

CA 08

Ymgynghoriad ar asedau cymunedol

Consultation on community assets

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Blaenau Gwent

Response from: Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

**Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council response to Senedd Consultation – Local Government and Housing Committee – Inquiry into Community Assets- June 2022**

The Committee is considering four areas: -

- **Whether the current statutory and policy framework empowers communities in Wales to develop community assets.**
  - **The extent the Community Asset Transfer scheme promotes and supports effective development of community assets.**
  - **To explore barriers and challenges faced by communities in taking ownership of public or privately owned assets, including finance and support services.**
  - **To discover what lessons can be learnt from beyond the Welsh border.**
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- **Whether the current statutory and policy framework empowers communities in Wales to develop community assets.**

There is a strong framework in place led by Welsh Government – and then localised within the Authorities own CAT Policy.

This was last updated in 2018 and included alterations to facilitate a simplified approach to the transfer of sports facilities and small areas of land.

- **The extent the Community Asset Transfer scheme promotes and supports effective development of community assets.**

Community Asset transfer has been the more recent term for transfer of assets but it should be noted that many older examples of transfers already existed for community halls and senior citizen facilities.

The more recent CAT process has seen 46 sites and facilities transferred over the last 6- 7 years with a further 6 in the process of being undertaken.

Initially transfers were on an as and when basis when community groups expressed an interest but more latterly it has been driven by cost saving measures. As an example, funding reductions meant that all sports facilities were having funding reduced and withdrawn so clubs were faced with taking sites on or seeing them closed.

In the case of sports facilities funding was made available to undertake the CAT process and to ensure investments were put into the facilities to address any major concerns or defects with the sites.

In all cases buildings were usable and had up to date servicing and testing undertaken.

- **To explore barriers and challenges faced by communities in taking ownership of public or privately owned assets, including finance and support services.**

In the majority of cases where groups have gone from users of a facility to the owners and operators there has been a need to ensure the group are incorporated and established to protect individuals and fully understand the obligations and responsibilities they are taking on and how they will cover costs.

Generally, this has been done through the production of a business plan which sets out how they will run, operate and fund the facility.

Originally assistance for groups came from a dedicated officer who was hosted by GAVO (Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations). This person was originally dedicated to Blaenau Gwent and subsequently for the wider Gwent Area.

Funding ceased for the post and in an attempt to co-ordinate assistance and advice the Blaenau Gwent Third Sector Support Group was established. This brings together the main third sector and sports organisations together at regular meetings and has a clear Terms of Reference.

Membership varies and is kept under review. With the completion of the transfer of sports facilities interest from sports governing bodies has waned but more recently with growing interest in sustainable food groups like Social Farms and Gardens have joined.

Wherever possible as much information has been handed to groups looking to take on sites relating to running costs, condition and servicing/ testing requirements where this is available.

This has not always been possible – in some instances multi use sports sites did not have cost breakdowns for each building and utilities were common to the site not the individual building. This has meant estimated costs were produced and sub meters for ongoing billing have had to be produced.

In the majority of cases have transferred to and become the responsibility of the occupants. The Council generally retains responsibility for buildings insurance, but this is recharged to the tenants.

Transfer is normally by way of lease – generally 21 – 25 years – but in some cases a shorter lease or different occupation agreement has been necessary due to issues such as – unregistered land, land registered as Fields in Trust, Charitable Land, works to sites not being complete on handover.

Handover to tenants has now improved and consists of a formal folder which outlines all the testing and servicing requirements and provides up to date certification. This is done by the Corporate Landlord Officer (CLO) who acts as a link and liaison with tenants and ensures they keep buildings safe and compliant to protect both the occupying groups, visitors and the Council.

Two buildings have been transferred freehold and whilst this is permitted under the policy it is only done in exceptional circumstances.

Two schemes have failed – one where a lack of income from provision of services was not forthcoming and one where unauthorised and dangerous works to a building meant the Council was forced to close the facility (this happened most recently during the pandemic which meant the visits of the CLO were not taking place which allowed substantial works took place before they were identified).

Officers in addition to the CLO also maintain infrequent contact with groups to advise and assist with any queries and issues – primarily from estates, Environment and Technical Services.

Limitations on staff resources has meant that the intended annual review of properties and sites to gather feedback and identify any problems at an early stage have not taken place.

A circulation list – All CAT – is utilised to disseminate advice, information on funding etc from within the Council and GAVO also circulate a funding bulletin as and when major initiatives or changes to funding come forward.

The bulk of transfers have been at nil/ minimal cost and in most cases there are no staff costs. Most groups are also eligible for rate relief meaning that the largest cost for most groups is maintenance and utilities.

The Councils energy officer has been able to advise/ assist groups with utility costs and to date they haven't caused major issues however with the current rising cost of utilities it may be expected that some groups may start to experience problems. Recognising energy as a major cost - Energy Audits were done for the majority of premises – utilising monies from Ystaddau Cymru/ Welsh Government. This identified the current energy usage of the building and recommended ways of reducing consumption as well as measures which could be introduced (alongside payback period). The main issue here was that in the absence of grant aid the limited use of most buildings (mainly evening and weekends) meant that payback periods were quite lengthy. Rising bills mean that reviewing these documents and contents by the groups will be encouraged but if there were any way of Welsh Government providing assistance to implement the proposals that would be welcomed.

The Council offers a competitive service level agreement for the ongoing maintenance of pitches, greens and fields.

The Third Sector Support Group acts as a good co-ordinator and awareness raising group for information and funding but there is no CAT dedicated forum or group for local authorities. Ystaddau Cymru have done some work and the ACES (Association of Chief Estates Surveyors-Wales) allows for discussion and seeking views of others on topics but this is ad hoc. We have hosted visits from other Local Authorities and pre Covid Rhondda Cynon Taf had convened a couple of meeting to have a general discussion on how authorities were approaching and addressing issues. This was mainly SE/ S Wales attended but it would be useful if this were a more co-ordinated initiative to discuss and disseminate CAT information/ approaches/ examples/ solutions. Is this something Welsh Government/ Ystaddau Cymru could organise/ co-ordinate?

Several organisations have been successful in obtaining funding to carry out improvements and alterations to enhance buildings and to ensure wider use. Some have created new social areas for occupant and wider community use, others have improved access or created better outside spaces or created a community café. Where possible if groups come forward with ideas which others have already done/ funded we signpost the new group to the ones which have already completed so they can learn and exchange ideas and not re-invent the wheel. This is on an ad hoc basis, but it would be good if this could be done on a Blaenau Gwent level or indeed on an all-Wales level.

- **To discover what lessons can be learnt from beyond the Welsh border.**

No direct knowledge but aware that Scottish Government have been proactive in funding community groups to acquire land/ buildings around Scotland using loans/ grants etc...