

Recommendations from the three asset-based projects undertaken in Birmingham

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Introduction

Currently the majority of organisations in the public sector work under a deficit approach (i.e. focusing on what is lacking and trying to plug this gap) rather than an assets-based approach (i.e. focusing on building on the positives in place). These two approaches are summarised in the table below:

Deficit Approaches (Where we are now)	Asset-based Approach (Future approach)
Identifies community deficiencies, defined by data from an external standpoint	Begins with assets within communities
Reactionary response to problems	Identifies intrinsic strengths and opportunities
Provides services	Invest in citizens and develop capacity
Advocate the role of agencies and organisations	Emphasise the role of community
View individuals as passive clients and consumers of services	Focus on the common good within communities and empower individuals to co-produce
Treat 'ill' individuals	Support individuals to develop their own potential
Implement policy programmes as solutions	See community residents as solutions

The endorsement of an asset-based approach provides an opportunity for organisations to respond to community inequalities. Asset-based approaches are embraced throughout public policy, often referred to as 'community engagement', 'empowerment' or 'enablement'. Although terminology varies, these approaches recognise intrinsic assets of communities: positive capacity; knowledge; networks; and skills.

Assets can be social, financial, physical, environmental or human, for example; employment opportunities, education and social networks. Broadly, assets can be categorised into 'types', shown in the figure below:



Background

Three projects were undertaken in winter/spring 2014 by University of Birmingham BSc Geography students at the following locations:

- **Bartley Green School**

The research was undertaken at Bartley Green School Specialist Technology and Sports College. It is located in the centre of Bartley Green and is a local authority maintained specialist school, catering for 11-16 year olds. In 2013 the school achieved an overall rating of 'Outstanding' through Ofsted inspections. The school represents an active environment which has many external links to the wider community. Bartley Green School was selected due to existing good relations between Birmingham City Council and staff at the school. The School also has an adjoining community leisure centre, which is funded and run by BCC, hosting influential initiatives such as BeActive.

Aim: The main aim of this project was to formulate methods to identify, measure and realise community assets around Bartley Green School.

- **Handsworth Wood Medical Centre**

There were two projects focused around Handsworth Wood Medical Centre, a GP practice in the Handsworth Wood area of Birmingham. The practice has 14,769 registered patients and, as well as GP appointments, provides community services such as practice nurses, district nurses, physiotherapy, ultrasound scans, blood tests, x-rays and has links with two intermediate care homes.

Aim: The main aim of one project was to produce a health profile of the Health Centre's patient population using standard social determinants of health (i.e. unemployment, income, age, housing etc.) and to then contrast this with the experience of Health Centre staff and local community. The aim of the other project was to produce a comprehensive map and directory of Voluntary Sector Activity around the Health Centre in Handsworth Wood, Birmingham.

- **West Heath Hospital**

West Heath Hospital is primarily used by older adults referred for rehabilitation and aftercare from larger neighbouring hospitals such as the Queen Elizabeth in Selly Oak. The hospital currently has a number of underused or vacant buildings and facilities around the site that could be better utilised for the benefit of the surrounding community.

Aim: The main aim of this project was to work with West Heath Hospital to identify local assets that could complement the work of the hospital, and make the site a hub for community activity.

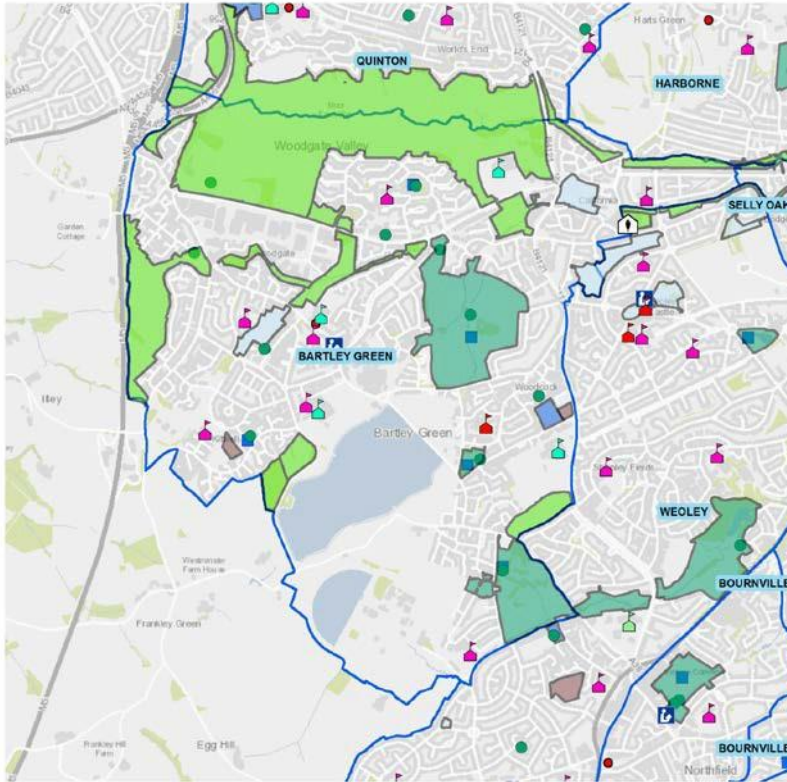
Models for mapping

All three projects examined the potential to use Geographical Information Systems (GIS) for collating and assessing asset-based information. Although there are limitations to utilising GIS (e.g. encourages the utilisation of assets, such as buildings or parks, that can be displayed with points and polygons rather than less tangible assets like culture and history) there are a number of advantages:

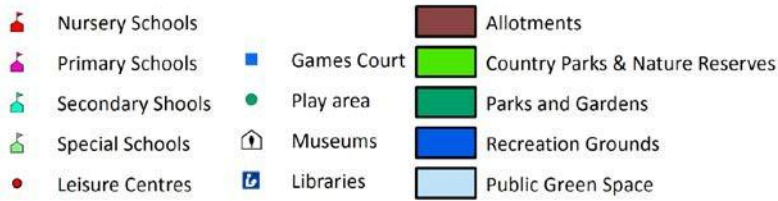
- Many organisations (such as local authorities) already have a number of GIS data layers that can be used
- As well as displaying data, GIS allows for the easy analysis of data (e.g. calculating travel times, combining a number of different data sources to produce a weighting)
- Maps are often more accessible than large amounts of written text so can make the process more amiable to community engagement
- GIS can be a way of gathering data directly from the public

Example of the GIS outputs from the three projects can be seen on the following three pages.

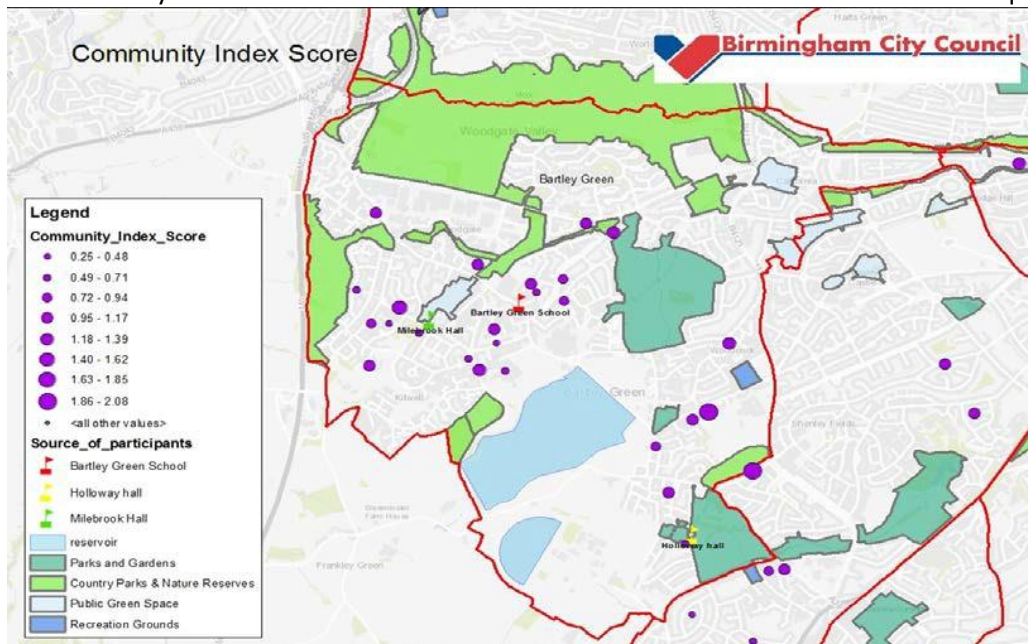
- Bartley Green School**



Key

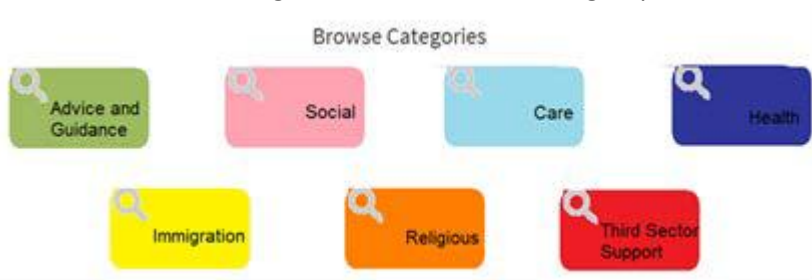


A Community Index Score was calculated for each individual based on answers to a questionnaire:



- **Handsworth Wood Medical Practice**

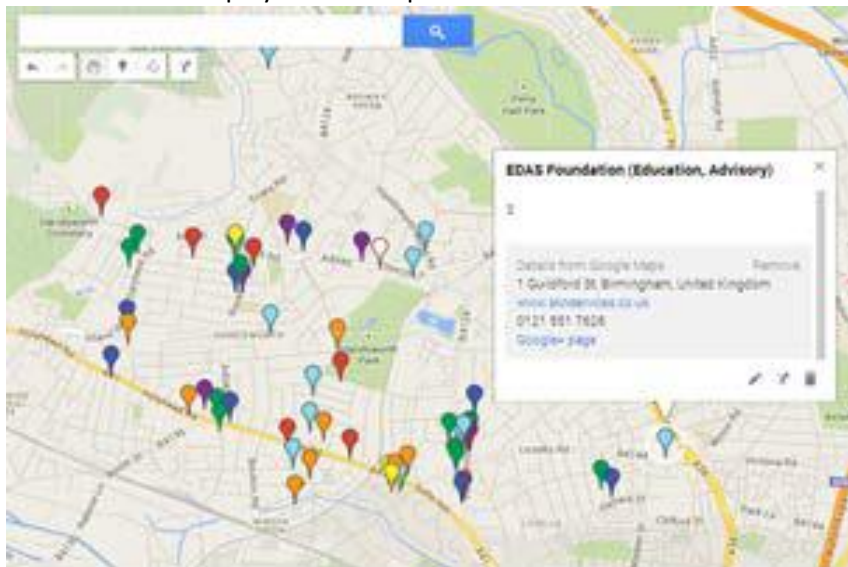
Institutions were catalogued into a number of subgroups:



A search could then be further refined, for example for 'Care':



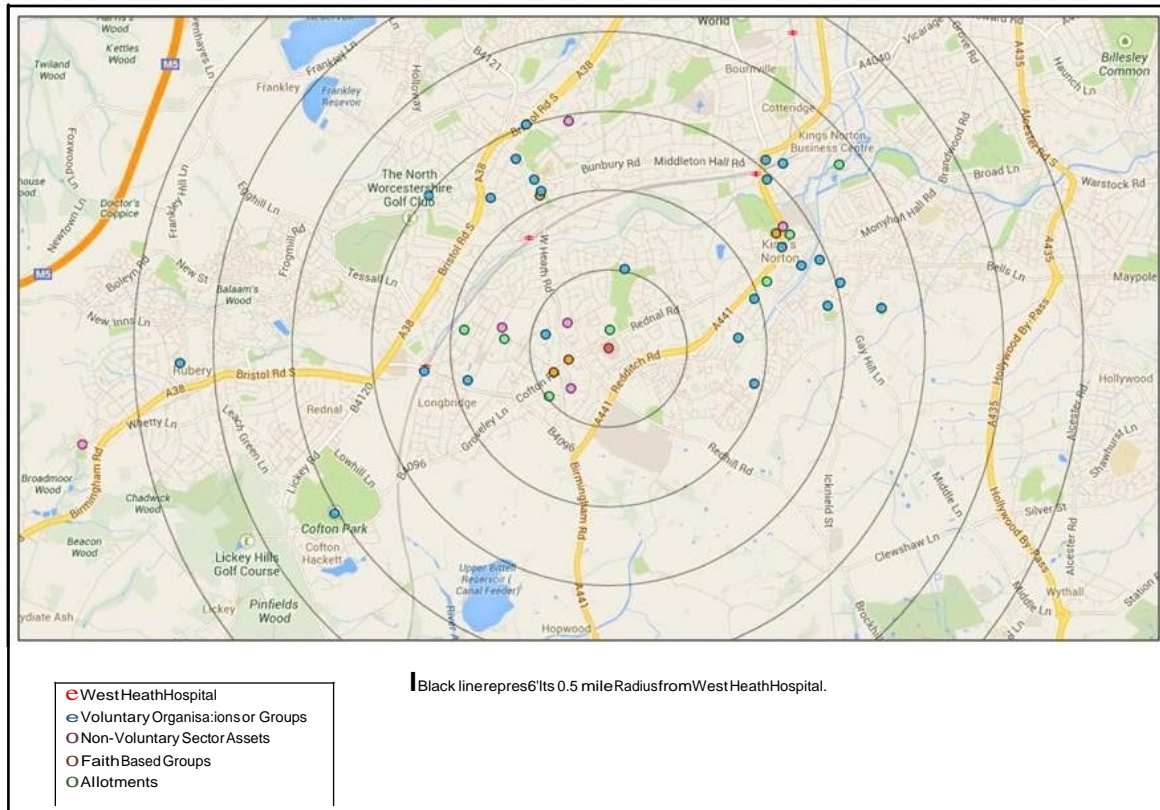
And these data displayed on a map:



This mapping is available at:
<http://route2wellbeing.info/>

- West Heath Hospital

Mapping undertaken around West Heath Hospital:



Key messages

- The understanding of the needs of an area can be very different between the community and professionals (and both of these views can be very different from what the data are telling us)
- Professionals opinions of a population can be strongly influenced by who they come into contact with resulting with an understanding that could be significantly different from the reality
- Many assets are not reaching their full potential – investment is needed for them to be fully realised
- Tangible/physical assets are a small portion of what the community values and a successfully assets-based approach needs to reflect this
- Community activity needs to be built on the basis of existing structures
- Some community assets can require ‘activation’ – assets often need to be invested in and realised
- The tangible and physical qualities of an area only constitute a small portion of what a community values
- When gathering information from professionals and community members there is a need to encourage individuals to think beyond tangible, physical assets. An opportunity to do so may be to distribute asset-based information prior to gathering information whilst avoiding subjectively identifying assets in a community
- Assets are often networked and so understanding the relationship between is important to appreciate
- Information on mobility patterns is important

Recommendations

- Better mapping of assets required (ideally by the community not external agents), although this is only a first step in the process
- Better partnership working between statutory agencies, the voluntary sector and communities need to be developed (potentially via an assets champion in each organisation, initially, although in the long term an asset-based approach is required throughout organisations and in doing so strengthened partnerships should result)
- Attempting to represent each asset in a GIS format results in a loss of information. For individual activities such as sports clubs, GIS representation is suitable. For more complex activities such as social outings, GIS mapping is not suitable. Alternative methods for presenting this type of asset information should be explored
- Careful categorisation of assets should be used in order to avoid losing relevant information. It would also be useful for different agencies (e.g. BVSC, BCC and CCGs) to use the same categorisation to facilitate data sharing
- Utilise a variety of methods to gather information – questionnaires, focus groups, social media and explore ways in which the community can provide information directly themselves
- It should be stressed that the asset-based approach is a way of better delivering services rather than a way of simply replacing existing services with those provided by the community itself
- Many people have a strong preconception of the services organisations deliver. To fully benefit from an asset-based approach it is important that this image is changed and the services people expect are in alignment with the aspirations of organisations
- Expanding search criteria beyond administrative boundaries is important in order to assess mobility patterns of individuals and represent community rather than organisational boundaries