



WE RETHOUGHT PARKS

BLOOMSBURY SQUARED

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ABOUT THE RETHINKING PARKS PROGRAMME

Rethinking Parks was a joint Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund England programme to find, support and test new approaches to raising income or reducing costs for public parks. Public parks face cuts of 60% and more from current local authority revenues over the next decade, and this programme trialled new methods and models to address this funding gap. Other resources from the Rethinking Parks programme, including descriptions of other models, the summary report and links to tools for the sector can be found at: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/rethinking-parks>

ABOUT BLOOMSBURY SQUARED

The Bloomsbury Squared project focused on nine squares in central London between High Holborn and Euston. All the squares are managed and maintained by London Borough of Camden; some on a long term lease from other owners. They include famous spaces such as Russell Square and less well known ones such as Queens Square.



BLOOMSBURY SQUARED AT A GLANCE



Funding parks and squares improvements through a compulsory business levy

A parks-focused Business Improvement District (BID) could raise significant funds to improve parks. In a BID, business rate payers elect to pay a levy for a fixed period of five years that is used for local improvements. BIDs are already well known in the UK, but none are specifically focused on parks. If the regulations were changed, the levy could also be invested in an endowment, thereby creating provision to maintain capital improvements funded by the BID.

CORE CHARACTERISTICS



MEDIUM TERM
DELIVERY



HIGH RISK,
HIGH POTENTIAL
MODEL



BUSINESS
ENGAGEMENT

WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL IMPACT?

The proposed Bloomsbury Squared Parks BID, based on a 1.5% business levy on properties with a rateable value of over £60,000, could have raised £4.2m over the 5 years of the BID. The amount available for parks will depend on whether wider amenity improvements are included, as well as the size of the area covered and the total levy.

WHERE MIGHT FUNDING COME FROM?

- Business rate payers would fund the levy
- Development support may come from BID establishment or other grants

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR DELIVERY?

- A supportive local authority
- Charismatic champion(s) from the business sector
- Skills and expertise in business engagement, campaigning and BID management
- Ability to identify a sufficiently attractive offer for businesses, so that more than 50% of them vote for the levy
- Parks in locations where businesses could benefit directly or indirectly from improvements made

HOW LONG MIGHT IT TAKE?

Under current guidance, BIDs take two years to development. The term of a BID is five years.

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WHAT THE TEAM DID

WHAT WAS THE TEAM'S ORIGINAL IDEA?

London Borough of Camden (LBC) wanted to find out whether voluntary or compulsory contributions from businesses, residents and institutions could sustain parks in the Bloomsbury area. The team were particularly interested in exploring a parks-focused Business Improvement District, raising contributions from businesses. Similar ideas have been successful elsewhere (e.g. in Bryant Park in New York;) but this was a new area of exploration for the UK.

In developing the concept, LBC worked with:

- Shared Assets, a land-based social enterprise, who carried out user surveys, baselining and options assessment
- A 'shadow board' of representatives from residents' associations, parks Friends groups, conservation societies, landowners (not all squares are owned by the local authority), key institutions and, most importantly, business interests
- A group of businesses and institutions surrounding Red Lion Square where the concept of voluntary contributions was tested
- A BID campaign expert, Helen Santer Regeneration Consultants

WHAT DID THE TEAM DO?

1. LBC recruited a Programme Manager to run the project, working alongside the LBC park management staff.
2. LBC formed an interim stakeholder advisory group to provide feedback on the project and how it should be developed. The group included representatives of key local stakeholders including residents, Friends groups, universities and institutions, and local organisations. Business representatives were also involved.
3. Shared Assets completed a baseline analysis of the squares on a site by site basis. The team researched how much the squares cost the Council to run and what condition they were in. User surveys and one-to-one interviews provided the team with insights into what different stakeholders valued and where opportunities for improvements lay. The process was also helpful in building consensus with key individuals.
4. The baselining showed that stakeholders felt that the sites were in good condition, although there were some concerns that quality was declining. It also showed that an area-wide approach would be better than a site-by-site strategy, particularly given how close the squares are.
5. The team then identified success indicators, targets and decision points, to give them a framework for testing the model and deciding whether to go to a ballot. This also helped the team tease out the finer details of the project plan and focus on the specific activities needed to meet the targets.

6. Shared Assets proposed the 'Parks Improvement District' model to LBC, with an initial financial model and a clearly defined boundary for the District. Their analysis indicated a 1% levy on business rate payers above a £60,000 threshold could generate up to £1.17 million per annum for squares. Opportunities for events and improvements to the squares were also identified, an important component in articulating the value of a business levy.
7. The LBC team tested the level of business and community support at one location (Red Lion Square). A sponsorship event in the square confirmed that there was a high level of support for the squares, that local people do not want to see major changes and most importantly, both businesses and local residents were prepared to provide voluntary and financial support.



The success of the business sponsorship event in the Red Lion Square prototype demonstrates that support can be forthcoming from the commercial companies if you can provide a sufficiently attractive return for the business.



(Shirley Blake, Bloomsbury Squared Programme Manager)

8. The stakeholder group evolved into a interim Partnership Board with a sharper focus on all nine squares and the business support required to pass the levy. The partnership board was a mix of businesses, institutions and local resident representatives - where most BIDs only involve businesses. This approach was adopted because of the high level of concern amongst local residents about commercialisation of the Squares, and the need to ensure a satisfactory balance of perspectives.
9. The final step for the team was working with a BID campaign expert to assess the wider business community support for a BID initiative. An email survey was sent to senior representatives at over 300 local firms. The campaign expert interviewed twelve individuals face-to-face, fifteen businesses by phone and the Chair of a local business association who represented a further 140 businesses.

WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT NEXT FOR THE TEAM?

The demonstration project in Red Lion Square has largely been a success. As a result of one on one engagement with businesses, and bringing businesses and residents together to hear about the potential for improvements, there are now regular volunteers who tidy and do clearing and planting in the square. The events also raised funding for new flower beds. A working group of volunteers has now developed into a formally constituted Friends group for the Square, which is developing an action plan of improvements and fundraising activities for volunteers.

The business survey found little appetite for a parks-only BID. There was some interest in a BID with a remit to encompass parks and wider amenity improvements (for example, the streetscape and the public realm linking the squares). However, concerns were raised about how a Bloomsbury BID would relate to existing BIDs in the area. The eventual decision of the interim Partnership Board was not to pursue a parks-focused BID through to a formal ballot of local businesses.

The project has raised the awareness of the value of the squares with the wider community, including key influencers. Businesses and other stakeholders have expressed support for specific activities, such as philanthropic donations, enhanced planting and employee volunteering in the parks.. The interim Partnership Board now has strong connections and a diverse membership, and is exploring setting up a Bloomsbury-wide Trust to support the squares.



THE POWER OF SMALL TESTING: THE RED LION SQUARE EXPERIENCE.

The potential of a Business Improvement District (BID) levy to contribute to the improvement of town centres in the UK has already been proven. But can this concept be transferred to parks? Are businesses willing to pay to support the maintenance of their local green spaces?

These were the questions behind an engagement exercise in Red Lion Square, one of nine historic squares and gardens in the Bloomsbury area. Camden Council wanted to test the BID concept by seeking investment and resources for the maintenance of Red Lion Square from local stakeholders.

“We started by holding conversations with local tenants and residents, many of whom were already active in the area, and this led to the formation of the Red Lion Working Group. The group came up with different ideas for getting businesses and residents on board, which we then tested out”, recalls Shirley Blake, Bloomsbury2 Programme Manager.

Some ideas proved more effective than others. For instance, a series of volunteer gardening events, facilitated by Groundwork London, was very popular. “This was a quick win – it brought colour to the Square, which is what the residents wanted, and it got more people involved.” (Shirley Blake).

Getting businesses involved was much trickier. A flier to invite support from businesses generated little interest. It was not easy to identify the right contact within a business, or to set up face to face meetings.

One approach that attracted a lot of interest was a local history exhibition located within the Red Lion Square café. This proved to be a useful mechanism for meeting people and making them aware of the opportunities to get involved. It also brought the project to the attention of local businesses that use the café regularly. After viewing the exhibition, one business came forward with the offer of £2,000 to help commemorate the death of one of their employees whilst working for them near the Square, and another is considering providing £40,000 to upgrade the outdoor area of the café, in return for corporate use of the square. This shows the importance of understanding the motivations of individual businesses to support parks, and ensuring that opportunities for support reflect these different business needs.

Jim Walsh is the Chief Executive of Conway Hall, an independent charity and arts venue facing the square. He recognised early on that this was an opportunity to build links with the local community and prepare for imminent cuts in public sector investment in the square. Jim has offered to host meetings and store equipment in the Hall and he has made an active contribution to the Working Group. Whilst positive about the progress so far, Jim also recognises the importance of adopting a sensitive and inclusive approach when seeking private investment: “Residents may be opposed to commercialisation, particularly if they think this will hinder their access to the square. Yet at the same time it is important to be commercially minded to protect the park and prevent it from declining. This experience has shown that it’s important to get a sufficient number of people around the table who care about the area and then get them to set the parameters of what they are comfortable with. For example, residents might say they only want five or six commercial activities a year.”

Although it is still early days in Red Lion Square, the notion of residents, businesses and local institutions offering time and resources to support the future maintenance of the site has been proven, and the newly established Friends Group is full of plans to progress this work further.

WHAT ADVICE DOES THE TEAM GIVE TO OTHERS?

Get key stakeholders and a shadow / interim board established early, including business champions who can represent and galvanise the wider business community.

Bring in expertise at the right point: the team reflected that they could have engaged an expert in BID development and consultation sooner.

The baseline analysis highlighted the benefits of considering the squares as a whole, rather than individually. Consultation with businesses suggested that a wider approach, covering the streetscape and public space as a whole, would be even more attractive. This could be achieved by expanding the remit of existing BIDs to cover parks improvements, or creating new ones with a specific parks focus.

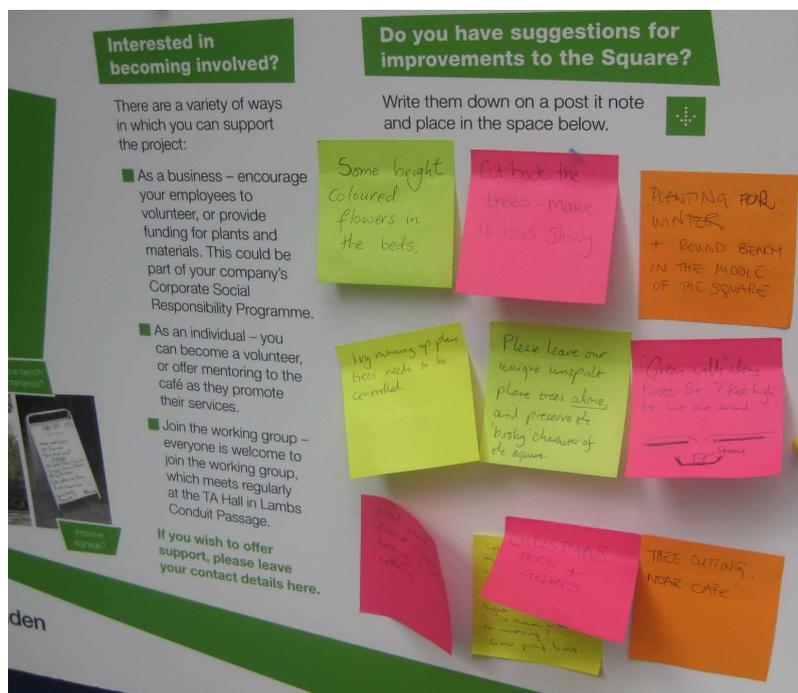


“Investing time on a one to one basis in advance with participants, ensuring that there is a clear understanding of local people’s concerns before going into a wider business or community meeting, is time well invested and enables a more constructive approach.”

“Think through the key marketing & engagement messages clearly. In our case it is not just selling the idea of a compulsory BID levy, but also selling the area wide strategic partnership approach.”

“A BID needs to offer clear value for money for local businesses if it is to be successful. This might be the ability to offer parks as an open space for product launches and corporate events; better parks management to reduce any anti-social behaviour in an area and increase footfall; wider business initiatives such as business networking and training opportunities; recycling schemes, corporate volunteering opportunities, and linkages to public realm improvement projects. If these type of business benefits cannot be offered by the prospective BID partnership, then it will be difficult to attract business support for the BID approach.”

“Whilst there is a good public understanding of the pressures on Council budgets, there is still a strong perception that businesses already pay for parks maintenance work through the business rates, and a resistance to paying additional levies for maintenance work. In the Camden pilot this was not assisted by the fact that the Bloomsbury Squares are currently in reasonably good condition - businesses did not see an immediate problem or need for any action. Capital public realm projects are more likely to be supported.”



QUICK GUIDE TO DELIVERY: BLOOMSBURY SQUARED

Organisations interested in pursuing a parks-focused Business Improvement District - either as part of a wider BID or as a sole focus - are advised to follow existing **BID guidance** (See below links). To launch a successful and effective parks BID, it will be important to involve a wider range of stakeholders (e.g. Friends groups), to baseline current investment and amenity value of parks covered, and above all to clearly articulate the value of parks improvements for local businesses.

WHERE CAN I GO TO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/business-improvement-districts>

<https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/London-BIDs-handbook-GLA-web.pdf>

<http://www.nesta.org.uk/bloomsbury2-squared>

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