation and tranquillity" (Land for the Many, George Monbiot, 2019).

Our shared buildings are outdated, inaccessible and dilapidated. Some large, complex assets, sometimes Listed, sometimes with restrictive covenants, all offering little lettable or sale value. 64% of survey respondents cited the need to "enhance the facilities" to increase services and make more viable.

Given their condition, the estimated value of £1.5m rental subsidy would be largely unachievable across the portfolio were BCC to choose to rent these assets at their estimated 'market value'. This also raises questions as to how achievable the City's One City objectives are without a more strategic approach to levelling up our shared spaces.

"The current building is not fit for purpose".

"Redevelopment gives the opportunity for proper community its space the community deserves as well as addressing many resident needs identified in our community plan including nursery, jobs, places to socialise."

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"We've had a lot of indirect support from BCC in order to get things happening and to uncover wider funding support...it has taken having the right people in the jobs in order to make better use of this."



“We need an approach to regeneration...that is not about maximising houses but about houses plus all the things we need to make a community.”

2.Approach

41% of respondents commented on the relationship with the Local Authority being an obstacle to realising capital aspirations. Specifically:

- leasehold length** - “would very much like the security of a 30+ year lease”, “rolling 1 year lease for the last decade meaning there has been no strategic investment in the place just minimal repairs”
- communication** - “the relationship has been a barrier”, “the Council are not listening to us”, “no support from the Council to help us to recover”
- training and development** - “There was nothing built into the CAT for transitional skills building for taking on these liabilities.”

As we know, Bristol faces rapid regeneration from external market forces who have the ability to drastically change a locality, with very little power held by local communities. The subject of land is complex and contentious. With the Government's *Build Build Build* agenda in full swing, growing communities will be serviced by a shrinking public asset pool, leaving us with less space to grow social and economic prosperity from the bottom up.

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We are all too aware of chronic under-investment in public services, making the sale of publicly owned assets a difficult temptation to avoid. Due to impacts of austerity, Bristol have already had to sell off some assets from within its portfolio, est £30m - see [Sold From Under You](#) for more info.

It is important to think carefully about the remaining assets we hold, prior to any further asset disposal, and take identify the levels of investment that is needed to maintain the portfolio value, giving special attention to those that provide a lifeblood for areas of high economic deprivation.

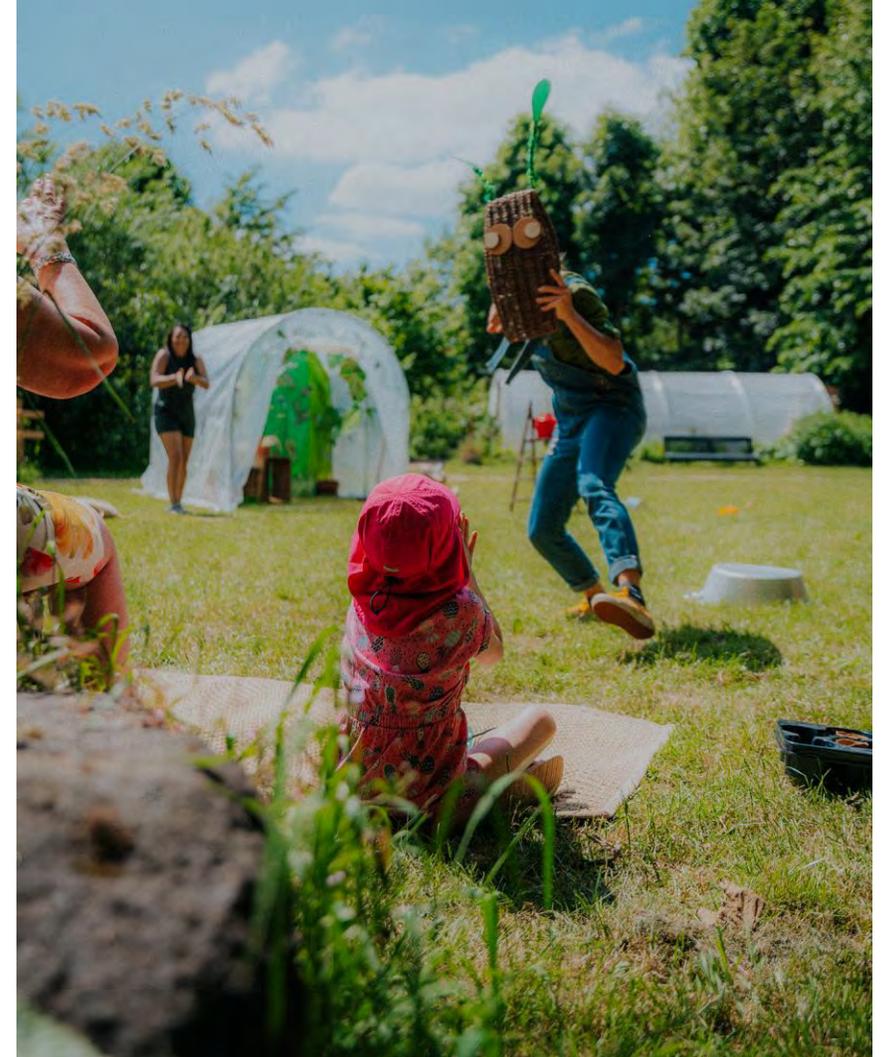


3.Expectations

While they offer a valuable outlet for services to be developed and managed by local people, bringing greater independence and financial sustainability to local communities, these buildings can be problematic with limited technical and physical capabilities, limiting the tenant's ability to make the asset viable as a social enterprise. This creates additional dependants of these tenants on the local authority in the form of grants in order to fund and sustain the teams managing them.

Energies of boards and management become largely consumed with management of a problematic asset, limiting their ability to focus resources on the development and delivery of programmes and services. The average salaries for a Charity Fundraiser and a Property Manager in UK is approx £25k. We expect too much from untrained volunteers to manage complex problems of assets and fundraising; "We had our core funding cut. not much core funding out there. any council funds we get is from applying to bids which takes money and time."

"As a volunteer led organisation directors close to burn out with no obvious answer in sight."



This challenge has increased due to the pandemic and restrictions on venue hire activity and loss of regular custom; “lettings of offices has dropped considerably since COVID19. It will take time to build the organisation up to pre COVID19 level.”

Whilst trading income has been referred to by most buildings in our survey and the ambition to develop sustainable business models, we must avoid placing too much emphasis and unrealistic expectation on VCS groups to generate trading revenue from buildings that are overall in a poor condition and volunteer-led. We must think carefully about the development pathways of groups themselves to enable organisations to sustain the professional capacity needed to see through long-term renovation and social enterprise efforts.

“Investment in the building in form of unrestricted grants so we can use it for the things we need on the building not related to delivering a project to make it more welcoming, efficient and accessible.”

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“Our ability to deliver these services despite little or no resources is testimony to our resilience. Imagine what we could do with a safe and secure building and more staff members in place.”



“We need sustainable community organisations, for this we need support for social enterprise space as well as space for community activity - if we are to break the toxic charity cycle to be self-managing and determining and not just relying on handouts.”

4.Parity

47% of respondents cited ‘core funding’ as needed to, “support to find sustainable model for the business” and “multiyear funding for core costs” needed to grow services and engage communities, develop and train volunteers, support building management and for fundraising and business development.

Investment in assets and the organisation as key to success is a case supported by BCC as evidenced by Bristol Music Trust’s (who manage the Bristol Beacon) most recent published accounts (March 2020), which state:

- they have a 25-year peppercorn leasehold agreement and a commitment of “a new 32-year lease from completion of the re-development”. The concession in terms of value per annum is not listed in BCC’s concessionary lettings data.
- Excluding capital, “the charity received unrestricted funding of £1,026,000 from Bristol City Council”, 24% of a total £4.4m revenue income for the period.
- “KPMG calculated that the economic impact generated by the Concert Hall in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA) was £17.4m.” This financial assessment by KPMG helped make the case for further capital investment from the local authority and cost circa £50k.

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We have become good at understanding privilege when it comes to communities and individual progression stories, but don't see how this translates to comparative journeys of organisations. Levels of investment alongside the ability to build a case for continued investment is very much at the heart of the City's disparities across neighbourhoods and the spaces that serve them.

Within a voluntary and community centre setting, emphasis is placed on a meritocracy model of operating; with individual success stories of buildings such as St Werburghs and Trinity Centre cited as examples to shame other groups in their asset failings. These success stories, whilst highlighting what could be possible, are still very much the exception. They rely on the efforts of key individuals over decades to make successes in complex circumstances and happen in spite of and not because of the challenges 1-3 listed above.

Though this is a difficult case to make in the current austerity climate, without parity of investment, viability will remain out of reach for the majority and we will only further disparity between localities across the City.



Recommendations

1. Introduce a new 'Community Asset Class' for identified assets of community value

Community assets are classed under a general categorisation of 'Land and Buildings' and, as such, are offered no protection when it comes to considering the sale of assets to counter ongoing austerity measures. asset decision making.

A set of localised Class Categorisation Criteria, will give greater order to the asset portfolio and support decision making consistency and efficiency about assets according to their defined class. Specifically, introduction of a new 'Community Asset Class' for Local Authority owned community assets will help to prevent unilateral disposal/demolition of identified assets of community value and/or to safeguard their future as community assets through protective covenants if transferred to private ownership.

Class Categorisation would clarify the decision-making process for changing asset status, in particular in relation to change of use/disposal of any assets marked under the 'Community Asset Class', through a Value Assessment Framework for measuring more clearly the social, economic and environmental value of such assets.

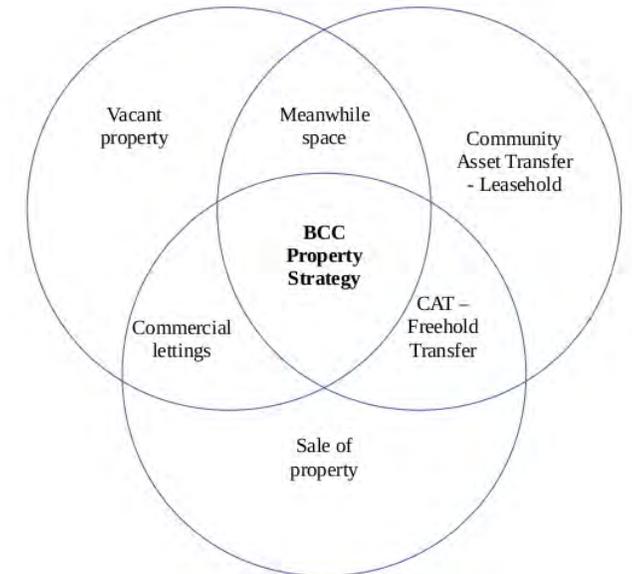
2. A One City Property Strategy connecting strategic and investment approaches

Investment in an independent scoping exercise to shape a One City Property Strategy that can deliver more effectively against the One City Plan and Economic Recovery Strategy.

A comprehensive, externally supported feasibility study and value impact assessment about community infrastructure needs will assist strategic decision making across the asset portfolio, to maximise local investment and lever available regional and national investment. We need to understand capital needs, alongside potential for long-term viability to prioritise investment. This means facilitating a mature conversation between all stakeholders and exploring all options available to us to rationalise and strengthen the concessionary lettings portfolio, including:

- consolidating groups and activities hosted within community assets
- supporting formal partnerships and mergers
- transfer of multiple assets to a specifically constituted community buildings trust
- freehold asset transfer of specific assets to access to alternative investment such as loan financing
- disposal/sale of non-viable assets to grow a designated match-fund pot for asset improvement
- increase number of concessionary letting through CAT transfer of assets across the wider asset portfolio such as libraries
- asset acquisition of identified community buildings not publicly owned

This strategy would also involve a review of the CAT Policy to enable it to meet current strategic objectives e.g. through longer leasehold terms to attract capital investment.





3. Strengthen localism through national planning policy

Bristol could very much position itself as a city leading with localism to shape and influence national changes to planning policy, by incorporating recommendations set out in *Land for the Many*, by George Monbiot (2019) into decision making about community assets including:

1. Introduce local planning policy that will see developments allocate a portion of strategic sites for community-led development
2. Give the new Development Corporations (Chapter 5) a remit to support community-led development and ownership, including using compulsory purchase powers where appropriate
3. Introduce a new Community Right to Buy, that could influence national approach to developing UK-wide Compulsory Sale Orders (Chapter 6)

Conclusion

With the reset button pushed, we are presented with a unique once in a millennia opportunity to achieve meaningful change together.

As guardians and caretakers of those most cherished community assets, the decisions we make now will affect communities for generations to come.

It's time to be ambitious and brave and radically shift Bristol's approach to community asset management. The assets within communities - the spaces and the people - are key to our collective COVID19 recovery.

If we value communities by taking them seriously and resourcing them to effectively manage the assets, we already own, the payback will be tenfold in terms of jobs, community cohesion and economic and social recovery.

Together we can move from deciding a community's fate on a case-by-case basis and adopt a proactive regenerative approach that benefits everyone.

Taking action now to address imbalance, gaps and disparities. Making the most of investment opportunities through a strategic, joined up, cross sector approach. Upskilling communities to set up new models for asset management. Working with national partners to support the formalisation of groups to make the most of the assets we own.



“Financial support for major repairs...such as roofing and rainwater drainage, would enable us to put a greater part of our income towards support to the community.”

TRINITY:

Thanks to Malcom X Centre, Docklands Youth Centre, Fillwood Community Centre, Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust, Art Space Life Space and Trinity for sharing photographs for this report

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