

DISCUSSION DRAFT – November 2020

Building our communities - ideas from our conversations

Summary

This paper presents ideas for change in Headington which arose in the recent Covid-19 related conversations organised by Headington Action. The paper has been distributed widely to invite responses from our members, those who have expressed interest in these conversations, and also groups and individuals from more diverse backgrounds.

In outline, the following ideas were suggested.

Community

1. We should go ahead with Connected Communities Week 2021, postponed from 2020, if social distancing rules allow.
2. Manage and develop the network of street coordinators across Headington, noting support for this initiative is being devolved by Oxford Together to local level.
3. Support Oxford Together's practical volunteer network by providing communications across Headington groups and stakeholders.
4. Take steps to encourage 'active citizenship'.
5. Develop and maintain a database of social, health and community activities in Headington, integrating this with the data held by social prescribers in the GP practices.
6. Set up and maintain a network of 'community connectors' to signpost people to support services.
7. Use empty premises as community hubs.
8. Encourage cafes and other premises to provide 'drop-in' spaces.

Environment/traffic

1. Encourage home owners and landlords to undertake small greening improvements outside their properties.
2. Encourage and support small scale environmental improvements at street level eg using the network of street coordinators.
3. Identify areas where more trees could be planted.
4. Make environmental improvements to the centre of Headington and along London Road such as installing planters and parklets.
5. Support plans to encourage walking and cycling and support the concept of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods to reduce traffic through residential areas (subject to appropriate consultation).
6. Support local groups engaged in environmental protection and carbon reduction activities.

Headington Centre

1. Change use of pavement space for better seating, cafes, greening and social interaction.
2. Through promotions encourage people to shop locally.
3. Employ a (part-time) centre manager.

4. Create an on-line presence for Headington retailers.
5. Set up a WhatsApp group for retailers and local businesses (an on-line business association).
6. Encourage the Councils to designate Headington as a '15 minute centre', *ie* a neighbourhood in which residents can access most of their basic, day-to-day needs within a 15-minute walk from home.

Local governance

1. Accept that a Community Council is not likely in the medium term, but liaise with the City Council to explore other ways in which decisions and powers can be devolved to local level.
2. Recognise that Headington has a good set of community groups and thus strengthen, rather than substantially change, them.
3. Build HA's formal relationships with the City Council, faith groups and the primary care sector.

Introduction

This paper is presented jointly by Headington Action (HA) and Headington Neighbourhood Forum (HNF). It contains ideas and suggestions for the development of Headington which arose from 'conversations' during the summer months organised by HA. The conversations focussed on four topics: environment/traffic, communities, Headington centre and local governance, with an emphasis on changed public attitudes and activities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

This paper was circulated for feedback to all members of HA, those who have expressed interest in these conversations including at Oxford City Council, and also groups and individuals from more diverse backgrounds. It will form the basis of a HA plan to be monitored by the HA Executive committee. It is envisaged that some of the ideas will form projects for HA and some will be actions for others where HA's role will be one of encouragement/lobbying.

Background

No one disputes that the Covid pandemic is causing profound changes to our social, political, financial and physical environment. But in the face of disaster there are also opportunities. That is not to suggest that the results of the pandemic are somehow balanced between good and bad. It is simply to recognise that, alongside the pain and damage, there has also been an increase in social cohesion, friendliness and mutual support. Attitudes to each other and to the natural and physical world are changing. Will these changed attitudes persist once the crisis is over? What are the opportunities for change in Headington? Do changing public and political attitudes imply the possibility of a different future for Headington? We set up four groups to consider these questions and chart some general ways forward.

Central Headington: Clearly economic growth will be seriously hit which could lead to reduced levels of public spending on infrastructure and transfer of money into social care and health. There are likely to be structural changes. Reduced public spending may place greater emphasis on community self-help; a shift away from commuting; retailers relying more on having a virtual presence in addition to a physical one. Our large institutions in Headington – primarily in health and education – will play a big role in the local economy.

How might the retail, cultural and commercial centre of Headington be supported, even developed?

Environment: Support for action on climate change could go either way. On the one hand a perception that the world is 'fragile' may increase political momentum for environmental change, on the other hand there may be a rush for growth. At a local level, reduced traffic volumes have led to reduced pollution, a quieter environment, more child play in streets, and a desire expressed by many not to go back (which we are now witnessing). Increased discovery of the benefits of green spaces and countryside may create new demands for improved access. What changes would we like to see (for example traffic free areas, safer access to schools and green spaces, greener spaces) and how might we influence this?

Communities: Much is being said about the value of community. There is a recognition that we are all in it together. Electronically connected communities are growing, through the proliferation of systems like WhatsApp, resulting in people getting to know their neighbours better and provide support for the vulnerable. More individuals have come forward as volunteers. How might we build more connected communities to reduce social isolation and increase neighbourliness? How might we develop active citizenship?

Local political structures: The pressure will be on political structures to deliver for less money. This may result in a centralising of power, or a devolution of governance to the lowest possible level to take advantage of community-led solutions. What form of local government structure do we want and how might we influence this? What are the implications for the Neighbourhood Plan for Headington?

Group members were asked to recognise that

- Ideas should be practical, realistic and low cost, in order to be accepted.
- Ideas should also be capable of being started in the short term if we wish to build on the goodwill and collaborative actions generated during Covid-19. We envisage that these will form the foundation of future longer term plans that will be developed and implemented as and when the situation and timescales become clearer.
- One of the charitable aims of Headington Action is to be inclusive of under-represented groups. So in considering ideas we must seek views of those who have historically been under-represented in decision-making.

Main ideas

The diagram on the following page shows the main ideas from the conversations. The following explanatory comments about the diagram may be helpful.

Communities

The work done by **Oxford Together** in building up and supporting a network of street champions, WhatsApp groups, telephone support and practical volunteers made a real difference during the lockdown. The value of this as a continuing structure to support neighbourliness and encourage volunteering post Covid is evident, if it can be maintained. Oxford Together has stated they will continue to provide, for a year or so, a City-wide service of practical volunteers and telephone support but are devolving the street coordinator network to local groups if possible. We could:

- Manage and develop the network of street coordinators across Headington.
- Support Oxford Together's practical volunteer network by providing communications across Headington groups and stakeholders.

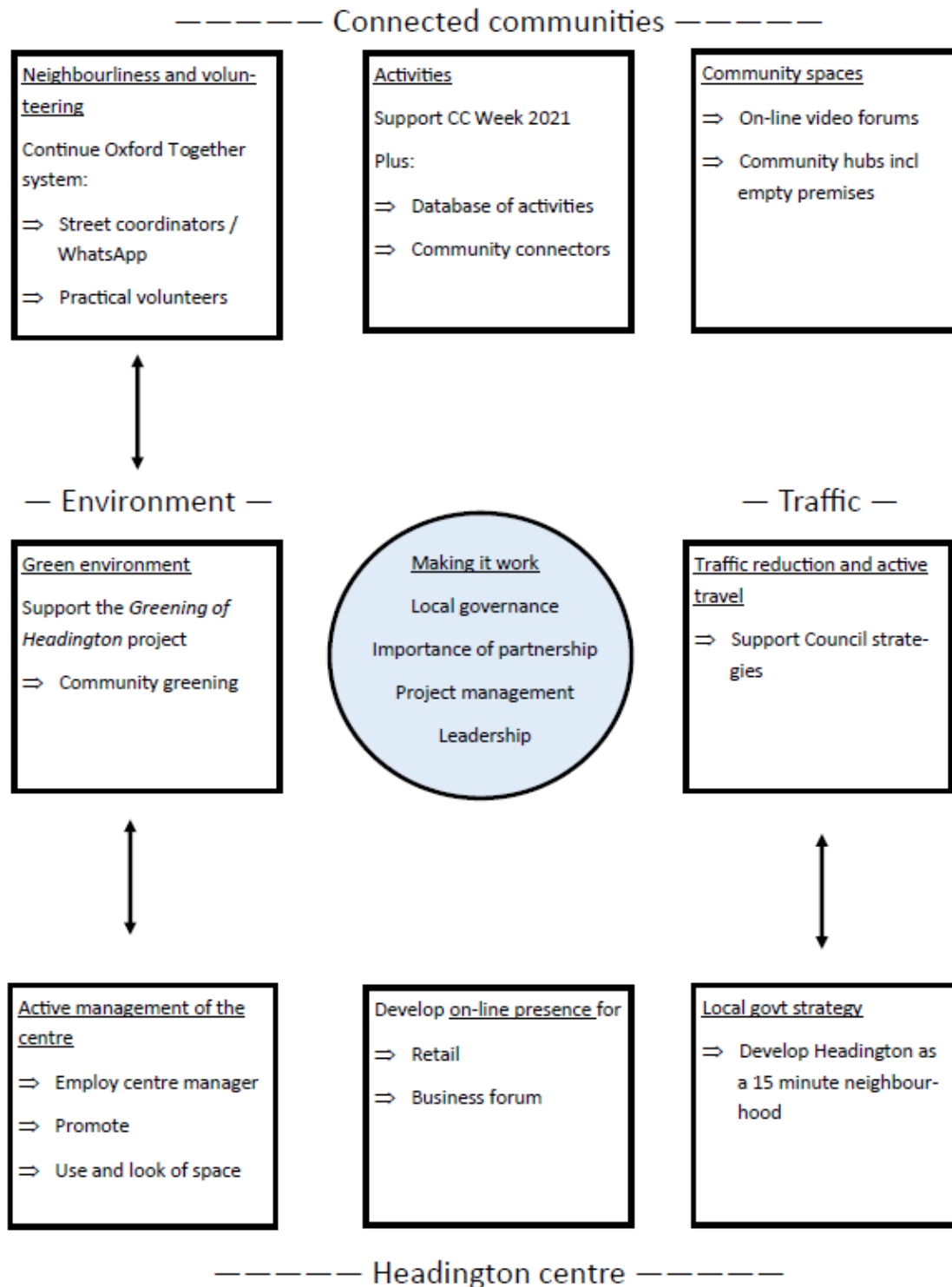
Last year HA initiated a **Connected Communities** programme, working with a number of organisations and individuals in an attempt to reduce loneliness and social isolations. A week of events and activities was planned for June 2020 to focus attention on this issue and spearhead action. Connected Communities Week 2020 could not take place, of course, but the aims and objectives of the week (and the continuing programme) remain more valid than ever. Hopefully this can take place in 2021.

The Connected Communities initiative was never seen as just a week of activities. Two ideas to provide continuity were raised:

- Develop and maintain a database of social, health and community activities in Headington, integrating this with the data held by social prescribers in the GP practices. Such a database spearheaded the excellent work done by Frome GPs in their successful 'Connecting Frome' programme.
- Again, picking up on the successes of Frome, to identify and support a network of 'community connectors'. These are members of the community who signpost friends, neighbours etc about how to access support services etc to improve their well-being. See <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/community-connector-training-available/>

More **community spaces** in Headington, perhaps where people can just drop in and talk, would be valuable. The library is good, but it has a different function. The Community Centre is not central. We could explore using empty shop or business premises; cafes can play a part (see talking benches at Brighton). But these options cannot work during a period of social distancing. In the short term on-line video forums might be a good option.

Key themes from the conversations



Environment/traffic

There was strong support for actions/projects to increase **biodiversity** and improve the **green environment**.

- This could be at a neighbourhood/street level where home owners and landlords might be supported/encouraged to undertake small scale actions. The street champion network might play a role here (thus providing a link to the communities theme).
- Central Headington is seen as a rather barren place. This could change through the introduction of parklets, planters etc. This suggestion also arose in the discussions about Headington centre (see below).

The above are recognised in HA's 'Greening of Headington' project, thus encouragement for this project to proceed.

There was strong desire for actions to reduce the volume and impact of motor **traffic** within Headington neighbourhoods. The introduction of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN) was highlighted as a specific approach. Additionally, in principle, we should support actions to increase active travel. These are not projects for HA – they are beyond our scope and anyway have wider geographical implications. Rather we should support our local authorities in their stated objectives for LTNs and active travel.

Additionally we should encourage both councils to consider designating Headington as a 15-minute neighbourhood (see below).

Headington centre

As retail habits change and there may be greater emphasis on shopping locally this is an appropriate time to consider ways to support and develop the centre of Headington, consistent with the City Council's Local Plan. The discussion group on Headington centre which included councillors, business people and residents identified a number of tactical ways in which the centre could be supported primarily through:

- improvements to the look of the area, eg through planters, parklets and other environmental changes;
- better and changed use of space, eg outdoor cafes and seating;
- a 'shop locally' promotion and use of maps and signs.

All of these, and other ideas, require substantial management effort which imply the need for a (part time) **centre manager**. Financing of such a post should be explored as a priority.

The Covid pandemic has accelerated the move to **on-line** shopping. Some local traders have moved in that direction as an adjunct to having a physical presence. Is there a case for an 'on-line Headington'?

Efforts over the years to form a **business association** have failed due to business owners either being remote or having other priorities. Now may be the time to resurrect the idea, perhaps through an on-line facility such as WhatsApp which would fit in better with owners' busy life styles.

Strategically, we should explore with the City and County Councils the case for designating Headington as a **15 minute neighbourhood**¹, and through that designation identify ways in

¹ *Defined as a neighbourhood in which residents can access most of their basic, day-to-day needs within a 15-minute walk from home.*

which the centre might change. This would be consistent not just with support to the retail/business centre but the aims for active travel and social interaction.

Local governance

HA has been a strong supporter of the Neighbourhood Forum and its development of a Neighbourhood Plan. HA has supported the Forum's aim to establish a Community (Parish) Council for Headington, believing this is the best way to strengthen local community from a political stand point. Oxford City Council has recently concluded a 'governance review' and has decided against setting up such a Council. The report to the Council (Community Governance review – Headington - 30 March 2020) contained a recommendation that officers and councillors investigate how they might assist the Headington Forum to further its community work.

In parallel with the above decision it is obvious that the Covid pandemic will drive changes to the ways in which local authorities will deliver services, even changing the three tier structure of local government, perhaps resulting in devolving delivery to more local levels.

Discussion with some local City and County Councillors and senior executives at the City Council have considered these matter. We have explored whether there is a case for a non-statutory body in Headington which would fulfil some of the functions of a community council, perhaps using the Young model² of local governance as a guide. We have concluded:

- Changes to local government governance in Headington are unlikely to get support from councillors and officers in the near future. This might change as part of local government reorganisation.
- Analysis of those groups already operating in Headington reveals that good structures are already in place, some operating well others less so. HA is well regarded. Therefore we should work with and develop what we have.
 - HNF needs attention, perhaps a new steering group, to provide better focus on planning.
 - Headington Forward would benefit from higher level representation.
 - Links with and support to Headington Community Association could be strengthened.
- We should explore ways of strengthening HA.
 - HA has a large potential work programme arising from these 'conversations'. Some of this programme requires support and interworking with other parties such as primary care, the City Council and faith groups. We would be stronger and have more strategic focus if we expanded HA's executive to include an officer from the City Council's communities team. Strong links with Primary Care and faith groups can be maintained through the Connected Communities programme.
 - We note and welcome the City Council's intent to widen officer support beyond regeneration areas into areas such as Headington with specific focus on communities and on the vitality of neighbourhood centres. HA/HNF is well placed to take advantage of this offer.

² Local Democracy and Community Governance – discussion paper by the Young Foundation (2010) at https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Local_democracy_and_community_governance.pdf