



Community Asset Transfer: Learning Points

The Department for Communities and Local Government issued an interim report in November 2007 based on the demonstration programme of Community Asset Transfer projects. This contained a number of learning points relevant to the different stages of the transfer process, which provide some helpful pointers for other authorities thinking of going down this route. These are summarised below:

Preparation

- The city council was unaware of the potential benefits of asset transfer and took a very different approach to asset use.
- The development trust lacked the right skills at the outset.
- Develop trust of the necessary stakeholders.
- Given the likely involvement of many council officers, there needs to be one person in the council to coordinate the council's response.
- Work with both junior and senior staff to ensure that all decision makers and influencers are fully onside.
- Be clear about your rights in terms of policy and legislation on asset transfer.
- Use strategies to reduce risk and avoid third sector organisations being sidetracked, for example, through the council taking on management of the technical aspects of the project.
- Councils should take a positive approach to asset transfer.
- Funding applications and decisions about them generally take longer than anticipated.
- Have two 'faces' – professional and business-like with customers, but soft and accountable with community and partners.
- Third-sector organisations should choose a proactive or pragmatic partner to develop an asset-based business strategy with.
- It can take a long time to acquire and refurbish an asset, so be prepared to think in the long term.
- It is important to develop strong relations with key partners.
- Make sure you have finance available to undertake feasibility work and other research activity.
- There is a need for trusting relationships with stakeholders that continue over time.
- Recruit champions and advocates early.
- Organisations should seek a wide range of funding to maximise the opportunities for financial sustainability.

Set-up

- Have the courage to take risks in order to achieve the vision.
- Make the business case from day one and draft a comprehensive business plan.
- Forget about negotiating terms until later stages – trying to seal a bargain too soon will tend to jeopardise the deal.
- Trusts must be able to operate in a highly competent and professional way and to buy in technical help where necessary.
- A trading subsidiary can reduce reliance on grant and EU funding and promote the long term sustainability of the trust.
- Asset-base development requires that assets are viable for the aims.
- When commencing a regeneration programme, there needs to be an exit strategy which could involve taking on an asset and making it sustainable through generating a surplus.
- Funding packages can end up being very complicated - make sure you have the capacity to manage this.
- Be focused and tough when negotiating - don't give up.

Implementation

- The social accounting exercise showed that the trust needed to work harder to raise awareness of its purpose and develop new services, such as those involving health. This will help the trust meet its aim of contributing to the regeneration of the area.
- The trust needs to find additional resources to map, monitor and measure its economic impact.
- Maintain tight control of capital build projects to ensure no time or budget overruns.
- The trust operates as a 'community anchor' on behalf of the locality, and is regularly consulted on regeneration matters.
- Develop your own systems with 'just enough' complexity, and make them non-bureaucratic.
- The successful management of property by a community demonstrates that a community organisation can 'run assets'.

General

- Have a long-term vision, and stick to it.
- Maintain good and open communications.
- Successful projects need to have shared ownership by all main parties.
- Perseverance is needed when pursuing asset transfer opportunities.
- More councils should help community enterprises that have robust proposals to acquire and manage property. The project has demonstrated that this can generate sustainable wealth for the local community.
- Aim high and to be good at everything but seek professional help when necessary.

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