Unearthing the Treasure in Our Communities

March 2025.

A Community Building Treasure Tour Report

Contents

Summary - Unearthing Treasure 2
Preparing to go on a journey together 3
What's important 3
Planning the adventure 3
Community Building Treasure Tour itinerary 3
An invitation for active community builders to join the Tour 4
An invitation for 'Storytellers' to share their story of neighbourhood. 4
Capturing the story of the Treasure Tour 4
Getting ready to set sail 4
Preparing those travelling as 'Shipmates' 4
Setting sail 5
What community treasure are we hoping to find? 5
Destination – One 6
Neighbourhood One 6
Neighbourhood Two 6
Destination – Two 7
Neighbourhood Three 7
Neighbourhood Four 7
Community treasure unearthed 8
Sharing the Treasure 8
What has changed? 8
Valuing the skills and expertise 9
Bringing people together 9
Sharing the experience 10
Unpacking the learning 10
Reflections 12
Acknowledgements 13

'Compassion and kindness are signs of a powerful community'

Treasure Tour Participant

Summary - Unearthing Treasure

The idea around hosting the Community Building Treasure Tour's was to offer a unique opportunity that shone a light on citizens who are active in building and weaving community together in their neighbourhood. Storytelling was at the centre of the tours, unearthing the hidden treasures of locally grown change in neighbourhoods across Birmingham.

The concept was created and curated by a group of people, with experience and knowledge of community building. This group of people alongside the Community Development Practice Hub, hosted by BVSC, in partnership with Birmingham City Council through Adult Social Care, explored four neighbourhoods in two areas of Birmingham, seeking people who are already building community in their neighbourhood.

The Community Building Treasure Tour's brought two groups of people together. Those who are active in building community in their neighbourhoods - 'Storytellers' and those curious to know more - 'Shipmates', who would visit 'Storytellers' in their place. These two groups went on a journey of connection and celebration together, sharing stories of building community.

'Shipmates', selected to travel on one of the two area destinations in Birmingham, with each tour destination, departing from a central location, visiting two neighbourhoods. 'Shipmates' travelled together and were welcomed on arrival by 'Storytellers' who would share their story of place. Each tour was hosted by a local organisation, in one of the four neighbourhood destinations. Their involvement helped curate each tour, being valued for their guardianship of their neighbourhood story and the 'Storytellers' who held the narrative around community building in them.

One month later both 'Storytellers' and 'Shipmates' came together to reflect on the Treasure Tour experience. What emerged from the time spent together, was the value being present with each other in this way. Treasure Tour participants expressed an increase in energy to see what is possible, leaving with confidence in the power of storytelling.

The Community Building Treasure Tour activities were convened in an equitable and participatory way, encouraging independent thinking, and enables real stories to emerge. This brought an opportunity to amplify what is being experienced by people in their neighbourhood, as they built community. This also revelled locally grown change, as local people came together strengthening social capital as well as their connectedness.

Overall, the stories that emerged from the time spent together reflected the importance of creating relationships of trust, which overtime enables a neighbourhood to flourish. The reflections also valued how people showed up with each other, discovering what is already happening that is valuable and vibrant in neighbourhoods across Birmingham.

Preparing to go on a journey together

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." - Lao Tzu

What's important

The concept behind the Community Building Treasure Tour was to shine a light on those citizens who are active in building community alongside others. It was also intended to amplify and celebrate what is already happening in communities as well as recognising how relationships are woven together to form an ecology of social connectedness across a neighbourhood.

There was also a wish to notice community builders who are young as well as those from diverse backgrounds and communities of interest who are active but do not express what they are already doing in this way.

It was hoped that coming together would inspire those in communities, who could either nurture or stifle this approach, by exploring community building practice through storytelling.

In hosting the Community Building Treasure Tour there were questions asked, *'who isn't yet in these spaces?'* and *'who are the people who are the future community builders in Birmingham?'* Through networks and connections people with a passion for their community were invited to join the Community Building Treasure Tour.

Planning the adventure

A small group of independent freelancers came together, who are themselves immersed in community building practice across Birmingham and beyond.

This group offered a breadth of community development practice including, convening, hosting community spaces as well as evaluation. An initial set of aspirations with an overall perspective to *'build community through sharing stories.'* These aspirations would underpin the Community Building Treasure Tours.

- *Increasing diversity*
- *Growing participation and visibility*
- *Defining what is valuable about doing things in a community building way*
- *Using story led evaluation*
- *Igniting independent thinking.*
- *Inspiring other people to want to go on this listening journey in their own neighbourhood*

'Communities are about the relationships we have with each other' Treasure Tour Host

Community Building Treasure Tour itinerary

Two areas in Birmingham were identified as places to conduct the Community Building Treasure Tours. The intention was to bring visitors from other neighbourhoods and create a reciprocal understanding of community building, which inspires a movement of active citizens in Birmingham's communities and neighbourhoods.

Four local community organisations, active in one of the two tour destinations, were invited to participate in the preparation and hosting of a tour destination. Development practitioners became part of a wider group and established the Community Treasure Tour as the overall title.

Their wisdom and knowledge about their neighbourhood, and the active citizens they are alongside were important. These citizens are the 'Storytellers' and shared their stories of contribution to their neighbourhood.

Two groups of people were highlighted, 'Storytellers' and 'Shipmates,' which was to reflect the theme of 'Treasure Tour' as the project developed.

What was important was to bring people together, in a relational and equalising way. There was a request to remove labels and titles and to be human alongside those sharing stories of growing community. In being intentional as to how the Community Building Treasure Tours were hosted and convened, invited an opportunity to ignite each other's thinking and enable a sense of being part of a movement around community building.

28 people joined the Community Building Treasure Tours as 'Shipmates', alongside 23 'Storytellers' who shared their story of contribution and community building in their neighbourhood.

The Community Building Treasure Tour structure included one day in each of the localities, where 'Shipmates' would visit two neighbourhoods. They would then return for a half day reflection session with 'Storytellers' and hosting organisations to explore *'what's changed?'* and *'what's next?'*

An invitation for active community builders to join the Tour

The invitation to participate in one of the two tour dates, was carefully considered. What was important in the invitation was to state 'Shipmate' participants were not passive participants looking to be *'tourists'* but would show up with genuine curiosity and create a reciprocal dialogue by being present with storytelling host organisations.

An invitation for 'Storytellers' to share their story of neighbourhood.

'Storytellers' were hosted by participating local anchor organisations, who were alongside them enabling them to share their stories of contribution to building community in their neighbourhood.

Capturing the story of the Treasure Tour

Insight and reflections throughout the tours were captured by being immersed and active in all of the tours activities. Participant voices were gathered throughout using a variety of ways and analysed. Themes emerged from the stories gathered which helped inform what is next for the development of community building practice in Birmingham.

Getting ready to set sail

"Don't listen to what they say. Go see." - Chinese Proverb

Four neighbourhoods were identified as places where an active community building approach is already embedded. Within these areas the practice of community building is being hosted and convened by a local organisation. These local organisations are trusted in their neighbourhoods as being alongside local people.

The two Community Building Treasure Tours took place on different days and on each day visited two neighbourhoods.

Preparing those travelling as 'Shipmates'

As part of the tour experience 'Shipmates,' were welcomed at a central location and taken by bus to the Community Building Treasure Tour destination.

'Shipmates' received a *'Tour Pack'* containing information about the neighbourhood, to help welcome those on the tour bus to arrive well.

Included in the *'Tour Pack'* was a set of good life question cards. Each card has a question, which is used to start up a conversation. It was also a resource to be used beyond the Treasure Tour to support

'Shipmates' in their community building practice. 'Storytellers' also received a pack of these cards, enabling them to continue hosting conversations in their community.

'Shipmates' shared their feedback as to how the Community Building Treasure Tours were convened and hosted. Responses offered a sense of value in travelling together on a bus to the destinations, as it allowed an opportunity to meet others on the same journey.

> ***'Brought people together, we had a chance to talk to other people while travelling'*** Shipmate

Having *'Tour packs'* also added to the sense of welcome as 'Shipmates' embarked on the tour. Feedback highlighted this was valued by those joining the tour as 'Shipmates.'

> ***'An extremely well organised and thoughtful list of activities which encouraged engagement. The chance to hear REAL PEOPLE talk about their journey and achievements. A deep sense of connection.'*** - 'Shipmate'

Setting sail

"Wherever you go, go with all your heart." – Confucius

What community treasure are we hoping to find?

'Shipmates' were asked this question as they embarked on their tour bus. The hosting team took the opportunity to fully prepare the people as they arrived as visitors and asked the question *'What community treasure are we hoping to find?'* The responses showed themes of listening to real stories; curious to know how ideas are formed and *'what's different.'*

> ***'What are people's mindsets and approaches? What are peoples perspectives? What excites people about what they are involved in?'*** Shipmate

Several participants were more specific in what they were hoping to discover in relation to their own community building practice in their neighbourhood.

> ***'I think it will be really worthwhile to see how different communities work together and if there is a difference to how our community works'*** Shipmate

> ***'Hoping to feel inspired with new ideas for our community and looking forward to meeting new people and seeing the different types of people who access these community spaces and hearing their stories.'*** Shipmate

Whilst for others this was a chance to explore a neighbourhood that was not known to them or where not normally associated with.

> ***'Wanting to open a window on a part of Birmingham that I know nothing about. really intrigued.'*** 'Shipmate'

> ***'A chance to be with people I wouldn't normally meet and to visit two locations which as an Asian young person were no go areas'*** 'Shipmate'

Destination – One

Neighbourhood One

Our Community Building Treasure Tour began in the first neighbourhood where 10 'Storytellers' welcomed the tour bus.

The hosting organisation had gathered local people who are active across the neighbourhood and enable a range of activities to happen. 'Shipmates' were welcomed and invited to have conversations about how community building takes place.

'Storytellers' shared the value of being connected with each other, building community through enabling local people to contribute their skills and interests that develop an ecology of activity.

There was an abundant generosity, as local people shared their gifts and skills with 'Shipmates.' Stories were told of neighbours connecting with each other and inviting them to be part of what was happening here. Stories showed this was a place where diversity and inclusion are woven into their community building practice to create a flourishing place.

'Shipmates' were guided through a *'River of Flowers'* moving from building to an outdoor pocket park and then onto the allotment space where more activity brings local people together.

Lunch was shared and conversations continued over food, with 'Storytellers' offering an openness to share their story of contribution, being proud of what is being achieved here, *'everyone here is valued'*

Neighbourhood Two

'Shipmates' returned to the bus and headed onto the second neighbourhood of the day where 6 local 'Storytellers' shared their personal experiences of what it is like living in the neighbourhood.

These 'Storytellers' now active community builders themselves, brought sensitivity and depth of thinking to their practice of community building. This created a safe and trusted place for people to feel welcomed and included. 'Storytellers' expressed the importance of relationships and knowing it takes *'more time than you think'* .

There was also an appreciation that community building requires a consistency in relationships too. This helped the 'Storytellers' discover what was important in being involved and making a contribution to their neighbourhood.

'Storytellers' also shared some of their key elements to building community, that of being agile and adaptable depending on who you are alongside as well as being prepared to go on a journey together.

Destination – Two

Neighbourhood Three

Our second Community Building Treasure Tour journeyed to the second tour destination and the third neighbourhood. The new 'Shipmates' who embarked on this tour were met by the hosting organisation rooted in the centre of this locality.

The history of community building in this neighbourhood was motivated by a person arriving in the area, to find there was nothing for young people to do, which resulted in growing activity bringing young people together.

A guided tour through a shopping centre, invited 'Shipmates' to think differently about using spaces to bring people together and grow relationships. 'Storytellers' brought their personal stories of what it was like walking through the door and receiving a warm welcome at a time of needing support. This warm welcome was a significant motivational force to enable their involvement in building community with others.

'Storytellers' acknowledged as their confidence grew they wanted to step forward and offer other people the same generosity they had experienced. 'Storytellers' shared their motivation and their interest behind growing community by changing the landscape in their place. Exploring what might be possible with empty shops or abandoned car parks.

These stories spoke about shifting the perspective on physical assets that are present in neighbourhoods and are underutilised. In doing so, these spaces have become part of the local social infrastructure and now offer safe connecting places in the heart of the local neighbourhood.

'Storytellers' shared their love of making and growing things, with stories of welcome and inclusion, which enabled an oasis for people to come together, get involved and *'have a go.'*

Neighbourhood Four

Our final destination brought us to the fourth neighbourhood, where 'Storytellers' were located in different places across the neighbourhood. Again those travelling were invited to listen to how 'Storytellers,' *'got on with things'* in their neighbourhood. Stories highlighted how people grew a sense of community by taking simple actions to support each other.

The tour continued around the neighbourhood on the bus, with 'Storytellers' stopping at key points to share stories and history of all the community building activities that utilised the assets in their community.

'Storytellers' expressed their experience of being connected with the host organisation as being the motivation to step forward, by being active in a visible way across the neighbourhood, which invited others to be part of growing community together in simple ways.

One of the stories shared was about the value of intergenerational sport in a community space, where playing football together had enabled local people of all ages to get to know each other. The invitation was to just play football and became the motivational energy to grow community, where everyone including

young people could get involved and have a go.

Community treasure unearthed

On the returning journey home 'Shipmates' were asked the question *'What Treasure did I find today?'* Responses revealed community building is unique to each neighbourhood. Individual experience is a motivational force to stepping forward, with an underlying willingness to share what is valuable in their neighbourhood and build community together.

'Shipmates' observations recognised the resourcefulness and attitude to *'have a go'* in the stories shared by 'Storytellers.'

> ***'A chance to hear inspiring stories and to meet amazing people. To recognise where there's a will !!! anything is possible'*** Shipmate

> ***'the possibilities of changing a space just by being in the space.*** Shipmate

> ***'What I hoped to find, the people who are the seeds because they just do stuff, they want to do. Can't believe that just playing football has changed things for a whole community'***
>
> Shipmate

'Seeing the art of the possible' Shipmate

From the question *'What has made today time well spent?'* 'Shipmates' acknowledged the impact as being inspired and an opportunity to meet, renew their passion for community and what is possible together.

> ***'Hearing stories from inspiring people. Getting to know different communities and the fantastic people who make them up.*** Shipmate

> ***'Learning all about the passion local people have for their areas.'***
> Shipmate

Sharing the Treasure

"Travelling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller." - Ibn Battuta

A month later a reflection session was hosted for each Community Building Treasure Tour destination. The intention was to bring 'Shipmates' and 'Storytellers' together as an opportunity to reconnect, develop relationships as well as reflecting on the overall Community Building Treasure Tour experience as a group.

In this session people were not defined as being either a *'Shipmate'* or a *'Storyteller'* but as a *'Treasure Tour Participant.'* In being together it was hoped that the collective wisdom would inform what might be possible as a group of people committed to developing a community building practice, which is co-created with citizens active in their community.

What has changed?

The question *'what has changed since you joined the tour?'* was asked all participants attending the session. Responses revealed there was a renewed sense of unity, connectedness as well as a feeling of not being alone in growing community since the

Community Building Treasure Tour had taken place.

> ***'inspiring stories equalled renewed confidence that citizens and communities can do things for themselves'***
>
> Treasure Tour Participant

Themes emerged revealing perspectives had changed in terms of community building practice. The largest theme was around the value of connection.

- *'Valuing the connectedness by being present together'*
- *'Reflecting more on a practice of community building'*
- *'Increased energy to see what is possible'*
- *'Developed an increase in confidence'*
- *'Valuing the power of storytelling'*

There was a sense that in journeying in this way together has enabled a greater sense of confidence, to recognise what is being achieved. It has also given permission to be more curious to seek connection with others and build new relationships.

The impact of taking part in the Community Building Treasure Tour enabled individuals to celebrate the treasures located in neighbourhoods as well as what might be possible to achieve more together.

> ***'more positivity about the power of communities to develop themselves'***
> Treasure Tour Participant

Valuing the skills and expertise

Within the reflection session, participants were encouraged to think about their requests that would support them in their community building practice. In analysing these, was a mixture of requests that focused on connecting and growing relationships with others, who were also active in their communities.

Other requests included enhancing skills in hosting community conversations and deepening knowledge to sustain local activity, including visibility and funding.

Participants were also invited to make an offer to one another. Again, within the responses the invitation to connect was significant. Offers of support also included goal setting, planning, mentoring as well as supporting each other.

Bringing people together

Woven in the feedback across the Community Building Treasure Tour was the sense of unity, togetherness by being present together. Attention was paid to convening and hosting sessions in an equalising way, removing labels, titles and roles, encouraging people to arrive as themselves first.

In the reflection session the question *'how might we bring people together well?'* was asked. The responses followed similar trends acknowledging how people come

together is important as it enabled a safe and trusted space in which to grow connections with each other.

Conversations and responses also noted that, being curious as to who is missing and seeking connection is a valued aspect in how people are brought together. There was a wish to find new 'Storytellers' who are doing great things in their community.

Responses also revealed the importance of behaviours that are welcoming, warm and respectful. The term being alongside each other was also shared. Acknowledging it takes time for trust to establish and to unearth the abundance of skills and gifts as they present in individuals.

> ***'Seek out new storytellers in the community, we were asked but there are other people that do good things in the community.'***
>
> Treasure Tour Participant

Sharing the experience

In the spirit of the Community Building Treasure Tour, the theme continued and provided an opportunity to hear how participants had valued taking part.

Those present at the final session were invited to write a postcard to someone about their experiences of being part of the Community Building Treasure Tour.

Expressed in the postcards was the discovery of good things taking place in other neighbourhoods. There was also an acknowledgement that people shared similar passions as well as interests and by coming together, have been inspired by stories to continue building community alongside others too.

> ***'had a great time reconnecting with the treasures I met on the tour and appreciated all the wisdom, experience and commitment in the room.'*** Treasure Tour Participant
>
> ***Dear My Community..... I have had a very interesting day full of really nice people that love community as much as we do. The funny thing, its they don't live that far away from us. My next holiday I want to visit them.....'*** Treasure Tour Participant
>
> ***'Dear [Name] ...Having a wicked day wish you were here. Found some wonderful friends and found some hidden treasures. See you soon'*** Treasure Tour Participant

Unpacking the learning

'Wherever you go becomes a part of you somehow.' Anita Desai

The intention behind the Community Building Treasure Tours were to offer a chance for individuals committed to community building to go on a journey together, particularly for those who did not see themselves as community builders in this way.

Storytelling was at the heart of the Community Building Treasure Tour's and valued as an opportunity to ignite thinking. This also influenced the activities of the Treasure Tours in the way it was hosted and convened to *'build community through sharing stories.'*

A sensitive frame was applied to enable an inclusive and equitable environment to be

created. Questions were carefully crafted to ensure everyone could contribute enabling all voices to be heard.

The Community Building Treasure Tour recognised two groups of people, which may not have ever met. In hosting the Tours it was important to create an equitable environment and 'Shipmates' were encouraged to leave their labels, titles and roles behind as they embarked on the journey into a neighbourhood.

For those working in organisations and systems, this was a welcomed opportunity, to spend time with people passionate about community and listen to the stories shared.

Hosting conversations and activities in a relational and humanising way, meant people got to know each other differently. Sharing experiences and hearing what people cared about, brought a reciprocity in knowledge sharing community building stories whilst noticing common threads and differences too.

Analysing the responses to the question *'What now matters enough to me to want to do something about it?'* it was apparent that *'to connect more with others'* was a significant theme. There was also a real commitment to continuing the relationships formed on the Community Building Treasure Tour.

> ***'the connections made matter to me - lots of amazing people doing amazing things.'***
>
> Treasure Tour Participant

Subsequent themes included generating ideas around building community, highlighting celebration, as well as bringing people of difference together, helping people overcome barriers and connect with each other.

There was also an acknowledgement to continue doing what has been started, noticing what is working, encouraging a legacy and sustainability through community building in neighbourhoods.

> ***'helping people to take their next steps and remaining committed to my own community'*** Treasure Tour Participant

Storytelling of community building was valued as something to celebrate. The impact was highlighted around how stories might inspire others or shift mindsets encouraging change to happen.

> ***'I have learnt from the tour, that when you tell your story you inspire others to do all these things, go out their comfort zone and just be part of the community more.'***
>
> Treasure Tour Participant

Reflections

What the Community Building Treasure Tour highlighted is a real desire for community builders to come together, grow their connections and strengthen their practice, whilst celebrating the great things that are happening in neighbourhoods. Since the Treasure Tour, participants have continued growing relationships with each other, developing ideas and enhancing their community building knowledge.

What was valued by Treasure Tour participants was that stories connect us at a deeper level, creating a chance to shift thinking and influence what might be possible or done differently. Storytelling is the conduit for bringing people together. *'Building community through sharing stories'* and foundational to this work. Once a story is told it cannot be unheard and convening spaces with an equitable and inclusive lens is fundamental to community building.

Themes as to what a community building practice might look like are beginning to emerge. They are fluid, interconnected and intertwined.

- **Connectedness –** Inviting a curiosity to seek connections with others and to notice who is missing.
- **Relationships –** building relational networks of value, knowledge, skills and resources, to grow a movement of community builders.
- **Storytelling –** Storytelling is at the heart of community building with communities having agency in their story as to what it is like.
- **Collaboration –** Coming together in a humanising way to inspire and welcome new ideas, through a reciprocity of knowledge as well as understanding.
- **Knowing –** Articulating what is working well in neighbourhoods, what needs to change adapt or be discarded.

Reflections also note that community building is both dynamic and messy. Stories demonstrate that relationships of trust are the vital component to community building, which takes time to grow over many years. Citizens and small community organisations have always been active in communities and neighbourhoods. Since the pandemic their value has become more visible to the wider society and as knowledge grows through a collective wisdom, there is an opportunity to explore what communities can do for themselves.[1] This is underpinned by the notion of 'doing with'[2] which grows local social infrastructure and social capital,[3] that over time builds healthy and connected places to live. [4]

Finally, the voices of Citizens and community builders are central to increasing knowledge as to what community building looks like in Birmingham. By hosting and convening spaces that are equitable, inclusive and equalised invites the storytelling of place to ignite community builders in their thinking as to what matters enough to do something. Moving forward the question remains; how do we grow a movement of people in Birmingham passionate about their neighbourhood, who think together, bring insight to the conversation about their community, where alongside systems can help address an unequal society, where no one is left out?

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1 https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/

[2] https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/projects/do-with

[3] https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Think-Neighbourhoods-Report-FINAL-March-2025.pdf

[4] https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/blog/towards-a-healthier-nation-the-case-for-a-greater-focus-on-neighbourhoods/

Acknowledgements

This report wishes to acknowledge all the 'Storytellers' who generously shared their story of commitment and contribution in their neighbourhood, illuminating what community building looks like in their place. Also to those who travelled as 'Shipmates' to neighbourhood destinations, who were prepared to try something new, give time, listen to stories and share the experience with others about the community building treasure found in neighbourhoods.

This report acknowledges the Community Building Practitioners, who are active in the four locally rooted community organisations and hosted a tour in their neighbourhood. The report also acknowledges their insight around being alongside local people whose diversity of contribution, enables their neighbourhood to flourish.

Finally the report acknowledges a group of co-collaborators, creators and curators, Jo Bagby, Steph Vidal-Hall, Tim Evans and Carol Hebden, who imparted their insight, wisdom and knowledge around community building, bringing to life the community building treasure that exists in neighbourhoods and communities across Birmingham.

If you are interested to know more about **Community Treasure**, please get in touch info@communitytreasure.org or visit www.thrivetogetherbham.org/initiatives/community-treasure

Birmingham City Council Adult Social Care

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Community Treasure

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