Communities in control?
Asset transfer and participatory budgeting

Report from events held in the West Midlands
Stoke-on-Trent 26 February 2009 and Hereford, 2 March 2009

Carrie Weekes and Al Bell
**Development Trusts Association** is the leading network of community enterprise practitioners dedicated to helping people set up development trusts and helping existing development trusts learn from each other and work effectively. Development trusts are:

- Community owned and led
- Cultivating enterprise
- Developing community assets
- Transforming communities for good.

www.dta.org.uk

**Community Matters** is the National Federation for Community Organisations. They currently have 1,180 member organisations across the UK and have been supporting community associations and similar organisations since 1945. Their vision is for active and sustainable communities in which everyone is valued and can play their full part.

www.communitymatters.org.uk

The **Community Alliance** is a partnership of Bassac, Community Matters and Development Trusts Association. Our vision is to have a community anchor in every neighbourhood. Community anchors are:

- Independent community-led organisations
- Multi-purpose and provide holistic solutions to local problems and challenge, bringing out the best in people and agencies
- There for the long term and not a quick fix
- Often the driving force in community renewal.

www.comm-alliance.org

The **Asset Transfer Unit** helps to empower local people and organisations to transform land and buildings into vibrant community spaces whilst supporting development of a thriving third sector.

Annemarie Naylor, Assets Programmes Manager | www.atu.org.uk | 0845 345 4564
Communities in control?
Asset transfer and participatory budgeting

Report from events held in the West Midlands
Stoke-on-Trent 26 February 2009 and Hereford, 2 March 2009

Carrie Weekes and Al Bell

Contents
1. Executive Summary 2
2. Context 3
3. Shape of existing asset programmes 3
4. Study findings: benefits and challenges 4
5. Ways forward 8
Appendices 8
1. Executive summary

The Every Voice Counts in the West Midlands programme recognises the importance of community assets and asset transfer in improving the economic and social development of an area. This document and the research project behind it aim to give an overview and establish the accessibility of and knowledge about these initiatives in the West Midlands.

Scope of the Study including methodology

Research was undertaken in two carefully selected areas of the West Midlands. Stoke-on-Trent and Hereford were chosen to participate, with support and contributions from their local authorities, due to the different perspectives they could offer on the matter. They reflect very different parts of the West Midlands region, giving an urban and rural perspective to events. They were also considered appropriate participants as they are both N14 authorities that have been taking part in the Advancing Assets for Communities demonstration programme.

Each group in the study participated in a seminar and workshop event, with a fairly equal mix of community groups, local authority officers and elected members. The workshops were facilitated by Development Trust Association (DTA) and Community Alliance, agencies which have been working for two years on asset transfer issues.

The aim of these events to give participants a chance to talk about what they saw as being the associated benefits, opportunities and challenges, in an attempt to find some tangible and realistic solutions.

Summary of the challenge and recommendations

1. Asset transfer is generally seen as a good and positive thing that enables better service delivery, empowerment of communities and supports cohesion as well as protects and develops key community buildings for future generations.

2. Community asset-based development is a long, slow process, sometimes taking years and maintaining momentum and capacity can be difficult, particularly when using volunteers and residents. More needs to be done to support and develop the skills of organisations to take on these challenges and more resources need to be made available to buy in good technical support.

3. Local authorities need more help and support to understand the benefits and assess the risks. Support such as that which is offered through the Advancing Assets demonstration programme and the Asset Transfer unit needs to be promoted and shared.

4. Funding and investment needs to be realistic and appropriate and recognise the distinctive nature of these projects.

5. As our case studies demonstrate, with good partnership working, specialist support and a lot of enthusiasm – these projects can and do happen!
2. Context

Extensive research into how community ownership of assets can improve areas has been carried out over recent years. In 2007, the Quirk Review’s report, Making Assets Work – The Quirk Review of community management and ownership of public assets, detailed the tremendous potential for community development, management and ownership of community assets by sustainable and energetic community organisations.

A common understanding or definition of community asset-based development and the benefits it can deliver for a range of stakeholders has been established over the years. ‘Community assets’ are land and building assets that have been created for the benefit of, or transferred to the ownership of independent, not for private profit community-based organisations (including social enterprises).

The term ‘asset transfer’ refers to the sale or lease of land and buildings from public bodies to community organisations at market value or a discount in order to deliver services that meet local needs.

Development of community assets is one way in which public bodies can support the development of third sector organisations. This is done by providing a means of generating sustainable revenue streams, encouraging self sufficiency, reducing grant dependency and enabling improved community based service delivery at a local level.

It is with this background that the Every Voice Counts in the West Midlands programme examines the extent to which community assets and asset transfers are being effectively utilised in the region.

3. Shape of existing asset programmes

Community ownership of assets is not new. Community ownership, and the benefits it brings, is at the heart of the Government’s vision for creating stronger communities. The extent to which these programmes work is illustrated by the number of agencies involved in community ownership of assets.

Currently, there are more than 15,000 Anglican Church buildings, 8,900 rural community buildings and 300 building preservation trusts involved in community ownership of assets. Out of approximately 450 Development Trust Association members, 80% are already engaged in asset-based development, benefiting from a collective asset base worth £500m. Similar involvement of other community organisations also occurs. There are more than 900 Community Matters members who have been extensively involved in or have experience of leasing and managing facilities worth £75m and the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (Bassac) has more than 90 members, including the settlement movement, who have experience working with £60m assets in community ownership.

As a result, recent policy development has recognised the potential role of community asset transfer as a mechanism for economic and social development. It acts as a basis of local wealth creation through economic and community development (particularly through sustainable social enterprise), through efficient public service delivery or as an anchor for active communities.

Community ownership might be an effective source of resilience amongst populations which struggle during challenging economic circumstances. Areas which have embraced community ownership of assets have seen remarkable changes. It’s been shown to make areas safer, healthier, wealthier and greener.

In summary, community assets can create benefit in a number of ways including:

- Income generation for community benefit;
- Provide collateral to raise funds and secure future borrowing;
Host wealth creation activities e.g. jobs and training for local people, particularly excluded/disadvantaged communities;

Re-use/revitalize redundant buildings/space;

Boost local communities;

Improve the physical environment;

Complement mainstream services and create links into communities;

Provide accessible neighbourhood based services for local people;

Enable communities to work in partnership to deliver a range of social, economic and environmental benefits; and,

Provide a focal point for community activity and regeneration.

4. Study findings: benefits and challenges

The findings from Stoke-on-Trent and Hereford point to a definitive need for community ownership and asset transfers in the West Midlands. Participants identified benefits as being that community asset ownership was capable of:

- Instilling a sense of ownership, identity and pride;
- Encouraging community cohesion;
- Promoting more responsive local services / addressing identified community needs;
- Helping support local decision making;
- Empowering communities;
- Building relationships between partners – between community and statutory bodies;
- Encouraging and increasing skills and involvement by communities and individuals;
- Building community capacity;
- Mobilising the community through community organisations;
- Supporting positive use of buildings and prevent buildings from getting vandalised;
- Encouraging sustainable community activity;
- An income generator for community organisations.

A number of communities in the West Midlands have benefited from community assets. The following three case studies demonstrate ways in which different areas have benefited. They are not just about the theory or asset transfer and the benefits of ownership but the reality.

Although the study’s sample size was relatively small, the study is held to be an accurate reflection of viewpoints in the West Midlands.

Respondents felt there were a number of challenges and barriers present when embarking on a project:

...in communities...

- Keeping the enthusiasm going;
- Recruitment and retention of volunteers;
• Community tensions;
• Lack of leadership in communities;
• Community capacity;
• Lack of business knowledge/specialist skills;
• Lack of clarity as to who owns a building;
• Funding;
• Community engagement/consultation.

...in local authorities...
• Lengthy decision making processes;
• Local authority reorganisation/lack of capacity/lack of understanding;

A number of communities in the West Midlands have benefited from community assets. The following three case studies demonstrate ways in which different areas have benefited. They are not just about the theory of asset transfer and the benefits of ownership but the reality.

**CASE STUDY**

**STOKE-ON-TRENT: SNEYD GREEN COMMUNITY CENTRE**

Sneyd Green Community Centre is on a housing estate on the outskirts of Stoke-on-Trent. This centre has one very large main room, bar, small kitchen, small storage rooms and an office. Outside there is some land and a car park.

The council is hoping to transfer the asset on a 25 year lease to the local residents association.

Holden Lane Residents Association started occupying the building in June 2008 after the previous community association disbanded. The organisation has greatly increased usage of the centre, running a number of children’s play activities and hiring out the hall for functions such as children’s parties and weddings. The centre is very much open to all and local people continually pop in. The organisation has a large number of volunteers to support the work and have also raised significant funds circa £150 to install a park in a local green space.

The transfer of the building will enable the group to realise its vision for expansion and improved services along with environmental modifications by opening up a breadth of external funding streams.

The organisation is supported by the city council’s community sector policy officer, regular contact with the neighbourhood area implementation team, the local CVS and Community Matters.
As a part of the agreement that allowed ASDA to develop its site in Hereford, a community building was developed by the supermarket at the Belmont Road store. The building has 7 office spaces over two floors with a kitchen and segregated toilets on both floors. There is a lift and plenty of storage areas. In addition there is a very large hall space with potential to be adapted into a superb multi-use facility for performances, conferences, film shows and other arts and cultural activities. The partnership recognised through consultation and research that South Wye lacked good-quality, serviced office space at competitive rents which Kindle is delivering through a new building called The Kindle Centre. The Kindle Centre opened on 1 March 2007 and in its first financial year turned over £70,000.

The centre is at the heart of the Trust’s work in South Wye and has been essential to the establishment of the Kindle presence and message, making the organisation accessible and welcoming to all. The centre was the result of a section 106 planning agreement with ASDA, which leaves the property leased for 50 years to Kindle at a peppercorn rent.

In addition to the Kindle Centre the trust also leases another space on the other side of the ASDA building, which is sub-let to the Primary Care Trust for dental surgeries and health information. The Dental Access and Health Information Centre is approximately 4,000 square feet or 370 square metres on one level. The Kindle Centre is on two levels and is approximately 12,000 square feet or 1,110 square metres.

The Kindle Centre has developed organically in response to the market and the needs of potential tenants and users and can currently be described in the following terms. The centre has three offices which are rented out on a permanent basis to Barnardo’s Breakaway, Stonham Floating Support and South Wye Regeneration Partnership. These tenants pay rent and a service charge which provides them with all utilities, cleaning and reception services except telephone and data lines. The tenants have use of communal kitchens and have very preferential rates for use of the meeting rooms.

In addition to the three permanently let offices there are four meeting rooms which are let on an ad hoc, hourly or daily rate and a large hall which is used for arts and recreational activities as well as conferencing and exhibitions.

Plans for development of the centre are in two main areas. Kindle is negotiating with Workmatch for the development of a catering kitchen in the building from which Can Do Catering will run its business as well as providing buffets for the centre and assisting with the cleaning and collection of crockery. They are currently putting together a funding bid to the Arts Council and other organisations for the development of the hall space to improve acoustics and create the potential for performance in the space.

The development of the hall is essential to the growth of business at the Kindle centre. The enhanced facility will enable the centre to charge more for conferencing and will open up the possibility of commercial film showings as well as fill the current gap in the area of performance space in South Wye and the scarcity across the county as a whole.
This project will refurbish the Mitchell Memorial Youth Arts Centre (MMYAC) and its adjoining annex. The buildings occupy a prominent position in Stoke-on-Trent’s Cultural Quarter in the town centre. The refurbishment of the asset will address its poor condition, layout and lack of facilities. The development of appropriate and fit for purpose performance spaces will enable the third sector organisations to extend its remit and support the work of more community organisations, offering a wider variety of engagement opportunities in art, music and performance. The project will also establish eight workspaces that will be used by the local community arts sector.

The refurbishment will be achieved by significant funding from the Big Lottery under the ‘Community Asset programme’ and Stoke-on-Trent City Council who have offered the MMYAC the freehold of the centre once the refurbishment is complete.

Recent consultation with existing and potential users highlighted the need for affordable rehearsal space and dressing room facilities. Poor accessibility was also raised as a concern, in addition to a lack of social areas, for example a café or bar.

Despite the poor condition of current facilities the theatre presently supports the work of a wide range of community groups, not-for-profit arts organisations and commercial arts companies with a community focus. Existing users of the building include an integrated dance company of professional disabled and non-disabled dancers. A community arts organisation also utilises the centre and works with a range of beneficiaries, including adults with learning difficulties and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).
5. Ways forward

More needs to be done to increase knowledge of community-owned assets and to improve support for those engaging with them.

More seminars should be run to increase awareness on related issues and equip people with the tools they need to make decisions on community ownership of assets and participatory budgeting.

There needs to be more guidance on how to manage risks and strategically place people for the long term. This may be improved through increased mentoring and job sharing between partners.

People need to be inspired and encouraged to get involved. Offers of further training and up-skilling of volunteers may help tackle this challenge. An increased partnership between working and learning would also help overcome it. Volunteers may also benefit from being shown good practice elsewhere.

Funders should be given realistic deadlines and timescales to allow time for community consultation. Referral to projects as long term investment not short term projects may help.

Local authorities could be of further assistance by providing asset maps and supporting and developing cross sector partnerships. Guidance should be given how to undergo clear community planning processes.

Appendices

Further reading

There have been several research reports which look further at the issues and challenges raised in relation to asset transfer. These will need to be addressed by any strategic approach to developing and supporting community asset transfer, and enabling social enterprises to develop assets.


In May 2007, the Quirk Review reported on the tremendous potential for community development of management and ownership of community assets by sustainable and energetic community organisations. The Review outlined the barriers to achieving such potential and put forward recommendations on the way forward. The Quirk Review concluded the following:

• There were no fundamental impediments to the transfer of public assets to community-based organisations;

• The benefits of asset transfer to the community, receiving community organisations, the public sector agency involved and other public sector agencies frequently outweighed the risks and opportunity costs;

• There was a multiplicity of approaches to, and levels of engagement in, the community control of assets;

• The option appraisals undertaken by local authorities were often too narrowly drawn;

• Further work needed to be undertaken if the asset transfer agenda was to be extended to central government and other non-municipal bodies.

DCLG (2007), Opening the transfer Window – the Government’s Response to the Quirk Review of Community Management and Ownership of Public Assets

In the same month, and in recognition of this potential, DCLG published their response, Opening the Transfer Window. This made a series of recommendations, taken up by the government and currently ongoing. These were:

• Updated local authority guidance

CLG CIPFA; LGA; RICS;
• A public sector risk management toolkit;
• A demonstration programme (Advancing Assets for Communities) and improved access to expert advice and support;
• Targeted investment in asset transfer activity;
• Awareness raising and campaigning.

DCLG (2008), Communities in Control: Real People: Real Power, the Government’s Empowerment White Paper
This white paper seeks to strengthen both civic and civil society and includes a number of announcements relevant to assets including the extension of the Advancing Assets programme and the establishment of an asset transfer unit to promote and advise more generally on asset transfer.

Advantage West Midlands (December 2007), Connecting to Success. West Midlands Economic Strategy
The strategy, and its associated delivery plan, identifies the third sector as a delivery vehicle across a range of policy themes (for example, enterprise, community, Europe, rural, and opportunities for all). More specifically, asset-based developments (alongside raising enterprise levels including social enterprise) are identified under the strategic objective of ‘regenerating our most deprived communities’. In detail, the WMES states a commitment to: “increasing the development of, and access to, community assets that enable community capacity building, access to, and great community ownership for the benefit of local people.” (p.64)

Development Trusts Association (2008), Demonstrating Asset Transfer – Year One
This is a review of the first year of the Advancing Assets demonstration programme funded by DCLG as a result of opening the transfer window. Advancing Assets advises and supports local authority-community sector partnerships to develop joint plans for asset transfer with a view to them being implemented. The evidence and case studies are drawn from the 20 local authorities and their third sector partners who participated in the first year.

Findings
In summary, there are two major areas of concern which remain amongst regional policymakers and practitioners – the capacity of third sector organisation to implement asset transfer projects and the sustained commitment, capacity and delivery mechanisms of local government and associated partners to support community organisations along this journey.

It is clear that community asset transfer development has the potential to contribute to a range of policy goals, from economic and rural development through to regeneration and empowered communities. At national level, particularly through the Quirk Review process, there is a stated desire (and funding for a range of activity) to take this development process forward. This desire is replicated at the regional level, in the policy frameworks of AWM and a number of other RDAs.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (December 2008), Community Ownership and Management of Assets
This is a review of evidence on community organisations owning or managing assets, including buildings and land. This was carried out as part of wider scoping work to inform Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s work in this area. The review finds that much of the existing evidence has been produced from within the community sector, and concludes that further independent evidence is needed. In co-ordination with others, JRF will be developing a new work programme on community assets beginning in 2009 to help address the knowledge gaps and inform future policy and practice development on this agenda.

Findings
The review finds that much of the existing evidence has been produced from within the community sector and concludes that further independent evidence is needed. In co-ordination with others, JRF will be developing a new work programme on community assets beginning in 2009 to help address the knowledge gaps and inform future policy and practice development on this agenda.

There has been little evaluation of the benefits, the scale of asset ownership is not clear and there is little published evidence on risks and barriers. Assets might be run-down and of insufficient quality. Community organisations might be drawn from their core purpose work to become preoccupied with the technical and regulatory
burden of asset management. Small organisations, which include rural or black and minority ethnic groups in particular, might have insufficient scale to experience benefits. There might be a lack of technical aid available from organisations and expert advisers to provide support.

DCLG/ARUP (January 2009), Capacity Building to Enable Asset Transfer (not yet published)
The Asset Transfer Unit (ATU), managed by the Development Trusts Association, will be established in the first quarter of 2009. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government commissioned this short piece of research in 2008. The research findings are intended to provide a focus for developing the forward work plan for the ATU and its stakeholders in asset transfer, and DCLG’s policy development in this area. “The Route Map” referred to is the result of this work (still in development) which maps the asset transfer journey and is supported by a resource pack with signposting to appropriate support.

Findings
The research has identified a number of issues which will need to be addressed or overcome to empower local people and organisations to transform land and buildings into community spaces.

For example, there is a real need for more signposting expertise and support, community organisations’ learning needs to be addressed and support providers need to work together and form effective partnerships to supply a variety of resources that assist with the varying needs of different organisations.

The ATU will use the evidence to shape the package of support they offer.

Acknowledgements
Research was undertaken on behalf of Every Voice Counts in the West Midlands, a programme run by the National Empowerment Partnership (NEP), managed by the Community Development Foundation and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Partners in this study include Community Alliance, the Development Trusts Association, Community Matters, Participatory budgeting Unit, Empowerment and Asset Transfer.

The National Empowerment Partnership
The National Empowerment Partnership (NEP) is a programme committed to supporting and improving empowerment activities across England. We gather evidence of effective community empowerment activities and promote the powerful benefits of involving communities in decisions that affect them.

Our focus is to provide a regional structure for empowerment activities and to steer and lead the empowerment agenda. In particular, we support local authorities and community organisations to increase the number of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.

The Regional Empowerment Partnerships
The practical work of the NEP programme is carried out by organisations working together in Regional Empowerment Partnerships (REPs). There is a REP in each of the nine English regions. Each REP brings together a range of statutory agencies, voluntary and community organisations, networks and people who are running community empowerment activities.

These Regional Empowerment Partnerships use their collective expertise to support local authorities, statutory agencies and community organisations to work together. This helps to give more power to communities and local people to make decisions about what happens in the areas where they live.

Every Voice Counts in the West Midlands
The National Empowerment Partnership programme is managed by the Community Development Foundation and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government.
Participatory Budgeting Unit

Participatory budgeting directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget. The Participatory Budgeting Unit is a project of the charity Church Action on Poverty, based in Manchester in the UK. They support public sector and community groups in developing participatory budgeting processes in their local areas within the UK. They are working with the Department for Communities and Local Government in rolling out and supporting their programme of participatory budgeting pilots.

Empowerment and Asset Transfer

Community empowerment is not achieved by people acting as individuals alone. Whilst there is a role for individuals in influencing local decisions, improving local services, taking on civil roles, and holding officials and councillors to account, community organisations are often at the centre of those initiatives and create the right conditions for their involvement.

Community empowerment requires community organisations with a can-do approach. Effective community empowerment requires resilient multipurpose community vehicles (of which development trusts are an example), that are community led, generating some of their own income, owning assets, and able to tackle problems and deliver a change-agenda themselves and through partnerships.

Those ‘community anchor’ organisations create a platform for other community groups and social enterprises to flourish, and build both bonding capital among communities of identity, and bridging capital between such communities, and between those with power and those without.