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Winning Hearts and Minds
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Winning Hearts and Minds
The Impact of the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group on individuals, institutions and the city of Birmingham and its inhabitants

Abstract

This case study highlights the success of the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group (ESAG), and the work of the two sustainability officers appointed by Groundwork Birmingham to work alongside the Eastside team at Birmingham City Council in making sustainability a key part of the decision making process in the regeneration of Birmingham Eastside. The University of Birmingham was a member of ESAG from 2002 and these ties contributed to knowledge created as part of the Sustainable Eastside project, an initiative supported by EPSRC's SUE plus fund and active from May 2003 through to June 2008. The findings in this report are based on background research and interviews with the key players in the Eastside regeneration project and consider both the tangible and conceptual impacts on individuals, institutions and the city of Birmingham and its inhabitants.

1. Introduction

Eastside Regeneration

Eastside is the site of a major redevelopment project in Birmingham city centre, straddling the Digbeth and Deritend neighbourhoods. In the late 1990s, plans for the regeneration of the area were aired to the public. The first of the plans, the 1996 Digbeth Millennium Quarter Plan, presented proposals for the area around Digbeth, and soon other large scale projects involving the renovation, demolition and reparation of the area emerged.

Eastside itself was launched in late 1999 as a Learning Quarter for the 21st century. The first of the Eastside projects to be completed was Millennium Point which was to house the City's science collections and the former University of Central England's new Technology Innovation Centre. A year later, the redevelopment of Masshouse Circus allowed the expansion of the City Centre into a new Quarter. The Bullring also opened at this time. The Eastside Development Framework followed in 2001, paving the way for a new City Park (the first for over 100 years) the expansion of learning via the area's two Universities and knowledge based industries as well as some first steps towards sustainability. It also encouraged the growth of the creative industries within the Digbeth area.

These projects had been planned over several years and did not benefit from the sustainability principles which would eventually become mainstream. From this point on, however, public investment began on a large scale through the European Regional Development Fund, Advantage West Midlands & the East Birmingham/North Solihull Regeneration Zone, the City Council, the Local Transport Plan, the Higher and Further Education and Funding Council, Lottery funding and private sector investment. On February 1 2002 a masterplan for Eastside was developed by HOK consultants to provide a vision for the Council, public bodies, landowners and developers alongside a commitment to transform the area by Birmingham City Council:

The creation of a new Eastside will be the opportunity to celebrate a new kind of urban fabric and new relationships between people and their environment. The chance of giving a place back to people and of pointing the way to a future of more sustainable forms of urban development is the great challenge of Eastside. It will be a learning environment in two senses – it will feature institutions that can teach, but also the regenerated environment will provide an opportunity to learn techniques of increased sustainability that may be applied elsewhere.

- Birmingham City Council (accessed online 2010)

Sustainable Eastside

With this aspiration towards sustainability in mind, the 'Sustainable Eastside' project was created. The project received European Regional Development Fund support to the value of £275,000 delivered through Government Office for the West Midlands, £225,000 from Advantage West Midlands East Birmingham and North Solihull Regeneration Zone with further support from the Environment Agency and Birmingham City Council and was managed by Groundwork Birmingham.⁴

In March 2002, 18 non-governmental organisations with a breadth of knowledge and experience in delivering sustainability came together to write a 'vision' for embedding sustainability in the Eastside

⁴ This funding covered 2003 to 2006. The project then received additional smaller sums for the next 12 months from AWM East Birmingham and North Solihull Regeneration Zone, support from Birmingham City Council and other project specific funding to carry out a physical demonstration project installing green roofs in 2 buildings in Birmingham City Centre.

regeneration project. 'Sustainable Eastside - A Vision for the Future' laid out plans for how Eastside could be socially, environmentally and economically successful and responsible. The collaboration of partners brought together to create the 'vision' resulted in the establishment of the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group. ESAG aimed to promote the vision, and to provide advice on Sustainable Development best practise throughout the Eastside development. Membership consisted of representatives from organisations and individuals with professional interest in Eastside including (among others) WWF; Groundwork; Localise West Midlands; Birmingham Friends of the Earth; and Birmingham Sustainable Energy Partnership. The advisory group scrutinised Eastside proposals; encouraged the implementation of sustainable development; consulted with key stakeholders; and signposted environmental techniques and standards. The University of Birmingham was a member of ESAG from 2002 and these ties contributed to knowledge created as part of the 'Sustainable Eastside' project, an initiative supported by EPSRC's SUE plus fund and active from May 2003 through to June 2008.

2. ESAG

2.1 The Sustainability Vision for Eastside

'ESAG and the sustainability officers were a powerful tool and catalyst for making sure the sustainability agenda was a key part of development plans for Eastside.'

- Keith Budden (2010), Groundwork

The authors of 'Sustainable Eastside - A Vision for the Future' saw the redevelopment planned for Eastside as an opportunity for the city to take the lead in integrating sustainability into the regeneration process and for the area to become an international model of Best Practice. The vision set out aspirations for embedding sustainability in the planned regeneration and considered effects on and benefits to the built environment; public space & infrastructure; social diversity and housing; resource management: reducing waste; and the economy, business and industry; and was intended for use as a background resource and supplementary guidance for planning by public and private sector developers, and to inspire political, business and community leaders.

The message to these groups was challenging and highly aspirational as the authors laid down a call to arms on the issue of sustainability. The vision challenged the key players to 'take the bull by the horns' (ESAG 2002) to dedicate the extra time, energy and financial commitment required to make Eastside a regional exemplar of sustainable development. The report insisted that sustainability must run through the essence of the project or not at all and it was the strength and tone of these documents that was a key to unlocking the future sustainability agenda. (Coyne 2011)

2.2 ESAG and the University of Birmingham

'Links with the academics from the University of Birmingham not only gave us access to their knowledge and expertise, but gave ESAG's arguments an extra dimension and weight in the eyes of the council and developers.'

- Karen Leach (2010)

It was at this early stage in ESAG's creation that the University of Birmingham became involved in the project. The University had already been commissioned to undertake a biodiversity study by Groundwork, thus when applying for funding from the EPSRC's SUE programme the links with ESAG and the regeneration project were cemented. The successful bid resulted in the Sustainable Eastside research project, supported by EPSRC's SUE plus fund⁵, and active from May 2003 through to June 2008. The aim of the project was to explore how sustainability is addressed in practice in the regeneration decision-making process and to assess the sustainability performance of completed development schemes against

⁵ The Sustainable Eastside **research project** was funded by EPSRC and a separate initiative from the Sustainable Eastside regeneration project and ESAG. <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/about/progs/pes/sue/Pages/SUE.aspx>

stated sustainability aspirations. University of Birmingham researchers were present at most ESAG meetings, and research undertaken by the Sustainable Eastside researchers fed into ESAG's final report and presentation. The links to ESAG were, for the academic team, instrumental in initiating meetings with developers, with Birmingham City Council, and in realizing the aims of the project. Indeed one of ESAG's founding members, Keith Budden (then of Groundwork), took a post on the project Steering Group; later the Sustainability Officer Rosemary Coyne also joined the Steering Group.

2.3 The impact of the Sustainability Officers

'Being embedded in the Eastside team at Birmingham City Council meant we helped to define and illustrate the sustainability agenda. The initial effects of our work were realised more slowly than was planned due to external factors slowing construction on site for a critical period but the ripples are still being felt and I think wider impacts will continue to emerge in Eastside and the city as a whole.'

- Rosemary Coyne (2011)

As a result of the proposals set out in the vision for Eastside, Birmingham City Council took the innovative step of co-locating sustainability advisors within the Eastside team at Birmingham City Council. Richard Green, as Director, facilitated the co-location of advisors in the city council office with Eastside Regeneration Manager Alan Bishop taking over from him to really help drive the agenda forward (Coyne 2010). Mostly funded by the European Regional Development Fund, Advantage West Midlands East Birmingham and managed by Groundwork Birmingham, but working alongside councillors in the Eastside regeneration office at Birmingham City Council, the advisors were tasked with providing the technical skills required to put the Eastside Sustainability vision into practice and to secure further resources to enable sustainable solutions to be implemented.

All of the contributors interviewed for this case study insisted that the secondment of the two sustainability officers (Rosemary Coyne, supported by Katie Prangle, and for a short period Steven Dewar) to the Eastside regeneration office at Birmingham City Council was one of the most effective actions of ESAG and significantly strengthened the case for sustainability in Eastside's regeneration process (Budden 2010; Green 2011; Bishop 2011; Leach 2010; Taylor 2010) and each praised the dedication and tenacity of Rosemary Coyne in particular in driving the project forward. Significantly, the sustainability officers worked in the BCC Eastside team rather than being physically and ideologically separated by their focus on sustainability. This gave them direct and regular contact with decision makers, developers and council employees; this collaborative working relationship embedded sustainability *inside* the decision making process, proving the business case to developers in considering sustainability issues in the early stages of their developments. Furthermore, the fact that the project focussed on a specific geographic area meant in depth surveys could be undertaken to support development of a particularly robust and detailed evidence base from which to make their case to developers. This further strengthened their credibility and promoted their agenda to decision makers (Coyne 2011).

Rosemary Coyne worked to develop guidance, policy and procedure recommendations which were submitted to Birmingham City Council to consider for adoption within their own planning guidance and advice to the public. Although these planning recommendations were not adopted by the Council, in part due to changes in policy and funding and the advent of the recession, the respondents interviewed for this paper point instead to the resulting conceptual impact this targeting of policy and decision makers had on individuals, institutions and the city of Birmingham and its inhabitants in raising awareness of the sustainability agenda.

3 Winning Hearts and Minds:

The Impact of ESAG on individuals, institutions and the City of Birmingham and its inhabitants

'It was a combination of the University of Birmingham, the sustainability officers and ESAG that ensured sustainability issues were considered so important by developers'

- Keith Budden (2010)

ESAG succeeded in embedding their vision for sustainability in the decision making process by liaising closely with the sustainability officers placed at Birmingham City Council. Although the practical impacts of this action were not as immediate as many hoped, all participants who were interviewed for this report expressed views that these actions did succeed in promoting the sustainability agenda to individuals and organisations, and in turn continue to have a widespread and lasting impact on sustainable development in Eastside and Birmingham as a whole. (Budden 2010; Green 2011; Bishop 2011; Leach 2010; Taylor 2010).

One notable case of the **impact on the individual** is that of Alan Bishop, Eastside Regeneration Manager at Birmingham City Council (1999 – 2007). Lead co-author of "Sustainable Eastside - A Vision for the Future", Keith Budden, said:

'Alan Bishop is a walking example of the success of the project. In the beginning he was sceptical towards our planned vision for sustainable regeneration and understandably mostly concerned with the social issues underpinning Eastside: jobs, housing, health etc. In working with ESAG and Rosemary Coyne in particular, I think he realised that sustainability would also be a key element in planning decisions undertaken on these social issues.'

- Keith Budden (2010)

Alan Bishop agreed that his expectations as to the extent of the likely uptake of the sustainability agenda at Birmingham City Council were more conservative than ESAG's at the outset. Working within the council itself he was more immediately aware that 'changing hearts and minds' and challenging the opinions of the directors and decision makers would be a long and gradual process. Nevertheless he also agreed that he himself was an example of how things have and can change, pointing to examples from his working practice and personal choices (Alan Bishop 2011).

'I was cynical at the start but I learnt a lot from ESAG and in particular from the sustainability advisors. Rosemary Coyne was a breath of fresh air and really opened my eyes to the sustainability agenda. We sat in the same office, so her thoughts, conversations and agenda were always present. Rosemary and ESAG's goals were presented alongside immediate and real solutions to problems, and not just a long term aspiration that had been associated with the 'green agenda' in the past. In some instances there were quite clear differences between the City Council team & ESAG – around the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders, particularly to the west of Millennium Point. On the plus side, the adoption of sustainable forms of development, the support for an Eastside CHP network and more organic growth of the creative industries in Digbeth were key areas where sustainable arguments were strongly influencing the built environment. I am now involved in achieving a variety of schemes to Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4, as well as CHP and low carbon schemes at the Homes & Communities Agency and have made personal sustainable lifestyle choices, such as fitting solar panels to my house.'

- Alan Bishop, Eastside Regeneration Manager at Birmingham City Council (1999 – 2007) (2011)
[now HCA]

The ripples of ESAG's influence similarly continue to impact on the institutions involved in Eastside's regeneration. ESAG's recommendations were not taken forward as hoped through changes to the planning frameworks. However Sandy Taylor, now Head of Climate Change and Sustainability at Birmingham City Council and a 'driving force' (Green 2011) behind Eastside's sustainability agenda,

suggests that Birmingham City Council's emerging Core Strategy now contains draft sustainable development policies which arguably have been strongly influenced by ESAG's work. The new Core Strategy, which will replace the current Birmingham UDP (Unitary Development Plan) includes a sustainability appraisal which has been under consultation from 2007 through to 2010, and a more detailed Sustainable Development guidance called "Places for the Future" is currently being prepared for consultation in February/March. Both the Core Strategy and "Places for the Future" Sustainable Development guidance will be adopted in late 2011/early 2012. (Birmingham City Council 2010)

Further to these impacts on the individuals and institutions involved in Eastside's generation, practical impacts have also started to materialise throughout Eastside and Birmingham as a whole. Although it is difficult to be certain of the tangible outcomes of the conceptual shift that was realised by the sustainability officers and ESAG, the prominence of the sustainability agenda in these new projects point to a wider practical influence. Some notable examples are the successful implementation of the residential CHP scheme in Masshouse, supported in part by the developer and HCA funding, potentially to Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4⁶ and the prominence of the new Birmingham City Council buildings in a recent BREEAM assessment⁷. Keith Budden, now Environmental Partnership Manager for Be Birmingham, also argues that ESAG formed the basis for the Environmental Partnership's own climate change partnership and thus paved the way for the Audit Commission Green Flag awarded to Birmingham in 2010 for exceptional performance in relation to a partnership approach to tackling climate change. Birmingham was awarded a Green Flag for tackling climate change and reducing CO2 emissions by the Audit Commission in the city's Comprehensive Area Assessment. Green flags are awarded when it is judged that there is exceptional performance or outstanding improvement in a specific area of work which other towns and cities could learn from. (Keith Budden 2011) (Audit Commission 2010).

4. Conclusion

The wide and lasting impacts that the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group had on the prominence of the sustainability agenda in Birmingham were initially conceptual but in successfully embedding sustainability issues in the hearts and minds of the developers and decision makers, further impacts are beginning to materialise.

ESAG succeeded in embedding their vision for sustainability in the decision making process by liaising closely with the sustainability officers placed at Birmingham City Council. Although the Sustainability Planning Guidance produced by ESAG and the sustainability officers was not taken forward, in part due to changes to the planning frameworks as a result of regime change and funding cuts, the sustainability officers did succeed in promoting the sustainability agenda to individuals and organisations. Although it is difficult to quantify conceptual impacts, all participants who were interviewed for this report expressed views that these actions had a widespread and lasting impact on sustainable development in Eastside and Birmingham as a whole. (Bishop 2011; Budden 2010; Green 2011; Leach 2010). Richard Green

More recently, practical impacts have started to materialise throughout projects in Eastside and Birmingham, these include the successful implementation of the residential CHP scheme in Masshouse and the prominence of Birmingham in a recent BREEAM assessment of well performing buildings.

⁶ For details see <http://www.display-campaign.org/example620?PHPSESSID=bj6to0hv8q35rhonh5tggtc9p5>

⁷ For more details see <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/home/best-2010/best-2010-birmingham-city-councils-breeam-excellent-new-offices/8606920.article>

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