

Community Hubs: **A Scan of Toronto**

SUMMARY REPORT

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Community Hubs: A Scan of Toronto

Introduction

In the summer of 2010, the Intergovernmental Committee for Economic and Labour Force Development in Toronto (ICE) identified community hubs as an area of interest to all three orders of government. A number of community hub initiatives had been initiated in the wake of the initial report of the Strong Neighbourhoods Taskforce (SNTF), a joint initiative of the City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto, supported by the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario. The SNTF identified under-served areas of Toronto as priority neighbourhoods and identified a number of place-based strategies to address local needs, including investment in local community services and a “*neighbourhoods first*” approach to the disposal of surplus public facilities.” At the same time, other forms of hubs were also emerging within the arts, economic development, and education sectors.

The ICE Committee has engaged WoodGreen Community Services to provide an overview of these community hub initiatives. This type of summary has not previously been done. Interviews were conducted with twenty-one organizations and key funders involved in local hub development. The results of this research can be found in the attached *Toronto Community Hub Profiles 2010-11* which includes information on funding, governance structure and programming for each hub surveyed. The following summary report presents key themes from the interviews.

The purpose of this report is threefold:

- 1 – Provide context for the recent spread of hubs in Toronto and define a hub
- 2 – Draw out key themes that emerge from the interviews and identify some of the issues around hub development
- 3 – Offer some suggestions to ICE stakeholders and outline next steps

Community Hubs: Variations on a Theme

In some ways, no idea is new. Known by a variety of names in other contexts, community hubs share elements with settlement houses from the turn of the twentieth century, “anchor organizations” in the United Kingdom, and “neighbourhood centres” currently in existence across Canada. The idea behind the creation of hubs is to bring services to the communities they are intended to serve. A community hub also encapsulates the idea of working outside service silos and improving program coordination. Increasingly, both funders and community groups are initiating hubs in Toronto neighbourhoods.

In effect, the development of community hubs offers two levels of benefits:

- 1. For service providers, economies of scale can be achieved through shared “back-office” duties. Funders also benefit from co-location of service providers.*
 - 2. For residents, services are more accessible and a broader range of service needs can be met. Additionally, as neutral public spaces, community hubs strengthen social networks within local communities.*
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Each of the community hub initiatives explored in this research varies in its governance, program mix and clients focus. Hubs are emerging across a range of sectors, from arts, to business/economic development, to community, to social and recreation services. Private partners are also participating in community hub development and funding.

A Working Definition

Although the term community hub can be applied broadly to various community spaces, three common elements emerged from this review, which help to frame a working definition:

Functions of a community hub:

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| Service: Key services to meet local needs. | Program activity responds to the needs of the local community and involves providers of social, health employment and/or business services. |
| Space: Accessible community space. | The space is seen as public and common areas are available for both formal and unstructured programming. |
| Synergy: Multiple tenants/service-providers are co-located. | The scale and focus of services creates a critical mass that improves overall accessibility for clients and creates synergies for co-locating tenants. Informal social networks among hub users are also fostered. |

Based on this definition of community hubs, the attached matrix shows a range of *place-based* initiatives that are currently underway. Some hubs respond to local geographic communities while others serve only a particular population or service area.

The community hubs which have been included in this review include long-established centres such as The Storefront and Artscape's Wynchwood Barns, the United Way neighbourhood hubs, targeted projects like the ProTech Media hubs for youth, and the 16 newly-identified Full Use Schools from the Toronto District School Board. Key informant interviews were conducted with hub operators, developers and funders, exploring the range of governance, funding and program structures.

Arguably, most of the thirty-plus Neighbourhood Centres and multi-service agencies in Toronto offer comparable features to community hubs and could also meet many of the definitional components of a community hub. A difference is that they tend not to co-locate with other service-providers because they provide a breadth of services themselves. Nevertheless, their potential as another way to achieve the same aims defined for community hubs remains largely unexplored.

Finally, economic/business incubators, such as the Centre for Social Innovation and sector-specific incubators funded by the City of Toronto, may or may not be considered community hubs. They are based on principles of shared services, space and synergy to magnify impact, but are not necessarily 'public' or oriented towards a broader community. Instead, they focus on their own clients and tenants.

Summary of Learnings

The development of community hubs is seen as an important tool to strengthen communities, but one that involves many challenges. Several key themes have been identified through this review.

Key Learnings and Successes

- Community hubs are a key strategy in bringing services to underserved neighbourhoods. Those hubs in operation already are warmly received by local communities and continue to see demand grow. Some service-providers have begun to be able to coordinate grant requests because of their co-location.
- The impetus for community hubs comes from a range of sources: Strong policy goals, funder commitment, community development goals, local vision and/or happenstance opportunity. Tenant selection models also varied widely.
- Hub structures allow emerging and smaller organizations to partner with larger service-providers, supplementing the range of services available in a community and improving cross-learnings for each organization. Common reception also facilitated clients' intake experience.
- Governance structures among community hubs varied widely, including the form of internal governance and the degree to which the local community or target population was engaged in the operations.
- A broad range of service-providers is more likely to create a community space where a thriving neighbourhood mix can emerge. This also facilitates service collaboration, cross-referrals among co-tenants and sharing of resources.
- Most hub governance structures were in early development still but had successfully engaged with the local community or target population.
- Hub managers were identified as having a unique blend of community development and facilities management and planning skills.
- Employment or local community economic development was an emergent theme for a number of community hubs, including employment training, business incubation supports, and commercial and social enterprises.

Key Challenges and Potential Opportunities

- Community hubs have been developed piecemeal, in isolation from each other. A broad coordinated strategy would ensure a joint vision of enhanced services across the city, supporting the operation of individual hubs. Harmonized development plans and funding envelopes need to be developed among multiple funding bodies.
- One of the biggest challenges is to identify space for the development of hubs. Identification of an appropriate centrally-located site for development can be difficult and time-consuming. The concentration of space in private stock also makes securing of a location difficult. Civic buildings are well-suited to be re-purposed as community hubs. Several hubs have had to rely on the private real estate market. Alternately, those who are able to access public buildings need to negotiate multiple and sometimes conflicting regulations, timelines and bureaucratic priorities.
- Hub start-up times are lengthy. Community hub development often was caught between different departments and units or among different orders of government and funders. Resources and time were wasted trying to deal with multiple partners or bring (potential) funding partners together.
- Hub operators identified sustainability as a key concern. Current operating funds to sustain the hub infrastructure are too limited, especially as community demand grows. This limits the ability of hubs to offer extended hours or programming as requested.
- Additional technical assistance to help with such specialized tasks as facilities development, real estate negotiations, negotiation of cost-sharing, governance models, community needs assessments and outreach is need during the development of hubs to assist staff with the specialized knowledge and resources they might need. This would also facilitate knowledge-sharing between hubs.
- Because the scale of funding needed for capital budgets is often considerable, government funding is pivotal and creates opportunities for important social infrastructure development.

Next Steps

Potential Approaches

As described in the Summary of Learnings, several significant issues were identified in interviews. Indeed, interviewees often had well-developed suggestions for improving the development and coordination of community hubs, or, where no one solution was apparent, potential directions for further exploration by those with an interest in the topic have also been highlighted. These suggested approaches to development and coordination issues are identified in the table below.

| Development | |
|---|--|
| Issue | Suggested Approach |
| <i>Program funding is designed in a way that makes the timelines involved with the development of a new space challenging.</i> | Flexibility in program funding would help secondary service-providers plan program and site expansion or their re-location to a community hub. Where funders are not currently recognizing this, they should do so. |
| <i>Civic institutions and other public spaces are not always maintained as a community space. Current Zoning by-laws do not allow the conversion of schools to other forms of community use without an amendment. The transfer of closed school buildings to other civic forms requires the purchase of land. The funds required may be onerous for funders and, arguably, for taxpayer/donors.</i> | The Strong Neighbourhoods Taskforce recommended developing a process for the transfer of surplus public facilities and real estate. Declining enrolment in the school board is likely to create continued opportunities. The City's acquisition framework and the School Lands Staff Working Group have identified priorities but annual funds are limited. Municipal zoning requirements and building codes and provincial legislation need to be adapted so that civic space (community hubs) is seen as a similar use of property. Community agencies need easier access to available infrastructure funding available so that they can purchase public buildings in a more timely way. |
| <i>Many of the start-ups are supported by agency staff that may not have the time, additional resources or expertise to lead a new building initiative.</i> | Hub development supports, such as dedicated human and technical resources, are critical to sustaining the development of community hubs. However, these supports must be structured to avoid creating another layer of decision-making bureaucracy which can delay their development. |
| <i>Arts programming acts as a community bridge builder.</i> | Early inclusion in planning for space and programming is required since arts activities often require more specialized space (sound-proofing, ventilation, access to water). |

| | |
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| <i>Location of appropriate space is difficult and lengthy.</i> | The Strong Neighbourhoods Taskforce recommended the development of a coordinated strategy. This should be re-visited. This also underscores the importance of managing community and funder expectations and to compress timelines where possible through the meshing of funding deadlines and planning timelines. This should not interfere with a full process of community engagement. |
|--|---|

| Coordination | |
|--|--|
| Issue | Suggested Approach |
| <i>Community hub initiatives often serve only the focus of the main funder(s), re-enforcing the silos that place-based interventions are trying to break. There is a lack of coordinated support and planning as these initiatives are being developed, in many cases, on their own and because there is no natural champion or authority.</i> | A public policy framework needs to be initiated for the development and ongoing support of community hubs to coordinate the organizations and government departments which are developing and funding community hubs. Convening an inter-governmental/funders' table would be a good first step towards using a place-based broader lens. This initiative should then be linked to other local planning tables, such as the Neighbourhood Action Partnership Tables in Priority Neighbourhood Areas. |
| <i>Funding streams tend to be piecemeal. For example, current funding comes from separate envelopes such as Infrastructure Canada and the recently announced Trillium funding.</i> | An ongoing fund and coordinating body for community hubs needs to be established by the four orders of government and other funders to provide core funding. The fund would address capital and core funding needs for community hubs, similar to previously coordinated efforts. This would minimize duplication. |
| <i>The piecemeal approach results in an uneven development of local services, with some communities offering few or no services and others offering many.</i> | Coordinated planning between the different agencies and funders involved with developing community hubs would enable the identification of a more strategic approach to address the gaps in the delivery of services across the City of Toronto. |
| <i>Access to information, shared best practices and technical assistance is limited. The result is that hub providers have to re-produce each other's work</i> | Because of the siloed nature of the development of many of the hub initiatives and their operation, the opportunity to share expertise and learnings has been minimal. Development of a network among Toronto community hubs would allow both formal learnings and informal sharing to occur more easily. Funders should encourage these connections through conferences, best practices guides and electronic communications. The knowledge-sharing would also foster the development of a common set of metrics to evaluate the impact of hubs on their communities. |

Recommendations

The following recommendations for action emerge out of the identified issues and approaches. ICE would be a natural champion for any of these. Failing that, a single funder or body might also initiate one of these actions:

| <i>Recommended Actions</i> |
|---|
| 1. Convene funders to discuss the development of an implementation framework for the coordination of community hubs, system-level planning and funding issues, especially across silos. |
| 2. Host a conference/forum for hub service-providers. To discuss common operational issues, shared learnings and best practices. |
| 3. Document. Develop resources which chart the various models of community hubs including their development and operation. |
| 4. Evaluate. Identify common metrics to measure the impact of community hubs on their target populations. Key questions could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The appropriate scale and service mix and satisfaction levels • Effective governance and management structures • Community engagement strategies • Identify any necessary adaption |

Additional Questions

This scan has only mapped out emerging community hubs in Toronto. Additional analysis and evaluations will elucidate further learnings. Some of the research questions this scan has provoked :

- **What features and form of hubs and funding structures are most effective in addressing the complex problems local communities and residents face?**
- **What processes would facilitate the identification, prioritization and coordination of locations for community hubs across the city?**
- **Are there opportunities to move beyond a social service focus, e.g. to economic and labour force development and other forms of community building?**

Further discussion through the suggested actions may identify further areas of interest and potential inquiry as well.

Conclusion

For many, community hubs emerged as a way to provide social services locally, including to targeted populations, such as youth or small entrepreneurs. As hubs become more widespread, their ability to improve local communities or support economic development still needs to be documented and evaluated. What is apparent however is that driving services closer to those who need them, and providing supports which can wrap around clients, addressing multiple and intersecting needs, are some of the strengths that community hubs provide. Community hubs are emerging as effective methods of local capacity building for residents, grassroots community groups and smaller agencies that are now able to participate in the local community in more meaningful ways. Community hubs also address the need for civic space where community members can connect and neighbourhoods can mix.

Most of the initiatives described in the attached matrix have developed in isolation from each other. No one organizing body has collected a broadly-based snapshot of how these place-based initiatives are rolling out across Toronto's neighbourhoods. Yet several of the interviewees expressed a desire to break through the silos, to coordinate efforts more effectively, and to learn from each other. As many of the hubs have operated in isolation, coordinating their activities will improve shared learnings and prevent the continuing duplication of efforts. This research has identified some of the common strengths and challenges that hubs face and the opportunity to create a coordinated policy framework.