

A Foreword from AskingBristol's Founder.

A Publication Taken from *Diaries of the High Sheriffs of Bristol*, written by John Manley, CCO, AskingBristol

“How do we ensure that the very best givers are engaged with the smaller askers?” – John Manley, CCO, AskingBristol

Two events during [last] year made me sit up and think. The first was the Bristol North West Food Bank and The Park's cardboard boxes. The second was the allocation of a small part of the BYCA funding to meet direct requests from Neighbourhood Policing for grants of up to £300 for small community groups giving young people in the less advantaged parts of the City the chance to engage in physical and creative activities out of school time.

An early award was to Horfield Youth People's Club for £200 for a table tennis table and a snooker table (second-hand). I received two thank you cards signed by all the Club members and a two-sided handwritten thank-you letter from Geoff Stock, who has run the Club for over 40 years. The PSCO involved and I were invited to a small thank you ceremony at one of their meetings. The impact of this £200 gift was extraordinary, as was the gratitude. I contrasted this with my professional career when the Bristol site would raise £40,000 for a 'Charity of the Year' – generally a national charity. I reflected that £40,000 is 200 lots of £200. We could instead have had significant impact on up to 200 community and voluntary groups in the City where we all worked and lived.

The fundamental realization was the undemocratic nature of the Third Sector (used as an expansive term to include all charity, not-for-profit, philanthropic, voluntary and community activity). Community Foundations were established in Ceremonial Counties to give a new focus on local groups by local philanthropists. A few years ago, they did some research that showed that over 80% of giving (money) went to 4% of charities. That is pretty shocking and shows the power of the larger, national charities. It is further evidence of the undemocratic nature of the Third Sector in this country. **It doesn't need to be like this. It shouldn't be like this.**

There is a natural tendency in the UK, and demonstrated most clearly in England, to treat all problems as requiring top-down solutions. Top-down solutions occasionally work. Having spent 35 years in research involving large- and massive-scale systems, I wanted to bring some 'systems thinking' to how to democratize asking and giving in Greater Bristol. The first and most important choice was to start bottom-up. As a side comment, oligopolies know how to resist top-down change, but they do not know how to resist bottom-up change.

Who are the groups we want to help? The Greater Bristol area (Avon) according to the Charity Commission website has 4,310 registered charities. But in addition, there are [numerous] voluntary and community groups who are not registered. No one knows how many there are in total. It could be 5,000, or 8,000 or 10,000. The City of Bristol alone has over 200 open spaces ranging in size from Albion Green to Stockwood Open Space. Most of these have notice boards for "Friends of ...". These are largely voluntary groups and not charities. Let's say there are 6,000. The larger charities know how and where to ask. Many of the smaller ones don't. How do we enable the very smallest to ask in the same way as the very largest? An obvious difference is that the asks of a small group are small, but the impact can be significant as we saw with the BYCA donation of £200 to Horfield Young People's Club – it is also worth noting that they weren't really asking for £200, they were asking for a table tennis table and a snooker table (second-hand). How do we ensure that the very best givers are engaged with the smaller askers?

Most groups do not have the time or expertise to engage with complex and lengthy processes and systems. AskingBristol assigns every group an "AskAuthor". The AskAuthor talks to the group for a while and pulls out their current needs; they help make them as specific as possible, drafts them up and owns them as they are pushed into AskingBristol. As a result, a group is shielded from complexity. Our experience is that the very best AskAuthors are University students. They love the opportunity to get outside of Clifton or Frenchay and meet communities from across the City. Students are quite capable of owning up to five such relationships. A

persistent challenge in AskingBristol is scale. Having University students as AskAuthors means that there is no scale challenge here – there are over 60,000 such students in Bristol.

As we saw with the North West Bristol Food Bank the SuperConnectivity of Bristol gives the means for directing an ask to the very best giver to fulfil it. How do we embed this SuperConnectivity into AskingBristol? If the challenge had been treated as top-down the answer would have been a data-oriented one, requiring a platform for searching. As our solution is bottom-up the answer is a data-routing one. In fact, it is identical to the structure of the Internet. If we regard an ‘ask’ as being like an IP Packet then the task is to direct that packet to the correct endpoint (termination), where in this case the endpoint is a giver best able to fulfil that ask. The design of AskingBristol exploits this Internet similarity throughout.

What is an ‘ask’? Three experiments with different aspects of AskingBristol have now been running for over two years. Initially, we believed that there were six types of ask: things given; things lent; spaces lent; volunteering; expertise; money. This has evolved to four types of *ask*, which we believe is the final answer: *Things*, *Time*, *Expertise* and *Services*. Each of these require a different treatment. It is worth noting that money no longer appears. This is because AskingBristol is not a fundraiser. If money is required it should be treated as an ask for Expertise: e.g., how does one raise this sum of money? *Expertise* will help advise on all the different options from loans to micro-giving to revenue generation to fund applications to national programmes, etc.

Services require the establishment of for-profit, third-party, shared-service providers. *Time* (volunteering) urgently requires a simplification of volunteering platforms to one that is not feature-rich (the bane of any systems development) and one that is secure enough that businesses and other organizations are confident enough to use for their employee volunteering hours and days – a huge number of these hours and days are wasted each year because there is no easy mechanism to alert individuals to appropriate opportunities. *Expertise* requires large areas of the *Tree* (the Internet) to become *IntraTrees* (Intranets). Those best able to link to the places where that *Expertise* is to be found should own the routing. The Bristol Legal Sector leads the UK in the way it has organized itself to interact with the Third Sector. One of the three groups it has established is Bristol Pro Bono. If a charity has a pro bono *ask*, it is directed to one email address. Bristol Pro Bono then directs the *ask* to a single point in each participating law firm/University law school. They then direct it to relevant partners in their firm. One lawyer, in general, will put their hand up and a connection made to the group making the *ask*. AskingBristol needs to know nothing about the structure and skills and lawyers in the Bristol Legal Sector to find the best match for a particular ask. For this to work efficiently, many areas of *Expertise* need to become *IntraTrees* in the same way as legal pro bono. This is achievable if professional bodies, trade groups, and interest groups step up and create such entry points and structures.

The last category of *ask* is *Things*. Here, BYCA has led the way in providing the answer. Our solution is *Multivarious Giving* – encouraging businesses, organizations, trusts and individuals to separate off part of their annual giving and to make grants to a number of groups based on a theme. At the end of 2021 we carried out an experiment with the Bangladeshi-heritage Curry Club in Bristol. I had worked with them several times as High Sheriff. 2021 saw the 50th Anniversary of Bangladesh Independence, coinciding with the national British Curry Day in December. The ‘British curry’ is very much an invention of Bangladeshi chefs in the 1970s and 1980s – the Curry Club planned to raise £2500 through a £1 donation on every Chicken Tikka Masala sold in 20 Indian restaurants and takeaways in Bristol. I offered them the chance to try *Multivarious Giving* with AskingBristol. They decided to make five grants of £500 to groups requiring specific objects [of that value] who are providing physical activity for young people in the lesser-advantaged areas of the City. AskingBristol found five candidates the Curry Club were satisfied with: Barton Hill Amateur Boxing Club; St Adheim’s Girls Football Team in Withywood; Oasis Hub in Lawrence Weston; Street Space in Filwood Park; ConfiDANCE based in Shirehampton and Lockleaze. Once the money had been raised, Naseem Talukdar (Founder of Bristol Curry Club and local community figure) and I visited the five groups to make the presentation. £500 to these charities was a substantial donation that would have a real impact on their ability to help their communities.

In the dying days of 2022, AskingBristol has begun its third and final experiment to examine whether there is the capacity in the giving side of Bristol to match, say, 100,000 asks a year in *Things*, *Expertise*, *Time* and *Services*. In a similar fashion we have two excellent University of Bristol interns – this year funded by the University itself as part of its Civic Engagement Programme.

AskingBristol has three ambitions. The first is to take it to scale in the Greater Bristol region meeting the needs of 6000+ charities and voluntary/community groups of all sizes, locations, and focus areas. The second is to

make Bristol the world's first *HyperConnected City*. And the third is to socially-franchise AskingBristol in cities and regions around the UK and around the world: AskingBrighton, AskingBerlin, AskingBoise, AskingBergen, AskingBelfast, AskingBrisbane, AskingBratislava, AskingBaltimore ...

What does it mean to be a *HyperConnected City*? I believe that Bristol is already a *SuperConnected City*. We say that Bristol is a village - it is. A village that reveals connections between any two citizens in a short period. If there were such a thing as a Coefficient of Connectivity (x) we would have a value closer to 1 than most other cities in the UK. If we took a sheet of paper and drew dots on it representing all citizens, businesses and organizations in the City, and then subsequently drew lines representing all the existing relationships and connections, the result would be a very dense graph. The higher the Coefficient of Connectivity the denser the graph. AskingBristol adds a new dimension. When the University Botanic Garden is linked to Ambition Lawrence Weston through the fulfilment of an ask, and when The Bristol Branch tree surgeons are linked to Dame Emily Park in Bedminster it is as if a line has been drawn through the sheet of paper from one side to another. If 100,000 asks are fulfilled in the first year, then there are now 100,000 lines through the sheet of paper. We have moved from a dense two-dimensional *SuperConnected City* to a denser three-dimensional *HyperConnected City*.

We are reaching the point where we can assess whether the potential is really there for Bristol – it is largely in the hands of the givers (givers of *Things, Time, Expertise* and *Services*). If not, we are very happy to tell another city how to do it – it would be a shame if Bristol was not the first.