

# ICOA1211: COMMUNITY PLC– A LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IN BLACKPOOL

## Subtheme 01: Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management

**Session 1:** Sustainable Development and Community Engagement

**Location:** Gulmohar Hall, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 10:25 – 10:40

**Author:** Carl Carrington

*Carl Carrington is the head of Planning and Built Heritage for Blackpool Council. He is a graduate of York University (MA Conservation Studies) and has worked with built heritage in both in the public and private sector since first graduating in 2000. Carl is something of a rarity in the UK as a head of local authority Planning Department coming from a pure conservation background. It makes life interesting for his employers.*

**Abstract:** When Blackpool Council decided to purchase Blackpool Tower and Winter Gardens at the height of the financial crisis in 2009, many people thought the move foolish. Not only were these huge entertainment complexes listed at Grade I and II\*, but both were in a poor state of repair. However, local communities had been outraged at their physical decline under private ownership and made it clear that the local authority needed to intervene before things went from bad to worse. The result was an innovative mix of partnership and direct control that has seen a consistent rise in the profit returned back to the maintenance of the buildings and an increased interest from major funders, thanks to the support and close involvement of the local community.

Local government entrepreneurship isn't a new thing, but cuts on UK public spending since 2009 (including serious cuts to the arts and heritage sectors) have forced a back to the future approach and one in which local communities provide a very real role in supporting both as shareholders in the process and its outcomes.

In this presentation, Carl Carrington examines how local government can steer historic buildings into profitable operation in partnership with community groups. The session also looks at how this approach attracts further funding along the way to deliver a combination of innovative new use and the restoration and preservation of built heritage for future generations.

The presentation will use Blackpool Winter Gardens as a case study where direct control by the Council has allowed a high level of public involvement in governance, public access and community activity alongside profitable business operation. It will outline the challenges in setting up the right stakeholder groups, business structures, and governance models. Relevant factors for success will be identified, particularly those transferable into other projects.

**Key words:** *sustaining, engaging, communities, heritage*

## Outline

This paper outlines the way in which local communities in Blackpool have engaged with local government to support the sustainable use of a major historic building in the town, increasing public access and use as well as providing third sector leverage for external funding. It explores how the partnership was formed, the benefits accruing to both parties and the importance of relationships and open dialogue as the key to successful joint working.

## Introduction

JB Priestly perhaps unflatteringly described the seaside resort of Blackpool as ‘the great roaring spangled beast’ in his 1934 book *An English Journey*. In many ways this accurately reflected the brash and confident prosperity of the town as it emerged from the nineteenth century as Britain’s premier seaside resort. It was within this prosperous late nineteenth century context and its social and architectural confidence that Blackpool Winter Gardens emerged. Initially opened in 1878, it contains two theatres, two ballrooms, three restaurants, one exhibition hall and a suite of seven elaborately decorated function rooms in a range of architectural styles.

In March 2010, Blackpool Council took the extraordinary step of buying the complex along with a range of other seafront properties including the more famous Grade I listed Blackpool Tower. They then embarked on a programme of restoration and repair at a time of increasing financial hardship for local government in the UK. Why?



*Fig.1. Blackpool Winter Gardens 1889 (Courtesy Blackpool Council Collections)*

The answer is twofold. Firstly, in developing a masterplan for the regeneration of Blackpool in 2004/5, there was an increasing recognition of the economic importance of built heritage as a part of wider visitor experience. The importance to the local economy was underlined by the fact that buildings like the Winter Gardens continued to deliver a large part of the town's cultural offer. The loss of these buildings would have been a serious blow to the town's image as a resort and to a local economy reliant on the visitors brought by its conventions, conferences and entertainments.

The second reason was public pressure over the condition of both buildings. Letters in the local press and the Council demonstrated that local communities wanted something positive done. The former owners had made it clear they found these buildings (particularly the Winter Gardens) a financial burden. Increasing maintenance costs, falling revenue – often linked to the poor condition of the building – and finally the loss of the party political conferences which had been the lifeblood of the complex, meant the Winter Gardens was not generating a profit. This in turn led to minimal maintenance, long winter closures and a loss of public access.

When Blackpool Council announced in March 2010 that it had bought both the Winter Gardens and Blackpool Tower, locals were overjoyed. The postbag to Blackpool Council and local media changed almost overnight from complaints over condition to letters suggesting how the buildings might be improved. The potential benefits of public ownership and control to the local economy were already well recognised and a condition of central government funding required profits to be reinvested in maintenance and repair rather than extracted and spent elsewhere, creating more sustainable model of ownership.

So far, this would appear to be a story primarily of local government success, but a little recognised aspect of the purchase was the involvement of community support for the principal funding application to the UK Treasury Department. At the time, community support was through Blackpool Civic Trust who provided very active vocal and written support for the purchase. This was significant because most funding bids to public sources are required to demonstrate a level of public support and clear community benefits. Whilst arguably not the most critical part of the funding bid, this was significant in demonstrating wider public support.

## **Partnership and Governance**

Once the purchase had been completed, the Council embarked on a £2.4m refurbishment and restoration programme of the public spaces of the complex and began to explore governance models for operating the Winter Gardens. After exploring options around leasing the operation to the private sector (a model it had already successfully used at Blackpool Tower) it was decided to form a wholly owned arm's length operating company - the Blackpool Entertainment Company Ltd (BECL).



*Fig.2- The Floral Hall – One of the public spaces restored in 2010/11 (Courtesy Blackpool Council)*

The Council was familiar with this type of arrangement, already having four companies within its portfolio including a regional bus and tram network and a number of leisure facilities. This model allowed the Council to appoint an independent Board of Directors whilst retaining control of the operation as the sole owner.

Alongside the new governance arrangements, the Council decided to facilitate the setup of an independent community support group to raise money for projects and restoration. This was designed to give local people a stake in joint-working with the local authority and some voice in decision making about the future of the complex. It was also a pragmatic recognition of the fact that there were some sources of funding that local authorities were not able to access without a third sector partner.

The Winter Gardens Trust was formed in June 2010 and the Board of Trustees included two elected Councillors (representing local government) and the Managing Director of BECL. This was a deliberate move to ensure two-way advocacy for the Winter Gardens Trust and to ensure that support for its activities came direct from sources of authority. The rest of the Trustees were/are freely elected from the membership of the organisation, avoiding any influence by Blackpool Council or its operating company.

To maximize the effectiveness of the Winter Gardens Trust, the Council (through its operating company) contribute an office, IT support and equipment as well as the use of spaces within the complex free of charge for its own events and in facilitating other community groups.

But how did the Trust negotiate such a favourable position?

In reality, much hinges on the pragmatic desire of Blackpool Council to have a third sector partner to support its objectives around access, engagement and funding. Theoretically, this could have been done through Blackpool Civic Trust, who had already demonstrated support for the Council's objectives, but in reality it would have been difficult to insist on local government representation on an already established Board of Trustees. The idea of political representation was seen as essential as the support offered to the

Winter Gardens Trust had real monetary value and the Council felt obliged to monitor the use of those resources and ensure a proper audit trail for decisions.

So can the Winter Gardens Trust be truly independent? To protect the Trust from undue influence, a Service Level Agreement detailing and agreeing the scope and conditions for the Council’s support was put in place. This prevents the Council from using its support as a bargaining chip in any difference of opinion. As an example, the Winter Gardens Trust objected to a recent scheme proposed by Blackpool Council for converting the Pavilion Theatre within the Winter gardens to become a museum and exhibition space.

The principle of a museum in the complex was never an issue, but the Winter Gardens Trust (along with other bodies) felt that some of the proposed alterations would compromise the significance of one of the most architecturally interesting parts of the complex. The Council did not ask the Trust to revise its consultation advice or pressure the Trust to withdraw it even though a funding bid of £18m hung in the balance. The situation happily resolved itself as the funder agreed to look at other locations, but this is precisely the kind of situation where the Council might have sought to influence but did not.

### Understanding the Benefits

One of the biggest challenges for this study has been trying to demonstrate measurable benefits to this particular community and its local government partner. To get a more detailed insight, it’s worth looking at the work of the Winter Gardens Trust to understand where community engagement has yielded visible results. There are three key areas where success can be demonstrated;

**Fundraising & Projects** – There are numerous projects led by the Winter Gardens Trust, some involving partner organisations, but all aimed at community participation. Some of these activities are directed specifically at raising funds but some are simply about bringing people into the building to appreciate its heritage value in different ways. The funds raised have allowed the Trust to fund projects such as the purchase and re-installation of the Wurlitzer organ in the Empress Ballroom, and to underwrite an annual community led film festival.

**Education & Awareness** – A series of interpretation panels, funded by the Winter Gardens Trust have been created for the public spaces of the building explaining its history and development. In partnership with local schools it has also funded the development of an Education pack with material for use with different age ranges. Most significantly, the Winter Gardens Trust provided £18,000 to fund a second and updated edition of a history of Blackpool Winter Gardens by Professor Vanessa Toulmin.

**Facilitating Access** – Blackpool Council were always clear in their desire that public ownership should equate to public access. The regular free tours of the complex were the first way of tackling this requirement, but as the complex has become busier, the focus has shifted to out of hour’s tours and the annual Open Day which allows the public to wander at will through all the historic spaces. The table below demonstrates the general trend in rising numbers of visitors accessing the building either for Heritage or third sector events related to community activity or volunteering and this is the kind of captured data which Blackpool Council can use for supporting funding bids.

	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
Event Type	No. Of Events	No. Of People								
Trust Led	5	875	7	1330	7	2120	9	2160	8	2230

Events										
Partnership Events	0	0	1	220	2	3350	1	4000	1	4200
Facilitated Events	1	75	2	240	2	370	2	840	2	1080
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>950</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1790</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5840</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7000</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7510</b>

Fig.3 Table showing community led or supported events between 2012 and 2016. (Winter Gardens Trust – Trustees Reports 2012, 2103, 2014, 2015, 2016)

**Diverse Community Participation** - One of the interesting factors in the opening up of the complex to community groups is the way in which local cultural associations have responded to this and begun to work with the Trust to deliver a varied programme of cross cultural activity. Diwali and Chinese New Year celebrations are now a regular offering, with programmes featuring music, food and dance in public spaces and as part of ticketed events. The Winter Gardens Trust also works with the organisers of International Women’s Day and the Blackpool & Fylde Volunteer Centre in delivering events around gender equality and volunteering.



Fig.4- Blackpool’s local Nritya Sangam Dance Group preparing for Blackpool’s Diwali celebrations (Courtesy; Nritya Sangam)

It’s clear from the range of activities and projects being delivered, as well as the numbers being engaged that the Winter Gardens Trust and its partners are delivering the goods. But with measurable evidence thin on the ground, how does this benefit BECL and Blackpool Council?

**Corporate Social Responsibility** - One of the bigger benefits to the Council and BECL is the demonstrable commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility. An example of this is the way in which strong commitment to public access has been maintained despite increasing commercial use. Blackpool Council aren’t legally bound to maintain high levels of public access and could make the argument that higher volumes of commercial business benefit the community through a stronger local economy.

**Supporting Funding Bids** - Another important benefit is the way in which community groups are able to support funding bids to a variety of agencies. A recent example of this is the support by the Winter Gardens and Civic Trust's for two bids to government funds for a total of £17.9m for the construction of a new conference centre at the Winter Gardens. These bids were both successful, and in part this was because the Council could provide a detailed evidence base for access and engagement from figures and information provided by the community groups themselves.

## Conclusions

Many local government agencies in the U.K. struggle with local pressure groups or civic societies, but Blackpool Council has successfully supported and engaged meaningfully with such groups, as the existing, long term relationship with Blackpool Civic Trust has shown. The Council have necessarily provided key heritage, planning and grant funding expertise. However, as a consequence of a spirit of cooperation, the Winter Gardens Trust has been able to deliver a number of initiatives which have involved communities and drawn on talented individuals to provide quality advocacy for local people.

Blackpool Council and BECL have effectively been able to devolve much responsibility for delivering engagement to a trusted third sector partner who have delivered real results whilst demonstrating evidence of Corporate Social Responsibility in support of funding and other bids. The truth is that the crossover in membership between the more established Blackpool Civic Trust and the newer Winter Gardens Trust has furnished the community side of the partnership with a group of people holding more than thirty years of experience in working with (and sometimes against) local government across a changing political landscape.



*Fig.5- Winter Gardens Conference Centre Proposals (Courtesy Bissett Adams Architects)*

As outlined in the abstract that was drafted for this paper, elements for the success of this relationship which could be transferred to other projects have been examined. What this examination has revealed is that the circumstances in which this particular partnership was formed are time, place and need specific. What is clear is that the people involved and the skills and qualities they bring to this partnership are critical factors in success. In addition, those at the working end of such partnerships must have the relevant interpersonal and relationship building skills as well as the ability to identify opportunities for positive joint working.

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Courtesy of Nritya Sangam Blackpool

Fig.5- Winter Gardens Conference Centre Proposals Courtesy of Bissett Adams Architects

# **ICOA1211: COMMUNAUTÉS D'APPRENTISSAGE PROFESSIONNELLES: LE RÔLE DES GROUPES D'HABITANTS DANS LE SOUTIEN À L'ENTREPRENEURIAT PATRIMONIAL LOCAL**

## **Sous-thème 01: Intégrer le patrimoine et le développement urbain durable en engageant Diverses communautés pour la gestion du patrimoine**

**Session 1:** Développement durable et engagement communautaire

**Lieu:** Hall Gulmohur, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 10:25 – 10:40

### **Auteur: Carl Carrington**

Carl Carrington est responsable de la planification et du patrimoine bâti pour le conseil municipal de Blackpool. Il est diplômé de l'Université York (MA Conservation Studies) et a travaillé sur le patrimoine bâti tant dans le secteur public que privé depuis son diplôme en 2000. Carl est un cas rare au Royaume-Uni : chef d'un département en charge de l'aménagement issu du domaine de la conservation patrimoniale. C'est un atout pour ses employeurs.

**Résumé:** Lorsque le conseil municipal de Blackpool a décidé d'acheter la tour de Blackpool et les jardins d'hiver (Blackpool Winter Gardens) au plus fort de la crise financière en 2009, de nombreuses personnes ont jugé cette initiative déraisonnable. Ces immenses complexes de divertissement étaient non seulement classés au titre des monuments historiques (Grade I et II), mais tous deux étaient en mauvais état. Cependant, la population locale a été indignée de leur déclin physique lorsqu'ils étaient propriété privée et a clairement demandé à l'autorité locale d'intervenir avant que les choses ne se détériorent. Le résultat a été un mélange innovant de partenariat et de contrôle direct qui a permis une augmentation constante de la part du bénéfice dévolue à la maintenance des bâtiments et un intérêt accru des principaux bailleurs de fonds, grâce au soutien et à l'implication étroite de la communauté locale.

L'entrepreneuriat des collectivités locales n'est pas nouveau, mais les réductions des dépenses publiques au Royaume-Uni depuis 2009 (y compris des coupes sévères dans les secteurs des arts et du patrimoine) ont obligé les collectivités locales à jouer un véritable rôle de soutien à l'avenir, à la fois pour mener le processus et pour participer à ses résultats.

Dans cette présentation, Carl Carrington examine comment les élus locaux peuvent diriger des bâtiments historiques vers des opérations rentables en partenariat avec des groupes d'habitants. La communication se penche également sur la façon dont cette approche peut attirer d'autres financements en cours de route pour offrir une combinaison de réemplois innovants et d'une restauration-préservation du patrimoine bâti pour les générations futures.

Cette communication présente les Blackpool Winter Gardens comme une étude de cas où la prise en charge directe par le conseil municipal a permis un haut niveau de participation du public dans la gouvernance, l'accès et l'activité des habitants aux côtés d'opérations commerciales rentables. Elle décrit les défis liés à la mise en place de groupes d'acteurs, de structures d'entreprise et de modèles de gouvernance adéquats. Les facteurs pertinents de succès sont identifiés, en particulier ceux qui peuvent être transférés à d'autres projets.

**Mots-clés:** Durabilité, Participation, Habitants, Patrimoine