



### PRECIS OF OPENING CHAPTERS OF 'NOURISHING SOCIAL RENEWAL'

This book is about a place called Balsall Heath, near Birmingham. 130 years ago it had been heathland dotted with farms just half a mile from Birmingham City Centre. Over time the fields were sold and terraced houses built to accommodate those who flocked to the area as part of the industrial and manufacturing revolution. Whereas it had been independent of Birmingham, progress led to the building of a Baths, Library and Schools. The community flourished as a white, working class population with a robust 'community spirit' that encouraged everyone to be mutually supportive.

However, after 100 years of development the manufacturing industries dwindled and those who were able to move to other areas seeking work and a better standard of living. City planners condemned a large proportion of the terraced houses and replaced them with 'social housing'. Many of the former residents were rehoused elsewhere when the old houses were torn down and the new accommodation plans created space for newcomers from Ireland, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia.

The mutually supportive community spirit evaporated once extended families evolved in to the more modern 'nuclear family'. There was an increase in teen pregnancies with young single mothers having to raise their children without the support previously offered by uncles, grandmothers and siblings. The youngsters from these families grew older and felt the need to become part of a 'family' to provide them with emotional support and peer approval. From here it was a short step to the formation of gangs. These gangs seem to have taken the place of the old fashioned 'extended family' but with them came a shift away from 'community living' and the days of the village bobby knowing everyone.

Balsall Heath became an inner city area which had become socially bankrupt. Unemployment was high, crime rife and isolation a growing problem. The increasing diversity of nationalities living so closely together created frictions as residents neither knew nor understood each other's culture. Prostitution increased from just one street to over 450 working prostitutes who stood on street corners and attracted 1000's of kerb crawlers. Those residents who remained found that their lives were miserable but they were stuck – as the area had deteriorated house prices slumped and became impossible to sell.

The downward spiral continued with local parks and alleyways becoming overgrown and dominated by drug dealers and gangs. Everywhere looked drab and uncared for and residents all 'kept themselves to themselves'

In 1980 a few intrepid souls approached both the police and the council and asked for their help to improve their lives. The response was that they had been trying but could not find a way to do this - they suggested the residents move elsewhere. This triggered a chain of actions which have ultimately improved the health and wellbeing of all Balsall Heath residents.

## **THE FIRST STEP**

**A social enterprise was created** - A local man persuaded his neighbours to work with him to gather together all the rubble and litter laying around in his street . They buried this with soil and turned it in to an 'adventure playground' where local kids with no -where else to go could play. Encouraged, he approached the local vicar and asked him to offer his disused church hall as a pre-school nursery which could be used by the children of local young mothers , thus allowing them to return to work. Together, vicar and resident approached some local charities for the funds to employ trained staff. These funds , along with charging a modest fee that mothers were asked to take from their new wages, allowed to project to flourish. Today it is known as St Paul's Community Development Trust and also has an animal farm housing sheep, goats, turkeys and many other animals.

**Street watch** – Another resident refused to accept that nothing could be done to stop local prostitutes from regularly sitting on his garden wall flagging down kerb crawlers. This restricted the activities of his young family and discouraged their young friends from visiting. As a Trade Unionist he knew that he had the ability to organise pickets so he spoke with his friends and neighbours to arrange groups of residents to patrol and ostentatiously take down the registration number of the kerb crawlers. Before long the campaign had spread to include 20 groups of 6 or so residents stood on 20 local street corners. They made it their business to shame the kerb crawlers into staying away. This was a long and painstaking task . Streets were reclaimed one at a time and once the demand for services diminished so did the prostitutes. These volunteers became known as Street Stewards and the patrols evolved in to enjoyable social gatherings as residents got to know each other and encouraged others to join in.

**Tidying up the neighbourhood** – Another area that was given attention by local residents was the broken windows, graffiti and unkempt green spaces. Common sense dictated that if the area was simply left to look uncared for then nobody would care how bad it became. The residents managed to recruit a volunteer handy- person or two who were tasked with repairing broken windows, mending broken gates and fences and trimming back overgrown hedges. They also cleared dumped rubbish and organised litter picks. Eventually locals found the means to employ 'Two men and a van' whose motto is 'We won't do it for you but we will do it with you' This encouraged more and more people to care for their environment and the message that 'together we can make a difference' became more widespread.

**Confused spaces** – These are areas of varying size that had initially been designed in to areas by architects keen to provide patches of green space for residents. However, over time nobody could quite recall who was responsible for which bit of land and therefore who should maintain it. Inevitably they became derelict and unkempt and were used as general dumping grounds. Locals reasoned that as nobody was willing to ‘claim’ them they would adopt a ‘finders keepers’ attitude and gradually, area by area these have been turned in to flower beds.

**Residents** – Balsall Heath has 11 residents groups, each covers 3 or 4 streets and meets every 2 months to agree what needs to be done. Attendance at these local meetings can include up to 30 residents . The meetings discuss what tasks can be allocated to ‘2 men with van’ or perhaps need to be referred to statutory authorities ( who are invited to these meetings)

Each residents’ group has within its number good and active neighbours who visit the elderly, call police to report a dumped car and befriend the more isolated and lonely residents. Every 2 or 3 months all of the residents’ groups come together for a Community Meal where they can update each other on matters of local relevance and generally feel part of a community. In addition to these activities there are ‘Good Neighbour Awards a couple of times a year where those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty are thanked at the Community Meal.

Other events are also organised throughout the year to generate community spirit – Fireworks Night, a Carnival, Food Hampers delivered to lone elderly folk at Eid or Christmas. Food for these is collected by local children.

Balsall Heath decided some years back to encourage its residents to improve their environmental surroundings. They took over some ‘confused space’ measuring about 40x70metres which they cleared first then erected two scrounged poly tunnels and turned the area in to a mini garden centre. From here they grow and assemble planters and hanging baskets which a scattered around Balsall Heath. In addition, 5 local primary schools now also have their own gardens where flowers and veg are grown. The residents have also created an Annual Gardening Competition which now attracts some 80 entries.

Every year a Balsall Heath Calendar is published and distributed to every household listing all of the above events. In addition a ‘welcome pack’ full of useful information is given to new residents. There is also a Community Newspaper published every month which includes good news stories, requests from locals for action or thanks for deeds done.

**Police Station** – In Balsall Heath the doors of the local Police Station used to be locked to the public. To improve matters local volunteers offered to staff the front desk. It is now being used as a ‘Solutions Centre’ where for one day every week the police, and all statutory partners allocate one Officer to be present. As a result a joint task force has evolved and residents are now able to enter with a problem and leave with a solution.

**Management** - In order to achieve all of this, Balsall Heath have employed a Community Organiser to make sure that all of these activities are sustained. They worked as a Community to raise the funds required to do this. To oversee all of these activities a Management Committee was needed in order to employ the Capacity Builder/Community Organiser and '2 Men with van'. Their task is also to make all of the planned activities accountable to the whole neighbourhood. Therefore the 'Good Neighbours' and residents' groups combine to hold area wide elections where every year 18 people are chosen to act as both employer and to represent the community as a whole. This is known as the Residents Forum and when it was set up it had three main tasks:

1. To represent the area
2. It built capacity and employ the Community Organiser
3. To provide services such as '2 men with van' and the other services highlighted above.

### **THE COMMUNITY ORGANISER**

Balsall Heath found that they had a couple of likely candidates for this role already amongst them, they had just never been identified and supported in this role before. The Community Organiser has several key tasks:

- a) To support the 'Good Neighbours' and build capacity locally by identifying active local residents who may be willing to help out their neighbours or work on other key projects
- b) To identify which local areas have specific needs and then make plans to help the community achieve them
- c) To drive the projects forward and ensure that the Forums/Community Group is accountable to local residents.

A good Community Organiser will dedicate time and effort to include everyone. However, there will inevitably be residents in the categories listed below who will resist becoming included. These individuals will often expend huge amounts of time and effort to prevent the inclusion and empowerment of many. Capacity Building requires these people to be held at arms-length given that it is a fundamental requirement of the project to create the space that many residents who may be shy or lack confidence need in order to find their feet and become a happily participating part of the team.

**Dealing with difficult people** – Whilst it is recognised that a strong community can achieve many positive things and that there are many good people in every neighbourhood it is also true that there will be a few people who will resist change and oppose the interests of the many. These normally fit in to 4 negative categories:

- a) Criminals
- b) Local figures who were used to ruling the roost when nobody else was involved but who can't cope when lots of people are taking part
- c) The professional, such as the teacher who wishes to keep parents out of school because 'amateurs have nothing to do with education'
- d) The Councillor who feels threatened because they cannot see how bottom-up and top-down can act in partnership.

**Criminals** – These first have to be identified and it may be then be necessary for a group of residents to band together to acquire the collective confidence to identify them and either shame them or persuade local authorities to arrest them. This is often not easy as those with the power to act frequently do not live in an area where such behaviour is likely to infringe on their life and therefore cannot comprehend the need for decisive action

**Tackling the sole prominent local figure** – In most neighbourhoods there are one or two people who have pushed themselves to the fore and gained the attention of professionals and councillors. Whilst some have done a good job, others have had their egos fed as apparently important people recognised them and paid them attention. They have often been treated as the ‘token’ resident with whom to ‘consult’ , thus enabling the professional to claim that ‘residents are involved’.

Many professional officers inadvertently keep a very few prominent local people in positions of power and make it difficult for others to become involved. If many people are to participate than the role of the local ‘prominent resident’ will by necessity shrink as they become less significant. Unfortunately the ‘prominent’ resident will not be easily side-lined. They will kick up a fuss and make all kinds of claims about those who threaten to take their place in an effort to retain their position. There is a temptation to delay the time when more people take part in sympathy with their plight . It is harder to be cruel to be kind and insist the token resident either adopts a new role which enables others to come forward or steps back. Either way if progress is to be made the deed must be done and sooner rather than later.

**Professional or Politician** - These can be just as difficult to deal with as the above two categories as their status can make them a greater obstacle. The ‘expert’ will claim that they know best and that ‘inexpert residents’ have no place ‘rocking the boat’. The elected person may similarly claim that they are an ‘accountable person’ who must be the one to take decisions because residents are not accountable and therefore their views are insignificant. Once again, it may be that both of these people can be shown that representatives from social neighbourhoods have a greater legitimacy than they do given their increased knowledge of the area. If this does not happen, again it may be that these people will ultimately have to be reassigned or replaced.

**Neighbourhood Forum/Community Group** - This can take many forms – according to how often residents wish to meet and in what format – an open residents meeting or a committee? Once this has been established it is advisable that key active people are trained in the skills needed to successfully run the group/forum.

The next steps will be to decide what form the group should take and which actions are needed to move forward.

- a) Register as a Charity , Company Limited by Guarantee or become a Development Trust.
- b) Prepare an Action Plan or a Neighbourhood Development Plan
- c) Set out to make some ‘quick wins’ to demonstrate to residents that you mean business
- d) Ensure that the forum/community group is truly representative.

A key aim is to introduce people from the neighbourhood to each other and help them feel part of a wider group of what will soon become friends once the ice has been broken. This will start to generate Community Spirit that can be nurtured and encouraged to spread as more and more residents see things changing for the better.

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD BUDGETS**

The question 'what does a neighbourhood cost?' is often asked. Nobody seems to know the answer to this because all of the bits and pieces that make up a neighbourhood are absorbed within the budgets for the broader community. However, if this is seen as a fraction of the huge, wider statutory budgets it could total £100,000,000 plus per year per neighbourhood of approximately 15,000 people. Until now this sum has been 'invisible' Because it does not exist in practise nobody has been accountable for it. It is very important that it is made visible and to disentangle it from the wider budgets of each statutory agency. Of course a huge proportion will relate back to the broader administrative agencies . However, even if 90% of the budget is pre-accounted for and residents are granted half of the remainder that will amount to £5,000,000!

## **OUTCOMES USED BY BALSALL HEATH**

The Balsall Heath Residents' Forum have asked themselves the following questions to give them an indication of whether their efforts have been worthwhile:-

- Are more people at work?
- Is the Arrest rate higher?
- Have we picked up a large amount of Litter?
- Have we mended more broken windows last year?
- How many students pass how many GCSEs?
- Does the neighbourhood look and feel good?
- Are people confident and proud?
- Do people trust one another?
- Are fewer services needed?
- And.... is money saved?