Asset Transfer
A Partnership Routemap
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“There are risks but they can be minimised and managed - there is plenty of experience to draw on. The secret is all parties working together.”

Introduction

This Partnership Routemap is a guide to making the most of partnership in the asset transfer process, drawing on the real experiences of those who have been involved in asset transfers over the last three years. It is not another collection of case studies - these are well documented on the Asset Transfer Unit website www.atu.org.uk and on www.buildingcommunity.org.uk, for example.

It is designed to complement the vast wealth of information already collected throughout the process of the Advancing Assets demonstration programme, rather than repeat or replicate. It draws on extensive research and interviews with case managers, Local Authority key players and staff and volunteers from the community (or Third Sector) partners in over twenty individual cases. This research with practitioners aimed to tease out what makes partnerships work in asset transfer, and how the partnerships affect the outcomes and the process. In highlighting examples of positive aspects of partnership in particular cases, we are not suggesting that that the process was flawless - in all cases there are challenges - but this document seeks to highlight where partnership has played a valuable role. In these discussions, it became clear that there were several factors that influenced success in the partnership and the process common to many very different cases, which form the structure for this guide.

Each of the ten sections focuses on one major example, incorporating quotes and perspectives from the case manager, the Local Authority and the community partner. It also contains a few smaller ‘Vignettes’ to illustrate the issue drawn from other cases - some showing contexts, starting points or outcomes related to that same issue. Each section also has a top tip from a case manager and illustrates links with the Asset Transfer Unit’s Asset Support Map.

Background

It is widely acknowledged that a strong partnership between the local authorities and the third sector organisations involved in the Advancing Assets programme will deliver better outcomes in community asset transfer. During the first and second rounds of the Advancing Assets programme the strength of the partnerships between the Local Authority and their third sector partners has been demonstrated as key to delivering successful community asset transfers.

This Routemap has been developed to inform all public sector, private sector and community organisations engaged in the transfer of a building or land to help to develop and support these essential partnerships.

Asset Transfer Unit

The Asset Transfer Unit’s website provides access to information concerning the various stages of the journey that local authorities and communities will encounter in the course of progressing community asset transfer activity. Visitors to the site can use the support map as a headline ‘health check’ as well as to establish where to seek specialist assistance. Practitioners can access and contribute to the Unit’s dedicated wiki to learn more about what’s involved in community asset transfer and share practical experience for the benefit of others. A series of toolkits are also available for download. The Support Map is extensively cross-referenced in this publication and can be found at www.atu.org.uk/Support/AssetMap.
1. Context - Local Authority Approach to Asset Transfer

The context in which any asset transfer is operating is important to the process. Contributing factors for success include it being seen by the Local Authority as part of the bigger corporate picture; a joined up approach involving several departments and a transparent and well-understood strategy, policy and process. Third sector partners can support the Local Authority in demonstrating how the practice of asset transfer relates to their strategic objectives.

Case study

Birmingham City Council saw the Advancing Assets programme in the context of a broader revision of existing processes and practice for the transfer of assets to third sector organisations across the city. This example focuses on the transfer of Perry Common Hall to Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA).

In 2005 Witton Lodge Community Association stepped in to keep Perry Common Hall. Since then the centre has been used to run activities for the local community, but many felt it never fully reached its full potential. Birmingham drew down support from the Advancing Assets pilot programme to look strategically at asset transfer with the aim of developing a council-wide protocol.

The existing protocol stated that the Council could not lease properties for less than market value but the Council, working in partnership with Witton Lodge Community Association, wanted to develop a specific “Quirk” or Community Asset Transfer (CAT) lease. The idea was to ascribe a value to the services the Centre would provide that contribute to reaching the Council’s strategic targets (such as the Local Area Agreement and local constituency plans) and that this would be offset against the market value. A tool to apply this principle in practice, and a resulting lease, has been being piloted in the Witton Lodge case with the view to it being adapted for other community centre situations.

Jointly applying for funding to develop the asset resulted in the partners really engaging with each other. This was driven initially by Property Services staff at Birmingham City Council. For the first two meetings with the case manager there were 16 people from the Council and no third sector partners. The case manager was able to make recommendations based upon her local knowledge as to who the strategic third sector partners might be. Now that group is very much an ongoing partnership with key third sector partners round the table: the Community Asset Transfer Group.

This example shows how developing a good cross sector partnership can have a positive influence - not only on an individual case but on longer term relationships and the asset transfer agenda more broadly. It shows that barriers such as protocols are not insurmountable and that partnership working can support positive change.

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Top Tip

The partnership process needs buy-in, commitment and leadership from the top - the Chief Executive of the Local Authority. Partnership thrives when the asset transfer agenda is understood and perceived positively by key stakeholders including council leaders, heads of property services, voluntary sector infrastructure support, etc. and is facilitated by getting all levels of management and all departments onboard and keen from the beginning.

Quotes from Case Manager

This asset transfer did not all go smoothly. Negotiating the lease and delays over funding caused frustration and delays, but because of the investment in the relationships and the partnership it was possible to keep the process alive.... “while the process was at times tortuous it was not faceless.”

Carrie Weekes, Case Manager.

Further Vignettes:

The Local Authority has an effective policy or strategy: in the Wirral the asset transfer process was driven by the Council whose aim was to both achieve community empowerment and council efficiency. Their policy was that transfer should be a real transfer of the asset and of responsibility for the asset, which came as a shock to some community organisations involved. The LA would invest in the buildings prior to transfer, provide tailing off revenue subsidy over an agreed period of years, but then the group would be expected to take responsibility going forward. “The Council’s openness and honesty helped the [sometimes controversial] process considerably.”

Jeff Scales, Case manager.

A can-do attitude: the Council in Ashfield were very pro-active about asset transfer and had a hands-on lead officer supporting the transfer of Acacia Avenue Community Centre and Teversal Manor Rooms. The approach was: we want to do this; we think it is a good thing for communities, and we will do what it takes to make it happen.

Quotes from third sector organisation

“The partnership has operated as a true partnership in some aspects of the process. Some members of the Local Authority team have been superb - particularly the Property Services team and the Constituency Team. Local Authorities need to work very closely with the third sector partners when designing leases to make sure the terms are not too onerous, while ensuring appropriate checks and balances and indicators are included.”

Andy Thompson, Witton Lodge Community Association.

Quotes from Local Authority

This project was “changing people’s views about what the purpose of a building is.” And “giving community organisations the opportunity to have a stake in their communities by the management of their assets.”

Karen Cheney, Senior Manager - Community Empowerment Lead Neighbourhood and Communities Team, Birmingham City Council and co-ordinator of Birmingham City Council’s Community Asset Transfer Development Programme 2009/10.

Link to Asset Transfer Unit asset support map

1: Partnership Building
2: Securing Finance
3: Ownership Management Agreement
2. Existing Relationships

Partnerships forged specifically to progress an asset transfer can be effective, but experience shows that where relationships are already good, contacts clear and communication channels open, partnerships are more likely to thrive and transfers proceed in a constructive manner. The case of the former Restormel Borough Council’s partnership with the Friends of Trenance Cottages illuminates this perspective.

Case study

The partnership between Restormel Borough Council and the Friends of Trenance Cottages in Cornwall was established to decide the best course of action to take regarding the future of the Cottages. “Working closely with officers of the former Restormel Borough Council, the Friends of Trenance have worked tirelessly in their efforts to bring this grade 2 listed building back to its former glory.” Peter Jones, case manager.

With an enthusiastic community effort, funding from both sides of the partnership and support from the Advancing Assets for Communities demonstration programme there was a good chance their aims would be achieved. The intention of the group was to use the building as a community resource centre with provision of meeting and training rooms as well as the creation of letting units for start up enterprises. A small community shop and café were also planned.

Colin Whitehead, now Property Services Manager for Cornwall Council, was pivotal in the development of a partnership based on close one-to-one relationships with the Friends group. Its development was complicated and imbued with a sense of urgency as a result of Restormel’s involvement in the movement towards implementing the new Unitary Authority, which in this case helped to stimulate action.

Although the relationships existed prior to this case becoming an Advancing Assets demonstration area, they had to evolve rapidly to progress the asset transfer. As well as the champion within the Local Authority, a crucial factor was that the community was very committed and active and initiated a number of fundraising and celebration events - generating a lot of enthusiasm locally.

Quote from Local Authority:

“I am delighted to see the hard work and commitment shown by the Friends of Trenance in finding a long term sustainable future for these buildings serving the needs of the local community.”

Colin Whitehead, Property Services Manager for Cornwall Council.
It is important for the Local Authority partner to clearly articulate acknowledgment of volunteer input. Partnerships involving paid staff and unpaid volunteers, in particular need to recognise the value and time put in by volunteers, and consider remuneration for travel and expenses.

**Further Vignettes:**

**Key stakeholders within third sector organisations play a crucial role:** Leominster Area Regeneration Company (LARC) had the benefit of highly engaged individuals in both the Local Authority and amongst LARC volunteers. They were crucial to maintaining motivation and driving the partnership forward, which was a great strength. Having much of the partnership process and the relationships invested in a small number of key players was also potentially a weakness, however, which LARC recognised in looking to try and share the responsibility and ownership of the process more widely to make the partnership more sustainable for the medium-long term.

**The relationship with local communities is vital:** In Allerdale a community consultation exercise was carried out jointly between the public and third sector partners. Three tiers of local government (town, parish and county council) were involved.

- A series of consultation events were organised
- A vision was displayed in public areas with feedback requested from the public
- People were encouraged to go to the Trust’s offices and voice any opinions or raise concerns

“Having very dynamic and driven staff at a key point in the project was crucial, and the fact that long term residents of the area were really involved.” Jackie McQueen, Case Manager.
3. Partnership Building

Partnership needs real investment, right from the start. It is important to ensure that initial meetings about an asset transfer process are held jointly with third sector and Local Authority representatives, and that both feel fully valued and engaged in the process.

Case study

In Allerdale a partnership was brought together in order to address the social, economic and environmental decline occurring in the area. As a rural area, the only buildings owned by the Local Authority and suitable for transfer were in Wigton, and the idea was to use these to generate revenue to invest in the regeneration of the whole North Allerdale area. This included developing Wigton’s Market Hall and transferring the old Wigton Community Centre to community ownership.

The decision to apply to be part of the Advancing Assets demonstration programme was made jointly between what became North Allerdale Development Trust and Allerdale Local Authority. They were in it together from the beginning having had a long pre-existing relationship with NADT’s predecessor North Allerdale Partnership. This enabled them to have conversations about what would ensure sustainability.

Extensive joint community consultation generated a strong sense of engagement in the local community - in the early partnership meetings, for example, more than one hundred local people participated when only a handful had been expected based on previous experience.

Investment in the partnership is not just necessary at the beginning of a process. Even the best partnership will have difficult moments - it needs constant maintenance and the flexibility to make changes.

Staff changes at the Trust and at the Local Authority have presented challenges to partnership working, but the strong foundations have ensured that the partnership is still functioning and effective.

Quotes from Local Authority

“Through working together with others such as shoppers, businesses, market traders, landlords and Cumbria County Council, we can tackle the challenges faced by the town centres in this recession.”

David Martin, Allerdale Borough Council’s Director of Partnerships and Community.
Community consultation is essential - an understanding of community needs and early acknowledgement by the Local Authority team of the value of third sector partners are integral to the process of asset transfer and community ownership.

Quotes from third sector organisation

“Establishing a single point of contact with the Local Authority made a huge difference to the progress of this project. An officer within the Regeneration Team, who had the support of the Assistant Chief Executive, became our contact point and a conduit of communication within the Local Authority. This change from engaging with the many to one, led to more efficient and effective use of everyone’s time.”


Quotes from Case Manager

“North Allerdale Development Trust has been really careful to nurture relationships with the Local Authority and the community and build on them throughout the process, not just when they need them. A strong relationship with the Local Authority is essential - if you have a good relationship with them, perhaps based on delivering shared objectives, maximise that relationship and use things you have in common.”

Jackie McQueen, Case Manager.

Further Vignettes:

Importance of regular contact: Make time for regular face to face contact supplemented by virtual contact. In the Wirral, not leaving too long between meetings maintained momentum, although some questioned whether meeting as a steering group was likely to be helpful. The case was made that in order to ensure that individual transfers are proceeding in the right way there was a need for community input into the strategy and the big picture - providing first hand experience of the general support requirements, and any patterns in problems that could be addressed.

“Every meeting has provided more clarity, and has improved relationships - helped by the number and frequency of meetings and so keeping up the momentum” Jeff Scales, Case Manager, Wirral.

Acknowledging input of the Third Sector: The fact that volunteers in Wirral worked hard and had a big impact on the asset transfer process was openly acknowledged by the Local Authority partners. The key contact in the Local Authority was always very complimentary and made a point of publicly acknowledging not only the time but the quality of voluntary sector input. This went a long way to maintaining motivation - in other cases the voluntary sector partners have felt undervalued and this has added to tension within the process.
4. Shared Purpose

It is important for all parties to have a joint or at least complementary purpose, with a clear mandate. Partnerships succeed where stakeholders are clear and open about their drivers for being involved. Even where purposes are not shared open communication is required so that all stakeholders can get what they need out of the process. Local authority and community partners in the transfer of Sneyd Green Community Centre have built on an existent shared purpose and intent.

Case study

Sneyd Green Community Centre is in an area of high deprivation and prior to the asset transfer process had suffered from lack of use by local residents. Early in the process the local residents association took a lead in creating a new centre committee working in partnership with Stoke on Trent City Council. There has been close working and a shared purpose between the residents association and the Council’s area implementation teams prior to the move to transfer the asset. Communication continued to be regular and open:

“We have regular meetings, phone calls as needed and John always calls us at the start of a problem, not when it’s a disaster.”
Tony Rider, Manager, Area Implementation Team.

The residents association have been successful in creating a sustainable income from the centre through room hire, events and services such as a toddlers group. The partnership between the residents association and the Local Authority is strengthened by shared purpose: the RA’s passion in improving the services of the centre and the Local Authority’s belief in the benefit of community ownership to foster this. Straight talking has helped to keep the process on track despite inevitable changes of staff at a senior level with the Local Authority. The Council has led on arranging meetings with the residents association and supporting the management element of the committee.

Quotes from Local Authority

“From the Council’s perspective working on this project has great benefits in the short term as well as the long term. It fosters good relationships with other agencies in the area such as the police and health services, and that really with a joined up approach to community problem solving.”
Tony Rider, Manager, Area Implementation Team, Stoke City Council.
Further Vignettes:

Complementary but different purpose: In Restormel, from the outset both sides of the partnership were clear about their motives in pursuing a successful asset transfer, and the needs of both partners were taken into account in the negotiations. Their aspirations resulted in a mutually beneficial transfer. If partners are not explicit with each other about their reasons for entering into an asset transfer process, problems may occur, with suspicion of hidden agendas, manipulation, or even conspiracy damaging the partnership.

Changing purpose: In the case of Old Clapham Library the initial purpose of the community partner was to save a building they cared passionately about, but later the group’s primary purpose had to shift towards developing and managing a viable asset in order to achieve this aim. Gary Meeds, Future Clapham Project Leader, London Borough of Clapham provides this advice: “Develop an outline programme as soon as you can, stay positive and keep an eye open for potential funding opportunities.”

Quotes from third sector organisation

“I first got involved with the Council by working with the local residents association. So I had a relationship with the Council just before we took over the community centre, and it was pretty easy to go for the asset transfer.”

John Reynolds, Chair of Sneyd Green Centre Committee.

Quotes from Case Manager

“The Sneyd Green community is really passionate about owning their centre and really opening it up for the community. The Council here are really committed to being partners in that journey.”

“If I had one piece of advice to give to another council it would be about working in partnership and meeting the community association where they’re at.”

Al Bell, Case Manager, Community Matters.

Remember that you’re all on the same side! It’s not them and us, but benefit to the community that is important - and the partnership needs to jointly define that need and purpose. Define your joint goals at the beginning, but allow for different aspirations.

Link to Asset Transfer Unit asset support map

1: Defining Purpose
5. Identifying a Suitable Asset

There are different starting points for the selection of the asset. In some instances there is a suitable building or piece of land, but in other cases the obvious first choice may be an unsuitable one. There may even be no building. Or it might be that the motive is simply a desire to save an iconic building and keep it in the community. Whatever the starting point, it is likely that serious negotiation needs to happen over the suitability of the asset, and the terms on which it can be transferred: for example whose responsibility it is to make it fit for purpose, is it to be a freehold or leasehold transfer, and for how long? Working in partnership from the outset is the key to overcoming inevitable barriers and frustrations.

Case study

Forest Heath District Council agreed to sell a 1.6 hectare site to enable Keystone Development Trust to develop a Community Land Trust, with support from the Advancing Assets programme. The intention was to create affordable homes and retail units and to develop and run a new community centre with a youth project. The process shows an effective partnership between the Local Authority and a large development trust.

Originally the partners looked at an old pub in Brandon (used as a youth facility) and some industrial units, but they were dismissed because they did not hold out the potential to become financially viable. Keystone had serious doubts about viability without an income stream to offset any losses that the youth project might make. The partnership was well established by this time and this was clearly demonstrated in that from this setback a much larger project evolved for the transfer of a site in St Johns, Mildenhall on which up to 80 housing units could be developed together with plans to demolish and rebuild an existing community centre with additional retail units. In the end, the project is likely to result in closer to 40 housing units being built in the context of the recession, alongside the community infrastructure first discussed by the partners, but this still represents a very ambitious project.

"Keystone had the vision and the financial knowhow. It’s a big programme and will cost up to £14 million which Keystone will have to raise." Steve Clare, case manager.
A Partnership Routemap

Top Tip

A good business plan for the asset and the project needs to be developed, written, used and owned jointly by all partners, and revisited throughout the process.

Further Vignettes:

In Restormel there was a serious issue about the viability of the plans of the building. There is very limited space within the Trenance Cottages, and without significant capital investment, there was not scope for all the exciting developments the Friends of Trenance Cottages initially envisaged. Plans were scaled back when funding bids proved unsuccessful, the specification reduced in consultation with the group and the Advancing Assets Programme used to support work to put together a Heritage Lottery Fund bid as well as revising the group’s business plan.

Quote from Local Authority

“Forest Heath DC wanted to transfer the asset for two reasons: while we were open about the fact that the Council wanted to save money, the other driver was that the asset be developed and managed by an organisation well placed to make the most of it.”
Simon Phelan, Head of Community Services, Forest Heath District Council.

Quote from third sector organisation

“We have had to be very patient and constantly creative. And we have continually reminded the Local Authority of the origins of the project - the running of a community centre.”
Neil Stott, CEO of Keystone Trust.

Quote from Case Manager

“If we’d been working with a smaller community group, I’m not sure it would have got very far as they wouldn’t have had the capacity or experience. Keystone knew what they were doing, and knew the difference between an asset and a liability. A small community group could have said yes to an inappropriate asset without being able to see the potential difficulties.”
Steve Clare, Case Manager.

Link to Asset Transfer Unit asset support map

- 1: Site Selection
- 1: Pre Feasibility
- 5: Developing New Facilities & Services
- 5: Developing New Enterprise Opportunities
6. Beyond Partnership Meetings

Partnerships don’t exist in isolation. Those involved face to face in the partnership need to be supported by senior managers in their organisations. It is important that officers and elected Members are part of the process, and that there is senior management buy-in from the Local Authority. It is also essential that the third sector partner has the full support of its board of trustees or management committee. Initial time spent developing this support and involving key players will reap rewards. If the project is to succeed, stakeholders must be engaged and play their part.

Case study

The Advancing Assets programme for Ashfield provided support to two asset transfer proposals - Acacia Avenue Community Centre and the Manor Rooms at Teversal Hall.

In Ashfield the process of asset transfer was set within the context of the wider policies and aspirations for the third sector. There was shared recognition of community need: Ashfield is an area of deprivation, an examining area, and asset transfer is part of a commitment to meeting the needs of those communities.

The impetus came from the District Council. Before they joined the Advancing Assets demonstration programme they were already working on an asset transfer policy and they linked it very strongly to looking at the devolution of neighbourhood decisions to the local community. “I think it’s a combination of the leader of the Council being keen and understanding the agenda. They have a very good officer and both officer and member buy in” says Naomi Diamond, Case Manager.

A successful bid to the Community Assets Programme (CAP) was made in Autumn 2007. The Local Authority understood about timescales and the need to continue to support groups to build their capacity, as well as the value of continued revenue funding. They regarded the project as a partnership process rather than ‘something that you do and then walk away from’.

The Manor Rooms have since been transferred, and Acacia Avenue will be transferred after refurbishment due to the “really strong personal and professional commitment of the people involved.” The Council was so encouraged by the success of these transfers and their perceived community benefit that they subsequently embarked upon work to progress two further transfers which remain in train.
National bodies such as the Community Alliance partners (bassac, Community Matters, DTA) offer support in terms of experience and skills, and can support the groups to present themselves effectively, to make the most of their membership, or to consider membership, of an external organisation.

Quotes from Case Manager

“Where there’s a lack of partnership asset transfer is driven by financial concerns or in response to a particular group or a problem building. But the Council in Ashfield were very pro-active about asset transfer and have a hands-on lead officer. The approach was: we want to do this, we think it is a good thing for communities and we will do what it takes to make it happen.”
Naomi Diamond, Case Manager.

Further Vignettes:

Accessing external support is important: relationships with external organisations play a crucially important role in progressing transfer activity - and can provide legitimacy and support, and access to specialists, to the national picture and funding. In North Allerdale: “The strength and depth of experience and skills within the organisation [the DTA] was crucial. It gave North Allerdale Development Trust credibility they could not have had on their own.”
Jackie McQueen, Case manager.

A Champion within the Local Authority: in Restormel the partnership failed in its bid for funds from the Community Assets Programme. Following this, if it hadn’t been for the technical expertise of an individual council officer who took it upon himself to redraw the plans, and the Advancing Assets Programme supporting some additional work, the partnership could have lost its motivation - thereby risking the entire project.

Community backing: As well as the champion within the Local Authority in Restormel, a crucial factor in the transfer of Trenance Cottages was that the community was very committed and active in, for example, initiating a number of fundraising events - which generated a lot of enthusiasm and credibility locally as well as much needed funds.

Quotes from Local Authority

“We recognise the strength and value of effective partnerships in contributing to the improvement of the well-being of the county's communities and encourage partnership working wherever appropriate.”
Northampton County Council partnership protocol.

Quote from third sector organisation

“The partnership momentum for the Teversal Hall Manor Rooms case in Ashfield came strongly from the community. It took a long time for the group to come to a decision that they would take it on, but the Council didn’t rush them, there was no stick.”
7. Capacity

The capacity of partners, both third and public sector, to engage actively in an asset transfer partnerships determines the likelihood of success. The Forest Heath case highlights the mixture of time and expertise that are required to progress transfer activity successfully. It raises the question of how and if smaller local organisations can engage given the capacity required and local influence that this implies. Small organisations can and do manage successful asset transfers, but larger organisations are likely to cope better with a large project. Larger organisations can also provide the key to brokering relationships between the Local Authority and smaller organisations.

Case study

In Forest Heath the third sector partner, Keystone, is an established development trust, and the partnership with Forest heath District Council has some characteristics of an alliance between partners of equal weight. KDT could draw upon useful resources and networks and had the credibility to engage with the Local Authority.

An effective partnership between the Local Authority and Keystone was achieved as a result of the capacity for partners to draw on their experience and networks to move the transfer process forward. Originally, KDT worked with a commercial building company, until the financial crisis took its toll on that industry and they pulled out. KDT was able to identify a housing association as an alternative because the Chief Executive was able to draw upon his network of contacts. Understanding the Local Authority context was also vitally important, both the political nature of things, and the financial and time pressures on officers - Keystone’s ability to communicate effectively with Local Authority officers and Members was boosted by the CEO’s prior experience of working within a Local Authority.

Quotes from third sector organisation

“Keystone has a strong senior management team, and knew where to go for support or to find partners.”
Neil Stott, CEO Keystone Development Trust.
Top Tip

If you look at the private sector, networking is seen as an investment - what you need to do to identify opportunities. The voluntary sector tends to see networking as a cost. Invest in networking, within reason, to build your capacity to identify opportunities.

Quotes from Local Authority

“We started the asset transfer process with the understanding that we wanted to work with a third sector partner with the capacity, the track record and the experience to engage with the process and take on the asset. In Forest Heath district the third sector is not very well developed - something we are trying to tackle - so we were wary of working with smaller underdeveloped community organisations who would struggle to participate.”

Simon Phelan, Head of Community Services.

Further Vignettes:

Local authority providing support where the capacity of the Third Sector Organisation needs boosting: Herefordshire Council and Leominster Area Regeneration Company (LARC) are partners in the transfer of Grange Court, designed to enable LARC to be able to take on and manage the asset effectively once it has undergone significant refurbishment. LARC was dependent entirely on volunteers and recognised the need for greater capacity in order to fully engage with the process. In order for this project to progress, the capacity of LARC was increased with support from Local Authority staff, particularly in identifying funding and bid writing. “Without a very good relationship with the Local Authority, particularly the Regeneration team, this project would not be happening” Wendy Coombey, LARC.

The capacity of the Local Authority to fully engage with the process: Lack of capacity to engage in a partnership process is often perceived as a third sector organisation issue. However, smaller councils are apt to have very low staffing levels in asset management/property departments, which tends to prolong transactions and increase transaction costs (all of which impacts upon third sector capacity to remain engaged for the long haul). It is also challenging for councils as asset transfer activity cuts across and places demands upon a whole range of departments - from community development through to legal. There may be a lack of understanding amongst council officers and elected Members about the asset transfer agenda and process. In the Wirral, the Council funded and set up a two day training course for council officers involved, which enabled them to engage more realistically with the partnership and benefitted the process.

Quotes from Case Manager

“It was a very business-like, mature relationship between large mutual partners. Power relationships would have been very different and outcomes different with a small local community organisation. Keystone has the capacity and connections to make those relationships work and generate the money required. Underpinning all this, Keystone had a track record and credibility. They were able to bring other people to the table in a way that made the project deliverable.”

Steve Clare, Case Manager.

Link to Asset Transfer Unit asset support map

- 1. Strategic Fit
- 2. Securing Finance
- 1. Capacity Needs Analysis
- 2. Finance Strategy

Project Management
Resourcing
Stakeholder Management
Organisational Development
8. Getting Down to Details

In the asset transfer processes, the devil is in the detail. It can be very time consuming and frustrating negotiating the basics even once the principle of a transfer and the broad heads of terms have been agreed. Negotiating those details in partnership, with an agreed timescale and transparent discussion of challenges and an understanding of the needs of all parties, is the key to moving forward in the process. “Agreeing on the principle is one thing, sorting the details such as VAT, who pays what etc. is much more tricky.” Naomi Diamond, Case Manager.

Case study

A group of stakeholders in Northamptonshire came together around the transfer of Fletton House, a former Victorian workhouse. These included current tenants such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, a pre school nursery and a disability group. It required £1 million of renovation work. The building was under threat of being sold off for private development. The Local Authority property assets manager responded very positively and initiated looking at the potential for a transfer of the asset to the community. A Community Assets Programme bid failed, but the Council’s Asset Manager supported the group to incorporate, and applied successfully to the Advancing Assets Programme to obtain further support.

The case manager helped them look realistically at their draft business plan and think about managing the building, and also to apply for a Capacitybuilders capital grant, although this was unsuccessful. The group was tentative - they wanted the transfer to happen, but were cautious about the implications and responsibilities. The Local Authority encouraged them to take a lease, but the group did not want to move until they saw a clear pathway to sustainability.

The process became stuck for about a year. Change of council personnel presented a further challenge.

The partnership, at the instigation of the community partner, engaged in discussing the possibility of a three phase approach, in which the group would take on a licence, then a short term lease, and then a long term lease. However, the group struggled to demonstrate that the need and demand were there. A feasibility study had been done some two years before but had become out of date; groups that would be tenants had problems of insecure funding and were unable to commit at this point.

The group eventually pulled out of negotiations as they could not see a way to make the building viable. At a public meeting, a further possible interest in the building from a local school was put forward, and this option remains to be explored. The community group that had originally been interested in taking on the building recognised that if this happened there would be benefits to the community despite things not working out as intended.
Top Tip

Be prepared for the long haul - the details take time to iron out, and all parties realising this at the start will avoid (or at least mitigate) frustration.

Quotes from third sector organisation

“I’m not feeling bitter that our original plan hasn’t come to fruition. It’s a wonderful programme, and if this other body gets the go-ahead, then we will have achieved many of the aims we had in mind when we originally got together to try and take on Flatton House” and “In partnership, clarity of communications is essential so you don’t get misunderstandings about what the community group want to achieve and what the Local Authority is willing and able to contribute - you’d avoid a mismatch of aspirations and outcomes.”

Helmut Cartwright, Community Group.

Further Vignettes:

Financial planning: The partnership momentum for the Teversal Hall Manor Rooms transfer in Ashfield came from the community. The community group raised money to refurbish an 18th century barn, formed a ‘Friends of’ group and initiated discussions with the Council about how to take it on. The discussion about sustainable income and funding took place as a partnership, jointly looking at business planning. It resulted in exploring the potential for Ashfield District Council procuring services from the group as part of the package. It took a long time for the group to come to a decision that they were confident to take the property on, but the Council didn’t rush them: “there was no stick.” They have now signed a lease.

Rent: In North Allerdale the process became contentious over details that had not been anticipated. For example, tenants were already in the building and paying rent, but the building had not yet been transferred to the community, so it became uncertain who the rent should be paid to. However due to the investment in the partnership from the beginning, an agreement was reached. It was decided that the Local Authority should collect the rent and then return it to the trust as a grant.

Staffing, TUPE and other details: In North Allerdale, the development trust initiated a fortnightly transfer meeting with their Local Authority contact to enable details to be examined in depth; details such as the implications of TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) regulations, practicalities of sub-leasing, and various policy and procedural issues. They found this invaluable in keeping the process going - each fortnight one specific agenda item was addressed, and a commitment made to get an answer by the following meeting.

Quotes from Case Manager

“The real difficulty here had been getting the phasing of the whole process right. Without a long lease, the group were unlikely to get the capital investment which the building needed, but without guaranteed sources of income, the group were unwilling to enter into a risky long term agreement. Hence the attempt at a three phase agreement.”

Naomi Diamond, Case Manager.

Quotes from Local Authority

The intention to overcome potential barriers was explicit from the start, even though in practice this was not always possible: “We don’t use our lawyers as barriers; we challenge our lawyers to come up with solutions.”

Chief Executive of the Local Authority.

Quotes from third sector organisation

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Helmut Cartwright, Community Group.
Case study

The partnership in Wirral was developed to oversee the Advancing Assets programme and the pilot projects (Moreton Community Centre and Vale House). The Council involved the relevant departments, mainly property and community engagement, and representatives from community groups in developing a strategy to proactively embrace asset transfer as a way of managing the Council’s portfolio of community buildings.

It was a very long process choosing sites and organisations. The initial year was difficult – there was a lot of tension between the community groups and the Council and council officers took part in several meetings to try to reassure community organisations. But once the initial pain was overcome things became easier. Relationships were built and although suspicion remained, groups and the Council moved forward together to explore the feasibility of community building transfer on a case by case basis. In order for these buildings to continue to survive independently and without long term revenue subsidy an increase in the volunteer workforce to underpin the future sustainability of community buildings was seen as essential.

While not all of the outcomes were anticipated, or indeed welcomed, by all the stakeholders, the partnership had created a more intensive relationship between the Local Authority and all the organisations that managed council or community buildings. There was now more regular contact which boosted mutual understanding. There had also been a high level of public engagement in discussion about the future of their local buildings, which helped the profile of community groups.

The partnership also brought some of the third sector infrastructure or support organisations into the process - which led them to look at how they might pull together a consortium around providing support to the local community groups and organisations.

9. Post-transfer

The importance of partnership in the asset transfer process does not end once the lease has been signed and the details ironed out. The relationships forged in the fire of asset transfer can have a lasting impact on the way the community, the third sector and the statutory partners work together. This impact may only become apparent several years after the asset transfer, as a result of the key people in the different sectors having a greater awareness of the local situation from different perspectives, and also having broadened their network of contacts.
If the partnership is embedded between the organisations it is more likely to succeed. If one or two people are effectively the only driving force, that undermines the sustainability.

**Further Vignettes:**

**Change in cross-sectoral perceptions:** In Birmingham, the case manager reported that there had previously been a tendency for the Local Authority to talk about “the voluntary and community sector” without a true understanding of what it looked or felt like. Now there is a better understanding which has resulted in developments such as improved communication, and even to the re-writing of forms related to processes which involve third sector organisations applying to the Local Authority for support.

**Quotes from third sector organisation**

“I think that we are seeing the first steps toward the Local Authority recognising community partners as equal business partners. They recognise that we have better grass roots networks as well as a fuller understanding of what needs to be done, in some cases. Our asset transfer process has proved so successful that they actively encourage us to work with partner groups who wish to embark upon asset transfer, beginning the process of forming a Community Hub within Wirral. We, for our part see the Local Authority as a full participatory partner that has many skills and contacts to add to a successful process.”

“*I believe we are moving forward together concentrating on doing the right things rather than a more risk averse answer of concentrating on doing things right.*”

Mike Griffiths, CEO Moreton Community Centre Ltd.

**Quotes from Case Manager**

The nature of the partnership and the relationship between the Local Authority (Wirral) and the members of the steering group was really strong - “*honest, close and personal.*”

Jeff Scales, case manager.

**Quotes from Local Authority**

“Community Asset Transfer is about giving local people and community groups greater control in the future of their area and their community. The Council is committed to working with community groups and local people to ensure that community asset transfer in Wirral is successful and sustainable in the long-term.”

Wirral MBC website.
10. Challenges and Catalysts for Partnership Working

In most cases researched for this Routemap, there were significant factors in the nature of the partnerships or external factors, for example bidding for funding, that either helped or hindered the process of asset transfer. In some cases one factor was a catalyst, and in another case the same factor proved to be a hindrance.

Funding opportunities:

Failing to secure funding can be a destructive and de-motivating factor or can be a catalyst for renewed impetus and a strengthening of the partnership. In Birmingham, funding deadlines enhanced the energy put into developing the partnership, particularly in bidding to the Community Assets Programme, which provided an urgency and a focus for getting together. Funding came from Birmingham City Council specifically to support writing a bid. It was a catalyst for a positive relationship. The bid was unsuccessful but another funding opportunity arose from the Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands - AWM) and the Council provided officer time to work with the organisation to develop a joint bid.

“The CAP bid gave the partnership a task and a sense of achievement. There were lots of last minute meetings, pulling together support, and a genuine focus on making it happen.” Carrie Weekes case manager.

Passion:

Lambeth Council undertook feasibility work on the transfer of Old Clapham Library to a group of artists who had a strong belief in saving the building for the community. The group of activists involved in the process “had fire in their belly for saving the building, but did not realise that they would have to develop into social entrepreneurs.” said Linda Damerell, Case Manager. They formed a local community group - OCLSW4 (Old Clapham Library SW4) - and the process started from this “activist stance” with people involved who had great passion, but who did not have a track record of running a community anchor organisation.

Top Tip...

Manage expectations and don’t expect too much - all partners need to be realistic. Realise they are there for the long term and remain positive and calm.
The partnership process needs buy-in, commitment and leadership from the top - the Chief Executive of the Local Authority. Partnership thrives when the asset transfer agenda is understood and perceived positively by key stakeholders including council leaders, heads of property services, voluntary sector infrastructure support, etc. and is facilitated by getting all levels of management and all departments onboard and keen from the beginning.

It is important for the Local Authority partners to clearly articulate acknowledgment of the volunteer input. Partnerships involving paid staff and unpaid volunteers particularly need to recognise the value and time put in by the volunteers, and consider remuneration for travel and expenses.

Community consultation is essential - an understanding of community needs and early acknowledgement by the Local Authority team of the value from the third sector partners are both integral to the process of asset transfer and community ownership.

Remember that you’re all on the same side! It’s not them and us, but benefit to the community that is important - and the partnership needs to jointly define that need and purpose. Define your joint goals at the beginning, but allow for different aspirations.

A good business plan for the asset and the project needs to be developed, written, used and owned jointly by all partners, and revisited throughout the process.

National bodies such as the Community Alliance partners (bassac, Community Matters, DTA) offer support in terms of experience and skills, and can support the groups to present themselves effectively, to make the most of their membership, or to consider membership, of an external organisation.

If you look at the private sector, networking is seen as an investment - what you need to do to identify opportunities. The voluntary sector tends to see networking as a cost. Invest in networking, within reason, to build your capacity to identify opportunities.

Be prepared for the long haul - the details can take an age to iron out, and all parties realising this at the start will avoid (or at least mitigate) frustration.

If the partnership is embedded between the organisations it is more likely to succeed. If one or two people are effectively the only driving force, that undermines the sustainability.

Manage expectations and don’t expect too much - all partners need to be realistic, realise they are there for the long term and remain positive and calm.
Acknowledgements

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