AskingBristol | A Shared Services Model | A Generator of *Asks* | An Organisation Redistributing *Giving* in Bristol's Third Sector | Redefining 'Levelling Up'

1. The Foundations

AskingBristol - A Guide to Our Experiment:

All charities and community/voluntary groups need the help of others to enable the support they give to their target individuals and communities. This support is the true social fabric of our City. It addresses inequality, need and exclusion in every aspect of life. Two years of experiments have given us a focus on four types of "ask": things, time, expertise and services. AskingBristol takes a totally bottom-up approach. It first identifies all the 1000s of charities and voluntary/community groups – whether they are based in a location or in a focus area (food, green spaces, sport, music, young people, older people, conservation, faith, education, language, art, ….). It then offers every group a volunteer to help define and make specific all their different asks. These asks are then pushed upwards through the SuperConnectivity of Bristol to try to find the very best individual, organization, business to fulfil each ask. In this way every group is treated equally bringing a true levelling-up to Bristol's Third Sector to the benefit of all those who live in the region.

The essence of AskingBristol's approach is its simplicity. It is available to charities, community groups, and organisations such as schools, health care, arts, and sports. Typically, they could be the Askers. The Givers

might be businesses, trusts, public bodies, or individuals. The roles could easily be reversed, and it could be a school helping a business, or other organisation, answer a specific problem.

Any group can ask, and anyone can give.   AskingBristol provides a directed way to fulfilment that contrasts starkly with the top-down approaches that are based on search (and necessarily require sophisticated platforms).   AskingBristol's bottom-up approach is based on routing using the SuperConnectivity of Bristol that already exists and is ready for significant enhancement to HyperConnectivity.

The Potential for Hyperconnectivity:

Bristol, like other cities and regions, has a proud record of supporting charities, voluntary/ community groups, and other organisations.

But there exists the potential to offer far more help to those who need it.

For instance, in Avon there are about 4,300 registered charities. When other groups (without formal charitable status) included there are probably 8,000-10,000 organisations. Many have not asked for help in the past, they often rely on their local connectivity. They would like assistance but need guidance and help to make it happen.

Many of these asks might appear quite small. But the impact of a successful match can have a great impact on the way in which those groups are able to support the people and communities they care for. Importantly, AskingBristol will treat all groups equally, whatever their size, location, or focus.

The number of individuals, businesses and organisations successfully giving is a small fraction of those who could donate items, time, expertise and, to a much lesser extent, money. In many cases **potential givers have no idea that anyone wants what they could give**. Even if they believed they had something to offer, finding the group or organisation that would benefit from their generosity is difficult.

More On How We Work:

Apart from the *Askers* and *Givers*, there is another key player in the AskingBristol process: the ***AskAuthors***. They support one or more groups each to pull out, refine and then own their asks at that point in time.   They become longer-term "buddies" to their groups.   They push the asks into the SuperConnectivity of Bristol. They make the connections when a fulfilment is successful.   They evolve their groups' asks over time as needs change and new ones appear.

It is crucial that asks are specific, otherwise they create confusion and uncertainty. They should be precise, achievable, and measurable. The clearer the request in terms of what is sought, and the time and expertise involved, the greater the chances of success.

*"**Asks are the currency of the system**".*

John Manley, CCO, AskingBristol

We began experimenting with the viability of six types of asks, refining these down to **four:**

Things   Time   Services   Expertise

The collection of asks is stored at any one point as an 'unstructured heap' rather than in a database which has a restricted formal language of making queries. The heap is continually changing as asks are matched and removed or become unwanted or expire.   This heap is not externally visible, it is repository that begins the routing journey of each ask – the mechanism is identical to routing in the Internet with backtracking and rerouting if necessary.

It is useful to note that the third sector is a market and has all the features of a market such as competition, failure, mergers, acquisitions, constrained assets and resources, some governance/regulation and external scrutiny.

AskingBristol manages asks in this market. Not all asks will be matched successfully. Some asks will require compromise. Over time AskingBristol, the AskAuthors and the askers will refine asks to increase their successful matching.

"AskingBristol is most accurately considered as a 'generator of asks'..."

Sohail Ali – Editor

AskingBristol is not competing with existing groups, or organisations, and their distinct roles within the community. In fact, AskingBristol's purpose is to **complement** what they already offer. It belongs to them as much as anyone and will hopefully strengthen and add value to their important and valued contributions, supplying them with new volunteering asks.

The many groups and organisations within Bristol's ecosystem include -

- **Anchor***: Location-based organisations supporting multiple smaller organisations in their community, such as the [Southmead Development Trust](#) and [Heart of BS13](#).*

- **Network***: Non-location-based organisations supporting support multiple smaller organisations based on a common theme/purpose, such as [Black South West Network](#) and [LGBT Bristol](#).*

- **Skills-based***: Often businesses offering expertise, such as [Bristol Pro Bono](#) (legal pro bono support), [Bristol Legal Sector Community Engagement Group](#), [Voscur](#) and [Bristol Media](#).*

- **Business and Institution-based***: For example, [John Lewis Community Engagement](#), [University of Bristol Student Union Volunteering Hub](#).*

- **Philanthropic***: Such as [Quartet Community Foundation](#)*

- **Commercial***: Such as crowd-sourcing businesses*

The System:

AskingBristol is an **Ask Service Provider** hosted in the Cloud. This is where activity is carried out by the consumers (*Askers*) and providers (*Givers*). AskingBristol receives asks as 'forms' from buddies via a straightforward intuitive interface. The forms are ingested and made 'live' at which point they are available to be routed to other Service Providers such as Bristol Pro Bono (legal asks) and Quartet Community Foundation.

AskingBristol has a minimal platform for internal audit and bookkeeping. It has a limited set of functions, including some automation.

The specialty lies in AskingBristol being 'bottom-up' - it empowers voluntary groups to promote their needs. The range of possible askers is large and varied in both the voluntary and profit-making sectors, creating plenty of opportunity for invention and creativity.

Scale is the biggest challenge. In a given year there might be as many as 200,000 asks and so there needs to be a corresponding scale with the givers.   We strongly believe that the AskingBristol model and system is viable and capable of dealing with the projected scale.   However this is intimately dependent on firing up the giving capacity in the City region.   The necessary capacity is there.   But it needs to embrace the bottom-up model centred on Things, Time, Expertise and Services.

2. Experimentation: Key Developments

An experiment during the early stages of the pandemic tested our ideas. It involved charities which came up with *asks* both important to them and achievable. ***AskAuthors*** (volunteers) extracted and refined asks to the satisfaction of the charities and *SuperConnectors* were able to find givers for the *asks*.

A number of diverse charities were recruited, along with a variety of *AskAuthors* who were recruited and assigned. *AskAuthors* placed *asks* on a platform - the *asks* were subsequently given to *SuperConnectors* for matching.
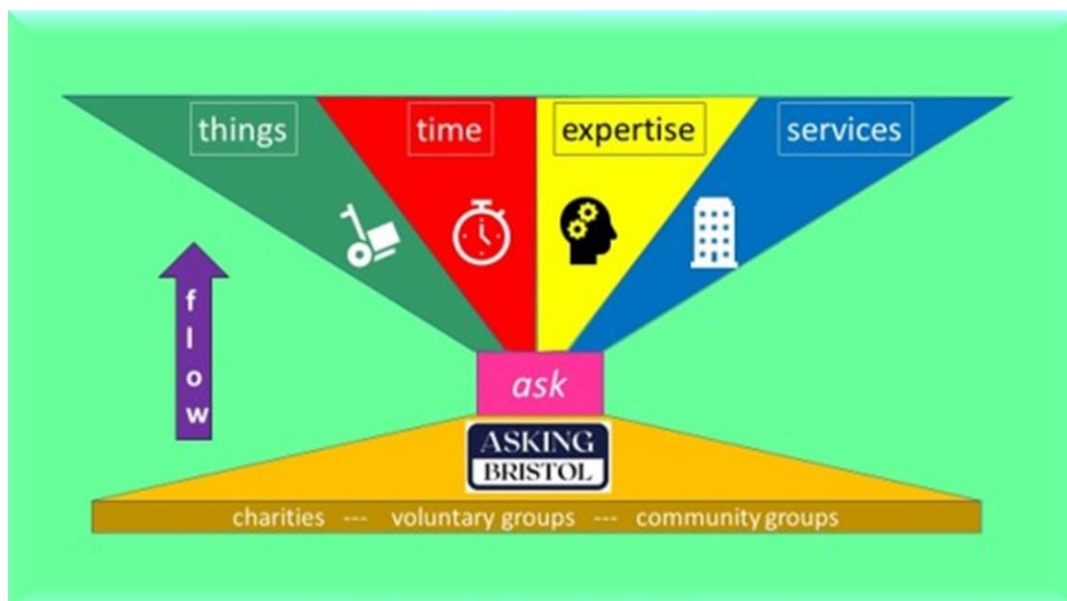
Above: a diagram depicting, in its simplest form, the fundamental structure of AskingBristol's vision, created by John Manley on embarking on the very initial stages of experimentation in Greater Bristol.

"Many things were learned, and people understood the principle very quickly and saw how it would help with problems they had experienced. Charities and voluntary/community groups appreciated the minimal impact on them, particularly now with pressures of lockdown on staffing and funding…
That their asks were owned by the AskAuthor was much appreciated, especially as it meant they did not have to learn yet another new system.
Running a charity can be very lonely *-* ***even more so in a period of uncertainty*** *- so having someone offering help with no other agenda than straightforwardly wanting to listen, understand and help was really valuable."*

An AskAuthor Contribution from the First Experiment, 2020.

3. Asks: The Currency of Our Work:

During initial trial stages, most *asks* comprised of **things given/lent** and **pro bono professional services**, with cash donations being a minority *ask*. The **specification/clarification process** of an *ask* is of crucial importance to help support the small charity in question. Examples of the *ask* specification process can be found below:

- A replacement Christmas tree for *Ambition Lawrence Weston* was complex but the investigative work was interesting.
- Some *asks* are not a one-off. They are on-going and repeated, such as old laptops for *DigiLocal* – there is no upper limit and has to be satisfied by multiple different donations. Similarly, surplus adult bicycles for *Life Cycle UK*.
- With things given it is necessary to ask if it is expected to be 'free' or whether there is a partial budget, or in the case of one *ask*, a full budget.
- With pro bono professional services, it is necessary to make clear the difference between giving advice and actually doing the work.

AskAuthors, Givers, and Personnel:

What makes an effective *AskAuthor* was explored during the primary experiment. A variety of disciplines were recruited, including -

- Two undergraduates from a student third-sector consultancy
- A postgraduate (civil engineering) for a charity based on engineering skills and IP
- A founder of the charity
- A member of the community involved with the community group
- Very active members of the third sector in Bristol
- Novices to this space – in the case of two activity-based charities they had sport and exercise backgrounds
- Super Connectors who assumed responsibility for the asks they had helped generate

All types of *AskAuthors* were **greatly appreciated by the charities they worked with**. Their personal qualities mattered far more than their background. Qualities shown included interest, empathy, good listening (not acting as problem solvers – they may be good problem solvers, but this is not the time), digitally-savvy, capable of seeing the bigger picture, willing to challenge their interlocuter to stretch and broaden their thinking about asks.

There are more potential givers out there than imagined. Every group talked to about AskingBristol wanted more community engagement but did not know how to do it or, if they had tried, could not find a charity they could help. This is a great untapped pool of resource, time, and expertise. An interesting development is a charity matching the ask of another charity, an extra dimension to creating hyper-connectivity.

AskAuthors	Givers
No community-focused project can thrive without the tenacity, empathy, and commitment of its volunteers. We believe in our recruitment strategy; one that brings enriching experiences to our volunteers.	By tapping into the vast pool of unused resources within a city, we can assist those who are keen to donate their time, things, and services by streamlining the process and helping givers reach the causes that really matter to them.

4. Scaling for Expansion:

AskingBristol is ultimately a vision - one that ought to be **reproducible** throughout cities within the UK, and beyond, that have large organisations with the capacity to diversify their donations to the small charities that need it. Imagine there are 10,000 charities, voluntary/community groups, and other organisations in the Greater Bristol area (Avon) that could participate in AskingBristol. If each has 20 asks at any one time it consequently means that there might be 200,000 active asks and in order to succeed AskingBristol has to meet this demand.

SuperConnectors (those who do the routing – either individuals or organizations (to continue the Internet analogy they are IntraTrees in the AskingBristol InterTree) can be ...

- Charities or similar not-for-profit organisations.
- Existing organisations for which the AskingBristol function would be a small part of their normal operation.
- Those which only exist because of AskingBristol. These could be set up to meet some particular needs but will only exist if adding value. If there is no value, then they cease to exist making them market based.
- They may be commercial organisations as long as their cost is greatly exceeded by their value. A good example of a commercial market-based intermediary is crowdfunding.   A charity might ask for £20,000 as happened in the experiment.   This is not a money ask (as that category does not exist) it is an Expertise ask – expertise that can direct towards revenue generations, microfinancing, trusts and

funds, funding streams, loans, crowdsourcing…   In some of these cases there is a financial cost to raising the money.   **C**rowdsourcers can give access to different types of givers of cash, including mini and micro-givers reached through social media. If the crowdsourcer, which is a commercial entity, takes £2,000 for raising £20,000 that is a viable option for some charities. It is the difference between not raising £20,000 and achieving it for the benefit of those they support.

5. Academic Civic Engagement:

Click the adjacent picture to learn more on the University of Bristol's Temple Quarter expansion.

The **University of Bristol** and the **University of the West of England**, Bristol, together have about 50,000 students, 10,000 staff and 30,000 alumni - about **one sixth of the population of Greater Bristol**.

Both define what it is to be a Civic University of the 21st Century and have long and substantial histories of giving, volunteering, and supporting individuals and communities across the Greater Bristol area. Undergraduates and postgraduates alone contribute 100,000s of volunteering hours a year. AskingBristol could expose hundreds/thousands of *asks* every year, each creating a new connection between the universities and communities of the city.

"Being a Civic University means going out and forming relationships in those communities, regardless of location and focus".

That freedom to choose between those multiple *asks* could create countless new relationships each year, making the Universities truly integral parts of the wider city.

In previous experiments, examples include:

- UWE Bristol giving 20 conference chairs to *BS3 Community* for their Southville Centre
- UoB Law Clinic support to 91 Ways in a publishing contract
- UoB IT Services projects (MS 365 and ERP/logistics/fundraising platform support) with Gympanzees and Mothers for Mothers
- University of Bristol Botanic Gardens giving tree, shrub and flowering plant planting advice, including edible and sensory plantings, to Ambition Lawrence Weston.
- [180 Degrees Consulting Bristol](#) (multiple engagements)
- The majority of AskAuthors have been UoB and UWE undergraduates and postgraduates
- UoB and UWE support to BS3 Wildlife on conservation and wildlife plans for their land in various part of Bristol

Within the Universities there are multiple organisations that would act as *SuperConnectors*. These include Student Union volunteering hubs; the Careers Service; Law Pro Bono Law Clinics; other departmental pro bono groups; student clubs and societies; professional services divisions such as IT Services.

In the initial experiment, *AskAuthors* included **two undergraduates** from *180 Degrees Consulting* and **one postgraduate**. The charities which had the students as buddies were extremely enthusiastic about them, describing them as bright, empathetic, and good listeners who challenged them over their asks. There is an opportunity to have a large number of students *AskAuthors* who would make a huge contribution to Bristol *HyperConnectivity*.

6. Further Practicalities and Learnings on Our Journey (So Far):

Just as it can be lonely being the company chief executive, it can also be lonely as head of charity with employees and volunteers below and a board above. Buddies, when discussing asks, can become a independent friend/mentor. This is particularly valuable at times of high stress and uncertainty as now, regarding the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

It is also worth considering that some *asks* require several different match possibilities tried at the same time. There is the potential for multiple successes.

AskingBristol **hopes to resemble a blueprint for which other cities can revolutionize their approach to third-sector engagement. As such, one may consider our project a 'handbook' of learnings for other jurisdictions to replicate.**

AskingBristol requires funding by way of grants and donations - **and we believe its operation can become integral enough to the region to justify this**. To be sustainable, the level of funding required has to be **minimal**. This has implications for the platform and any staffing. An additional option is to build the platform, know-how, case studies and integration with the wider ecosystem. Then to franchise this as a package to cities

in the UK, and potentially beyond – *AskingManchester, AskingNewcastle, AskingMilan, AskingBerlin, AskingDenver*. The revenue from franchising would provide sustainability for *AskingBristol*.

Through years of experimentation, interaction, and improvement, we have continually learned more about the untapped potential of the city.

One of the greatest values of *AskingBristol* is exposing the many *asks* of all types of charity and other group in the city. The majority of these asks would **never have been exposed**. These asks are a raw material that allows tens of other organisations in the city to ingest them and provide things/time/expertise to every charity and voluntary/community group in the city regardless of size, location, or focus.

AskingBristol creates a fabric of asks through which thousands of players build a *HyperConnected* City to the long-lasting benefit of all its citizens.