

Notes/transcript Community Asset Transfer Pre-Inquiry Scrutiny Working Group on 1 February 2024

Notes from the evidence gathering, supplementing the report provided.

Geoff Bacon

- Community assets transfers aim to provide services and the best outcomes of the people of Swansea. We do have an established policy that is contained in the report in Appendix A. This was brought in to make sure we have a consistent and as far as it can be, equitable and sustainable approach to community asset transfers, there are a number of very key principles in that policy. It's about continuation of service plus there has to be a mutual benefit for us the council as the property owner.
- Some of the key principles I will come on to in terms of the process of community asset transfers are critical in any approach, it has to have the support of cabinet, the appropriate cabinet member and has to have the support and the advocacy of the appropriate head of service or director. If it has support it will go forward to cabinet, for consideration and approval.
- Probably 90% fall at early stages, as they do not understand fully what is involved and have not been realistic about what they can do
- Something we have set out in this report is that is that isn't just community asset transfers that have communities to run their services but also community centres. And I made a very specific point about referring to the yellow licences or the annual licencing costs of the Community Centres because they are, in my mind, the model that works because it isn't the case of handing a lease of an asset onto a group. There is continued support and excellent support, albeit with dwindling resource in terms of enabling those groups to have autonomy in terms of how they manage their facilities.
- With a Community Asset Transfer we do not do that, ongoing support is not provided, basically the asset is taken on the service should be deliver on this basis, no rents forthcoming but effectively you will take that asset over.
- There are large number of potential stakeholders in terms of the various Community groups. The points made in the report. The communities don't always speak as one voice, there will quite often be opposition, so it's very important for us to make sure that anyone who comes forward with a proposition is heavily engaged with the Community so there isn't anything which may be possibly contrary to what's been proposed for the wider community. It is very unlikely you'll get every single member of the community being happy with any proposal to come forward. So that's a significant challenge for us. Welsh Government will also a significant stake holder. We've attached in the report, the Community Asset guidance from Welsh Government and that is extensive, worthy and complex.
- It is recognised across Wales that it's not as straightforward as it may appear, and they held a cross party public inquiry into the corporate asset transfer process in which I was involved in that in terms of my role, not just in Swansea but in terms of my national role as part of the Association of Chief State Surveyors and I was speaking on behalf of every authority in that regard in the property perspective, and we all had similar problems. It's not straightforward. It's not necessarily always one-size-fits-all. Quite often the support needed for the community groups is something that local authorities can't quite always give,

because it isn't just support at the outset, it's continuous support and that could be challenging at different levels.

- We do have some clear principles in terms of finance, the fact that it needs to be financial benefit for the authority and it's delivering a service that the Council can no longer take forward. So, it needs to be cashable saving, the policy is quite clear on that.
- We have effectively transferred 12 bowling Greens, 15 bulk pavilions, 16 allotment sites along that, as well as the number of football pitches, own spaces and community buildings.
- I've also set out what I think the future challenges are and key is support for the groups. Ensuring they're properly organised and they have constitutions in place, for example, you may get enthusiastic individuals at start but person may move, die, get divorced etc., so, they can't just rely on one person. It needs to be something that is sustainable with the proper constitution to make sure we know who's responsible for what. We try and have a standard approach.
- There can be delays in process because we will have to go back and forth about the lease presented because at that point the groups start of understand what they are responsible for and that's when you do get what they can actually take on or are willing to take on. The reality is it has to work for the authority. If that's the case, it needs to be you take it on, you can perhaps temper the expectations to a degree, but the reality is we can't really have a halfway house aside from the annual licences that we have, the Community centres. But to enable more of those to be created there would need to be more resources to enable that to happen.
- Resources undoubtedly going to be an issue and I think it is also the opposite resource, the softer side, in terms of how you enable that group to flourish and feel as if they're and they get the sense that they are not basically left on their own. I think that's the challenge that we all have in every authority in Wales; we very similar concerns.

Q. What is the length of lease term that is asked for from these particular groups that relates to ground funding, so it enables groups to unlock funding that perhaps the local authority could not.

A. Sometimes the lease may be increased depending upon how much money is actually being sought, so that can often be a determining factor. But apart from that, the lease terms will be generic.

Q. Do we have any recourse if things are not working?

A. Yes, it can be from the very beginning where due diligence is checking the potential partner and maybe then looking at the leases and the agreements that are put in place, are there any break clauses, are there any referral clauses or are there anything that we can enact to say well that person has taken or group has taken on this asset, it's not going as we expected it to be or it's not engaging the community in the way that we would hope.