

BIRCHFIELD FIRST STEPS

Final Action Plan

Birchfield Neighbourhood Forum
February 2016

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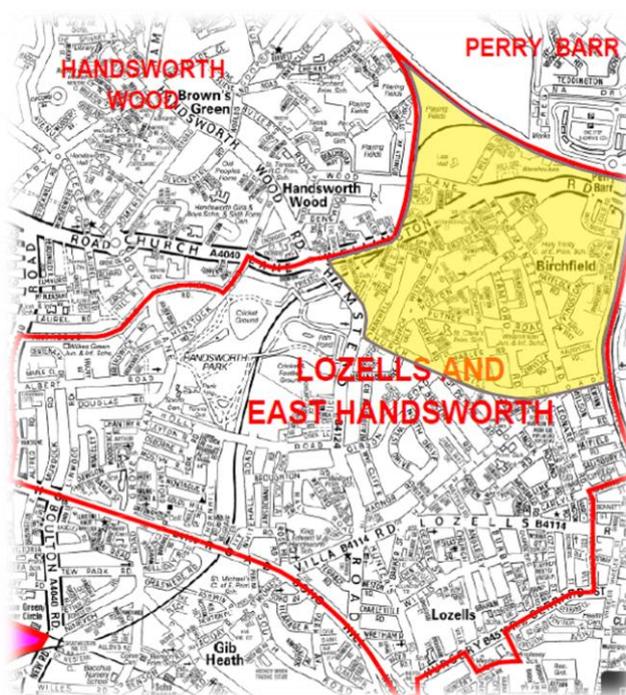
Introduction

Birchfield Neighbourhood Forum is a forum for bringing residents together to discuss local issues, share information and meet with elected representatives and officers responsible for delivering local public services. The Forum is run by a voluntary committee made up of local residents who are well networked into the community and have extensive links with public, private and voluntary sector organisations. We have members who have lived in Birchfield for most of their lives and can recall the opening of the flyover at Trinity Road in 1963 and we have members who are simply passing through – a transient community coming from one place and stopping off at Birchfield on its way to another.

As a Forum we have been very active in the neighbourhood from campaigning on issues such as the traffic chaos caused by the flooded underpass at Perry Barr, to representation on the local Community First Neighbourhood Match Panel and most significantly our role as the steering group for the development phase of Birchfield Big Local.

Birchfield sits within the Birmingham Lozells and East Handsworth ward in the Perry Barr district. It is a source of constant disquiet that our ward name includes two of the neighbourhoods but excludes ours. For years we have been expressing our concerns about our lack of visibility on the political map and how it serves to undermine the pride we have in our neighbourhood. Our cause has not been helped by the disappearance of our community facilities. We have lost our local library and the Citizens Advice Bureau and Birmingham City University's relocation to the city centre has reduced the pedestrian footfall through the neighbourhood. Even one of our best known landmarks and organisations, Birchfield Harriers, has relocated outside of Birchfield.

Figure 1 Birchfield Neighbourhood



Birchfield is a predominately residential area, with mixed tenure- housing association, private owned and private rented. Most of the houses are from the Victorian era, but we have a few modern new build and some pre-WW2 semi-detached houses. A new estate on Birchfield Road is under construction by Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust. Once complete it will have provision for 140 houses and apartments, replacing the tower blocks that once decorated Birchfield's skyline.

We have a young growing community with a third of our residents are under the age of 18 with close to 10% being less than four years old. Comparable figures for Birmingham and England are 25.5%, 7.6% and 21.4%, 6.3%. We have a very diverse population with just 12.2% defining themselves as

'White' (all categories) and 77 other languages recorded in the 2011 Census. One in five of our residents have been resident in the UK for less than ten years, twice the rate for Birmingham as a whole. Ward level unemployment is the highest in the city (8.3% at January 2016) with 29% of its residents having no qualifications in comparison to 15% across England.

As a neighbourhood with three Super Output Areas in the top decile on the Index of Multiple Deprivation we face many challenges. The lack of community facilities, our ethnic diversity and high levels of unemployment have created artificial barriers, reinforcing isolation and fragmentation. It has been one of our residents' greatest aspirations to have a cross-cultural community hub where people can meet, socialise and interact and where the community can access information and services. Our objective for this First Steps Community Plan is to provide a rationale for a community hub, lay a foundation for partnership working with Birchfield Big Local to develop it and present an action plan for how we will continue to build the case for its development.



December 2015-The new view from Birchfield Road, where once the tower blocks stood

Method

Two years' ago Birchfield Big Local undertook extensive community consultations to find out what the local issues were and what residents wanted from the programme. An extract from the Birchfield Big Local Plan describing the information gathering activities is appended. Our aim was to build on this by validating that those issues are still current and gathering ideas for how a community hub could contribute to addressing them.

We have sought to be as inclusive as possible and to take every opportunity to hear residents' views whether through structured or unstructured mechanisms. Forum members have been particularly active in engaging residents at meetings, events, in shops and on the streets. Whilst these unstructured channels have not yielded more information than was obtained through the structured mechanisms, they have been extremely valuable in helping us to understand the appetite for some form of intervention(s) that would address the general issues raised.

Consultation activities and dates are outlined overleaf.

Activity	Date	Format(s)	Number participating
BNF meeting	April 2015	Open meeting	30
BNF meeting	July 2015	Open meeting	25
Birchfield Big Local English Conversation Class	February 2016	Unstructured discussions	20
Secret Garden Project			50
Perry Barr District Convention	December 2015	Public consultation event	
BNF Community Event	February 2016	Public consultation and awareness raising event at Westminster School.	

These events have engaged local residents as well as representatives from local organisations, BRAG, ATHAC, Handsworth Helping Hands, police and Birmingham City Councillors.

Our consultation process is ongoing. Our next event will be held in an open space or school building where we can attract residents from different faiths and cultures. We have learnt from previous consultations that Christian religious institutions are not sufficiently neutral to attract residents from Islamic and other faiths. Holding the consultation at the local primary school should overcome this barrier to participation.

What do our residents want from the area?

The main issues confirmed during the consultations are summarised below.

A cleaner environment

Litter, fly-tipping and dog fouling have been longstanding issues with domestic rubbish overflowing onto pavements and empty land becoming eyesores as rubbish and household items are dumped on it. BNF, Handsworth Helping Hands and Birchfield Big Local have all organised litter picks as a means

Just back from Birchfield Big Local English Conversation Class. Next week there will be no class. It is half term and mothers say they need to be at home as we have no place at Grosvenor Road Studios for their children to play or take in activities.

of raising awareness and engaging residents in addressing this problem.

Space to call their own

There is a real lack of facilities in the neighbourhood. The local library has closed and so has the Citizens Advice Bureau. We have no common ground at the moment where people of different cultures and traditions can meet and engage in cohesive activities together and form connections.

There are few after school amenities to engage children and

teenagers after school and during holidays. Play facilities are inadequate as are places to play football and other outdoor games. Residents have stated a need for more play spaces on their doorsteps and places where parents could get together while their children played. They also suggested that activities for children should take into consideration madrassa times (Islamic after school club).

The lack of facilities impacts on accessibility to local services. For example there are residents who want to join the Stepping Forward to get support with preparing CVs, confidence building and job search. However, due to limited space, and lack of volunteers, only 2-3 people can be helped at a time.

The Secret Garden was formerly a derelict plot of land. With Big Local support, it has been transformed into a grassed play area with a play space and a basketball court. This is a good illustration of how a single initiative can tackle multiple issues – environmental and lack of facilities.

Better access to information

With the library and CAB moving out the neighbourhood, there are few places left from which information can be accessed. Whether residents' issues relate to hidden homelessness, housing repairs, problems with landlords, welfare benefits, fuel poverty, debt, noisy neighbours, mental health issues or employment local people need good access to information. Residents do not just want to go somewhere to pick up a leaflet. They want to be able to talk to someone and get practical advice. If specialist support is needed, they want to be signposted in the right direction. Currently information that does exist is fragmented across the neighbourhood. Bringing it together under one roof would be extremely beneficial to residents.

To have pride in the neighbourhood

There are a lot of people representing different faiths and backgrounds who care passionately about the neighbourhood. They like its multicultural nature and its family feeling. It has been described as 'a gateway to Birmingham' due to the popularity of the Birchfield Road as a route into the city centre. Nevertheless, these feel-good factors are undermined by -

- Prostitution
- Drug dealing
- People drinking in public spaces
- Lack of a sense of identity – the area is not seen as an area in its own right
- Low levels of volunteering and social action
- Perceptions that nobody (external to Birchfield) cares about the neighbourhood
- A transient community that does not consider Birchfield its home

“Birchfield kind of grew on me. It was convenient for work, convenient for church and I live in the area so I just got used to the people.”

A more cohesive and integrated community

A cohesive Birchfield community:

- **Birchfield was a diverse community, but there were different views as to how well those communities worked together.**
- The issues of a divided community that have persisted for nearly 3 generations
- The noticeable rise of the new communities in the area
- Tenants that they don't associate themselves with the wider community and don't look past the front door.
- **A transient community** [where] your neighbours can change up to every 3 months*
- The net effect being that these residents were temporary and therefore did not participate or invest in the community in any way.
- The area was also labelled by those that didn't know or live in the area and the media

The community is diverse but some individual communities rarely connect – living parallel lives. There is a sense of community fragmentation not just between different faiths and ethnicities but also between older and younger generations.

Although Census figures show us as having below average levels of caring, we still have many isolated vulnerable people/groups within the area and inequalities between and within communities e.g. in access to resources and opportunities to set up businesses and acquire property.

What they think needs to be done to help the neighbourhood

A residents' vision for Birchfield was developed in 2013 at the Birchfield Big Local Plan Conference. The First Steps Community Plan sits within that vision of -

A neighbourhood where the diverse community feels empowered, engaged and enabled to address issues such as health, inequality, unemployment and environment, so creating a happy, safe, clean, prosperous and regenerated area in which to live and work.

A place where every citizen has a collective sense of ownership, belonging, pride, respect, creativity and an equal voice. A place where individual talent and skills are nurtured and people want to come and stay.

In this way we will provide a lasting legacy to all people by giving them a new direction that helps break the cycle of poverty through creating a well-served and connected community.

Actions that residents believe would help the neighbourhood are to –

1. Identify a site for the community hub;
2. speed up work towards developing a community hub;
3. support the community to develop locally managed projects which would respond to needs identified and be delivered through the community hub;
4. strengthen relationships across faiths and cultures;

5. strengthen the relationship between Birchfield Big Local and the Forum;
6. empower the Forum to play an active role in developing a facility where residents can socialise and build networks.

Implementation

Figure 2 shows our concept for a community hub. It would be located at an accessible site, providing full disability access. It would be managed by a local committee and deliver a range of valuable community services. In addition to this, it would provide facilities for use by the local community whether through casual attendance (e.g. a community café) or through a more formal arrangement (e.g. letting space to community and voluntary organisations).

Ultimately it will be down to Birchfield Big Local to develop the community hub. Our role as a neighbourhood forum is to help provide an evidence base of need and to support Big Local in making this a reality. The implementation is designed with these goals in mind.

Figure 2 Community Hub



Action plan

Priority	Actions	Led by ...	Timescale
Consultation into ideas for neighbourhood facilities and services	Deliver a family fun day as a consultation event with questionnaires, healthy food, music and video.	BNF	Spring 2016
Finalise the choice of site(s) for the community hub	Collaboration with Gavin Orton Architects in reviewing sites for a community hub.	Birchfield Big Local	Spring 2016
Formalise partnership working with Birchfield Big Local	Present proposals for partnership working with BBL to project manage activities	BNF	Spring 2016

Priority	Actions	Led by ...	Timescale
	towards developing the hub		
Build the Forum's capacity to support development of the community hub	Design a bespoke capacity building programme for Forum members and seek funding through Birchfield Big Local	BNF	Spring 2016
Strengthen relationships across faiths and cultures	Engagement with Mosques, African Church, Sikh Temple and schools as future stakeholders supporting and developing hub.	BNF	Immediately and ongoing
Improve use of residents' skills	Encourage residents to complete the BBL volunteering audit. Increase the number of people involved in BNF.	BNF	Spring
Support residents to develop project ideas to address local needs and issues	Invite residents to put forward ideas for new projects. Approach BBL for project development support for residents.	BNF	Summer onwards

Local volunteers audit

Birchfield Big local is currently undertaking an audit of volunteering skills and capacities across the neighbourhood. The First Steps Community Plan will benefit from this but even before it is completed, in addition to the twelve active volunteers in the Forum at least eight people have offered their support through access to the following skills –

- Photography
- Sewing
- Teaching
- Video
- Journalism
- Social media
- Music

Our Network

Our consultation with the community so far has identified resources that are in place to help the Forum fulfil the vision -

- Access to Arts, Heritage and Culture (ATHAC)
- African Salvation Theatre
- Aston Vision
- Birchfield Big Local
- Birchfield Bugle
- Birchfield Residents Action Group
- Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust
- Citizens UK Birmingham, community organisers linked to the school
- Grosvenor Road Studios
- Handsworth Helping Hands, an environmental improvement organisation
- Midland Heart Housing Association
- Mosques – Hutton Road, Putney/Stamford and Church Vale
- Seventh Day Adventist Church
- Sikh Temple, Churchill Road
- St Clare's School
- St Mary's School
- St Mary's Vicar
- St Teresa's Church
- Stepping Forward Job Club
- United Reformed Church
- Westminster Primary School

Maintenance and key contacts



BIRCHFIELD NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM
FAMILY FUN DAY

SAT 20th FEBRUARY 2016 (10am - 4pm)
WESTMINSTER PRIMARY SCHOOL
WESTMINSTER ROAD, BIRCHFIELD, B20 3PN

BUILDING A BETTER BIRCHFIELD

BRING YOUR IDEAS FOR A COMMUNITY MEETING PLACE,
ACTIVITIES FOR ALL, YOUTH, ELDERLY, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

~ MEET BIRCHFIELD FORUM MEMBERS ~
CHAT ABOUT WHATS GOING ON IN BIRCHFIELD
SEE PRESENTATIONS FROM LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

* CHILDRENS BOUNCY CASTLE *
* ARTS AND CRAFTS *
* ASIAN AND CARIBEAN FOOD *

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT JIMOH ON 07799 695 797

Engaging our community

Support from the community is critical to Plan. The hub will be of no value if residents do not use it and residents will not use it if it fails to provide the facilities and services they need or is not seen to be locally-owned.

We still have an outstanding consultation activity scheduled in support of this Plan but our community engagement activities will not stop once it has been delivered. We have more work to do to ensure that the needs of all our diverse communities are considered and that they can engage with the Forum and the community hub in a manner that best suits them.

The Forum's annual general meetings are open to all residents,

affording further opportunities for their engagement and input into shaping the next phase of the action plan.

Monitoring

Progress in implementing the action plan will be monitored at the Forum's monthly meetings. We will review what we have done and how it is moving us closer to our establishing a community hub. Where necessary we will make revisions and additions to the action plan in order to maintain its validity and to provide meaningful opportunities for involving other residents and stakeholders.

Publicity

The Community Plan will be publicised through a Birchfield Bugle special edition on the Community Plan scheduled for Easter delivery. It will also be publicised through a number of channels and media including –

- the [Birchfield Residents Activity BloG](#);
- BNF Facebook and Twitter accounts;
- a special edition newsletter;
- video and audio recordings of residents feeding back during the consultations;
- friendly websites e.g. <http://birchfieldbiglocal.org/>.

Next Steps

Once the outstanding consultation activity has been delivered and its findings analysed, our next step will be to present the Plan to the Birchfield Big Local Partnership. This will be a significant milestone as it will underpin our proposals for partnership working with BBL in taking forward a strategy to develop the hub.

In parallel with this we have to pay more attention to our own development. Accordingly, one of our next steps will be to review our own skills and develop a funding proposal to allow us to commission appropriate capacity building support.

Appendices

Birchfield Big Local Plan describing the information gathering activities

In-depth interviews

A series of in-depth interviews were held with people who either live or work in Birchfield and know the area well. This included representatives from various faith organisations, members of Birchfield Neighbourhood Forum and Birchfield Residents Action Group, representatives from local schools and Children's Centre, and a representative from Midland Heart who are the main provider of social housing in Birchfield. A list of all those interviewed is included in the appendix.

Meetings with groups

Meetings were held with groups in the area including:

- Parents at Westminster Primary School
- Elders at Wilton Road United Reform Church
- Members of the School Council at Holy Trinity Primary School

Birchfield Big Local Survey

A survey was devised to find out what people like about Birchfield, what local assets are valued locally, priorities for improvement and people's vision for the area. A paper version was distributed to residents and the same survey was put online using Survey Monkey.

Pop-up events or road shows

A series of pop up events were held at various locations around Birchfield to talk to people on the streets and find out their priorities for the area.

- Church Vale Shopping area – 4th April
- Westminster Road area – 19th April
- Wellington/Birchfield Road Shopping Precinct – 20th April
- Salvation Theatre – 29th May to coincide with Birchfield Neighbourhood Forum AGM

Community Conferences

A community conference was organised on Saturday 27th April at St Clare's Catholic Primary School. The conference was attended by 33 people and much of the time was spent in workshop sessions exploring the priorities for the area.

A second conference was held on Saturday 7th September at Grosvenor Road Studios to create a shared vision for Birchfield Big Local and to share and help shape the action plans included in this document.

Newsletter and Website

A newsletter was distributed to households in the area before the April Big Local Conference. This highlighted a variety of ways in which local residents could contribute ideas to the consultation process including via email, Twitter, text, questionnaire, road shows, website, or by attending the community conference.