

Notes / Transcript Community Asset Scrutiny Inquiry Panel 17 June 2024

David Bernard Rooke (Coed Gwillim Park)

- The friends are a registered charity that was set up in March 2019. All eight formal park groups are represented, which at that time was three football clubs, three bowl clubs, a heritage centre and the canal centre. The team that was established to improve all of the facilities in the park for the community.
- The initial funding we received was 337,000 to upgrade an old pavilion. We then had grants of 89,000 from the lottery, 6'885 from the Coalfields Trust. The Economic Recovery Fund for the local authority of 131,000, a further grant from 35,000 for community facilities programme of the Welsh Government and so on.
- We have just completed a new girls changing room which is funded with 300,000 from the Football Association of Wales, 80,000 from Swansea Local authority and the footballers raised 55,000 themselves, giving a total of 435,000. Well, that building is now up and up and running. We also had various funds for a new external changing room, monies from the Swansea Bay Foundation and the Community Facilities Programme. We have had other for warm spaces, afternoon teas for senior citizens. Local businesses have funded with several individual donations, so overall we have put 1,000,000 back into the park in a relatively short space of time. Two years plus the local authority has spent in the region of 200,000 improving our local play area in the park and 120,000 in an adjacent area to the park, which is the canal towpath and we hope to run a park run there, perhaps later this year etc.
- That is what we have done, what we are planning to do in the next while is we put in a grant for a new community minibus and community car, which is to be used for taking local people to hospital visits with the community car. The minibus would be used by all the clubs in the park as well as the men shed the over fifties, the old age, etcetera. We have been granted 30,000 of the overall funding of 2000 and 26, but we are waiting to hear from the lottery for 96,000 and we are pretty hopeful that we will get that.
- Moving on, our plans going forward are for a 3G pitch, to relocate the tennis courts and additional parking because we have been a victim of our own success by needing more.
- Officers from the Council including the Community initiative coordinator and our local area co-ordinator have been excellent and of course, Swansea Council for voluntary services. They helped us with many of the grants. Also, the Council Leader was very helpful when we needed him.

Stuart Rice

Thank you, that is an exceptional list of funding that you have been able to ascertain and to pull together and you should be proud of that. If you can go on to what you found most challenging that would be really useful.

David Bernard Rooke

- One of the big challenges is getting different authority departments to speak to each other. What we found initially was cultural services received an income from the park because they took the revenue, and at that time, although it stopped now, whereas the Parks Department were quite happy for us to have the lease because they would be saving money at the £15,000 or whatever it cost them to

cut the grass and do the other maintenance. So that was a challenge because one department was for it and one was against it in from a financial point of view.

- Some issues dealing with Community Council, whom we did not realise initially, were trying to take over the whole park, but in the end, they pulled out of it for a variety of reasons. We did not take over the whole park from being formed, we have taken two leases, one in 2022 and a further one last December in 2023. And we hope to take other leases for other areas that we would develop with 3G pitches and things, but there is a bit of negotiating to be done there before we get to that.
- Dealing with the authorities legal department, who seemed very short staffed and took an awful long time, and so much so that we may have lost grants through that process had we not pushed.

David Bernard Rooke

- Risks and barriers include not securing the funding. We were determined as a group we would get lottery funding and we got it. It took us three attempts but we got it. Bear in mind that we were trying to get it in the middle of COVID, which was not particularly easy to meet up and what have you. Are the other funding then followed. It tends to be this the process that once you get somebody on board, other people are far keener to come forward and feel more secure and comfortable with giving you additional funding.
- But it was not helped by the slowness of the authority to provide the legal, which was critical.
- Consultation, covid was very much an issue as we could not physically engage with our community and obtain the face-to-face surveys and other feedback etcetera that they were looking for in some of the grant applications. So, we had to do survey monkeys and various different other things to try and get the information, letters of support and all these from all local organisations, financial support, a lot of local businesses gave us some money. So we did get there, but it wasn't easy, we overcame any risks as we had a very determined group, we were going to get the job done one way or the other.

David Bernard Rooke

- We had wonderful support from Swansea Council for voluntary service with applying lottery and other grant applications. The local authority also came good when we had a serious funding shortfall due to exceptional price increases in timber and other building products. Following COVID, I mean there were really serious price increases at that time, we were fortunate to get an economic recovery grant of 130,000.

David Bernard Rooke

- What have been the community benefits, you found since. There are lots of them. We have had over 1.3 million invested in our park over the past two years, most of which would not have happened without the transfer. We are currently looking at a further investment to complete our current plans over the coming few years and proved that our park is an exemplar in Swansea. We have had a very busy park with the following achievements: a new community pavilion, open daily and run by around 30 wonderful volunteers, the cafe provides a warm food and drink at very reasonable prices. It generates an income of about 10,000 per annum, which is put back into the park facilities.

Operates a dementia club, a menopause support group, photography club. Meeting room space, bowls facility, changing room for tennis, bowls, running. A place for birthday parties, baby showers, funeral wakes, afternoon teas for senior citizens preparing community Christmas meals, flower arranging classes and others growing all the time.

The football fraternity is growing from strength to strength, with over 600 members and girls. Football membership has gone from 6 to 160 in a year. It is great to see all the youngsters enjoying the park.

The new refurbished play area is a big plus for the children and attracts yet more people to the park and Pavilion Cafe. The tennis courts have been recently refurbished and no doubt will get significant use as Wimbledon starts shortly. The Canal Society operates its kayaks on the canal on a Sunday and is very popular and the heritage centre opens for three hours in a Saturday and Sunday and provides a lot of information on the history and heritage of the area.

Overall, a far more cohesive community with reduced isolation and significantly increased well-being.

David Bernard Rooke

- In terms of the disadvantages and challenges you have found since to transfer.
- Because we have been successful, parking has become a significant issue which we are addressing in the next phase are of our development plan.
- Frustration with local authority departments not taking their responsibility seriously e.g. we have got a raised path leading to the pavilion. There are some roots growing up through it and we ring up Parks. They say it is not their responsibility, it is responsibility of highways. So, we ring highways and nothing gets done sometimes do not seem to care, but we do as it is a trip hazard for our park users.
- Post lease issues, we have a collapsed drain which is causing flooding in front of the new girl's pavilion, which we have just invested 435,000 in. The local authority was very slow to respond and have promised a camera inspection. We have been told it is our responsibility, which we do not accept at as it was a pre-existing condition before we signed the lease. We have a similar situation with the sewerage because there's a pumped sewer system on site. That should be automatic but has to be manually done on a daily basis, and I am afraid the LA is slow to react to this as well.
- Another challenge is utility bills. Very slow to come through with the lease we signed in December 2023. We should have been informed who the existing suppliers were to the LA on signing the least. Just this week we had a bill of £3000 for electric from December till the end of May, in hindsight, if we had been given the information, we could have negotiated better rates. But it is now too late because the bill has been sent. So, we have not yet had a water bill, even though we have had that at least for six months. So, on a handover in any future leases, it is our view that the utility should be looked at by all parties, whether taking over the lease or getting the lease should be told with the existing supplier so that they could form a contract and negotiate better rates.

Stuart Rice

I think you have raised some very important points. Twofold, really, in terms of the transfer of the property over to the group, we need to make sure that we have a clear list of duties of cares and suppliers and the other issue which I think is related to

what you've mentioned earlier in that point is about late defects and having a clarity about who is responsible for any latent defect that's becomes apparent after a transfer.

David Bernard Rooke

With regard to consultation, the community was kept informed on what was happening through Facebook, website, SurveyMonkey questionnaires. Attendance at a village fate where we took a stand so that we could inform the community of what the proposals were. That was prior to COVID. We had several public meetings as we felt it was vital that they would be kept informed and ultimately supported us. It was not easy during the COVID-19 episode though, but we got there. We also had letters of support from all park organisations and other local organisations like the over fifties club, the men's shed, the local rugby club and others.

David Bernard Rooke What can be improved...

- Single point of contact. The contact who can deal with the internal workings of the local authority. So, we just have one point and they can sort out the other things and come back to us dealing with different departments.
- The legal side needs improving, far too slow. But I appreciate that you have issues with staff problems.
- Give giving details of all utilities and current suppliers would be very helpful as well as taking readings on handover.
- The ongoing issues preexisting, as we mentioned just now.
- Understanding at handover would be helpful in relation to responsibilities of new Group for fire extinguishers, pack testing, Legionnaires disease risk assessments, waste disposal and fire risk assessments, all those we feel should be dealt with between the local authority as to what they have or have not got. So, the new group knows what it needs to get.
- Going forward a forum of park groups who meet once a year, maybe twice a year to network would be a good idea where all the group park groups in Swansea or a couple of members of each group could sit down, network together and discuss their issues.

Tim Daley (Coed Gwillim Park)

- I think one of the things that was quite beneficial for us was a kind of staggered approach to the to the takeover of responsibilities. So, things like starting to cut the grass ourselves and things like that and then working your way up to some of the more complex things liking checking for Legionnaires and stuff like that. It is not, you know, everyday activity and you can find a volunteer for grass cutting but those other specialist tasks you have got to get somebody in to do, and I think knowing what those things are, is was a big thing.
- David covered all the benefits of access to grant funding and things that we would not be able to do without leases and the support of Council workers right across the board has been fantastic. There is a lot still to learn.

Stuart Rice

Thank you, Mr Daly. One of the things that I wanted to ask both of you is about the capacity of your organisation, because you have applied for so many grants you

have taken on quite a lot of responsibilities. How have you, how have you found that and what sort of individuals or how many of you are there to be able to do that.

Tim Daley

Changes on our side were absolutely essential to be able to take advantage of this. We could not have done this without that, so we merged some of the clubs together because we could not have done this if there was local rivalry and all the rest of it kicks in and it is very difficult to then agree how to do and manage and maintain some of this stuff. So, actually the facilities became the key driver for improving the clubs.

And we could not have done that as individuals. To share and put aside some long held rivalries and all the rest of it to make that stuff happen. That is probably the hardest thing is to get your act together in order to be in a position to, as you rightly say, gave that strength to be able to then take on a huge amount of responsibility. Not just the maintenance and what have you, but then the time to get funds, talk to funders and give that confidence to funders that you have a track record that you can deliver and that you can spend the money well. You have got to have good governance; all of that kind of stuff is really important. That would be the biggest tip for us, for anyone is having that your own side of the house sorted before you go and start to trying to draw these things in.

David Bernard Rooke

The friends have 12 trustees representing all park organisations and I guess about six of those trustees were very active in raising the funds, a lot of which was done through COVID, so we didn't have a lot else to do in COVID except on the computer and fill in application forms to try and get grant. Took two years.

Susan Jones (Councillor) Can I just say congratulations to you. It sounds a really tremendous project that you actually achieved. I just wondered about the ongoing maintenance and what assurances that that will continue over the next maybe 10 to 20 years.

David Bernard Rooke

The running of the pavilion generates, as I said earlier, about 10,000 towards the park. The Bowling Green is maintained by volunteers. The community garden is run by volunteers. We have a litter picking group volunteers. There is one person employed in the community cafe, but there is 30 volunteers. We cut the grass ourselves. Volunteers both around the Bowling Green and all the football pitches. Tim organises that through the through the football community. Because it is our park, we have ownership, haven't we? We want it to be the best and there's people coming in there most days. It is a good community.

Tim Daley

It is definitely a challenge that makes us worry in the long term is how do we continue to invest in the facilities rather than just tread water which you know we do appreciate that is where the Council was itself, you know, in terms of all the pressures on the purse. So it is, it is our biggest concern is how to continue to improve without having any great fundraising mechanisms within the club.

Susan Jones (Councillor)

So was such a challenge as well is to keep the volunteers coming because that is a challenge in itself.

David Bernard Rooke

Yep, they are wonderful, really wonderful volunteer and they love it.

Guildhall Gloucester Room

Thank you, Councillor Jones. One of the questions I was going to ask you is that with that on the horizon, obviously getting grants, majority of which are capital related. Do you foresee then a problem with any revenue costs going forward, being able to ascertain or get them or do you feel there is capacity in the memberships to be able to cover that?

Tim Daley

There is current capacity in the membership to continue with the revenue support as we are now but they have got cost of living pressures and all the rest of it and is a squeeze on those finances for individuals. But whereas we would have relied on the past, the Council would have cut the grass anyway, sort of thing. Now, now we definitely that that is our biggest risk as a as a club is to maintain the size of the club and the Members who can afford to pay.

Jaime Penlan Afc We are at the start of our journey in terms of the lease, the lease was only signed back in March. So as a football club now as talked about a lot, we are in the process of going for grants and things like that to get the project up and running. So, it is very early stages for us at the moment as a club.

Is there anything you found challenging in the process so far?

- Yes, that obviously the whole process. There was only a couple of us doing it from start to finish. So that was a challenge in terms of how many people were involved in the project.
- How long it took was quite difficult. We had quite a few challenges along the way in terms of timing and similar to talked about certain departments not talking to each other and things like that there was a lot of difficulty we found from that point of view.

Were you given any guidance or support so or was there anything else that you think could be improved there?

- We received a lot of support from people like Jamie Rewbridge and especially Gemma Bevan. Both of them were fantastic, but it was certain departments speaking to each other. They are, obviously extremely busy but I think it could have run a lot smoother. Like when we were first made the application. It took longer than anticipated at no fault through our own. So, I think that so when you are looking at funding. But because of how long it took we actually missed funding this year because the few refused because our application as was too. We have got to wait now till next year. So, in terms of trying to get our facility up and running now, it is going to take a lot longer than we would have liked because you know we are probably going to have to wait until the next year before we can go in through the FAW.

In terms of bringing the community with you and consultation, can you tell us a little bit more about what you engaged in to consult the local people?

- We met with a lot of local schools around it. We talked to them about things like when we get the facility, like things like football matches, if they wanted to bring their cup matches and things like that to play in our facility, we spoke with the rugby club because it is quite close. Yes, we tried to do a lot around the community to try and get everyone involved because obviously our junior section is quite large. And we are looking now to get more involved in the girls because there is not many girls teams around our area. So, we are looking to implement that to give them an opportunity to play football as well.

Is there anything else that you think could be improved in the process?

- Having more clear guidelines of how long it will take and you know the amount of things you need to know, like going through business plans and things like that. I think obviously a lot of football clubs come to us now when like we speak to them and they say we have just started speaking to the Council and we go through with them what is involved. I do not think a lot of them understand, we have got this pitch and we want to take it over and I don't think they understand the work that goes into it from start to finish. Networking would be useful.

Simon Winspear (Swansea Council for Voluntary Service)

- We are an umbrella organisation for the third sector, for the Swansea area and we have sister organisations in all parts of Wales forming as a whole part of third Sector support Wales, so our job is to provide any and all support. Free at the point of contact for all organisations in the third sector, that's charities, both registered and unregistered social enterprises, community groups. So they I think it's important to understand in the third sector the range of organisations and the huge differences that there can be from organisations that are extremely well organised and supported like I've worked with Coed Gwillim recently. It's an excellent example of a really thriving third sector organisations and right through to I've worked with groups whose constitution are very different. So, that context is important to bear in mind.
- We have had an expansion in our capacity for development work and so previously our capacity was pretty much limited to dealing with inquiries that would come to us and we would tend to come to us when things have gone wrong rather than rather than at the start. But in the last year or so, because we have more capacity in the, in the department, we have been working a lot closer with the Council and Council officers, and we have a regular monthly meetings. I also sit in the economic region team, which has been another point of contact.
- So, what we have seen over the last year is it is that there is a greater awareness of what we can do in these situations. Bringing in our expertise and knowledge of third sector organisations which perhaps could solve some of the problems that occur before they started had we been involved at an earlier stage, probably we could have picked up and identified earlier some of the very specific third sector things that either public sector or private sector organisations just simply wouldn't be aware of so. And the current situation is that there is a very good contact between the between the Council officers and I think it's growing.
- Although in this case with Community Asset transfer, I would say that that perhaps one of the things that would help in this area to avoid duplication, speed up the process and get better quality is having a more formalised way in which

when third sector organisations are approaching you about a Community asset transfer, that they are also given information signposted to SCVS too automatically. One of the biggest reasons we always hear from organisations about why they did not come to us earlier for support is that they did not realise we were here and did not realise what was what was available said and in these cases with Community asset transfer it is a very difficult thing for many organisations. I think you have already heard today that it is complex, it is a little bit bureaucratic.

- The Council Policy on Community asset transfers is a good document, but it is not the most accessible document for the third sector. Whereas once you have had a chance to work with those groups, they often realise they do have the capacity to be able to deal with it.
- In terms of getting successes out of Community asset transfers, trying to as much as possible encourage organisations to want to participate and to do what is possible. Obviously, you cannot just completely remove the bureaucracy and there is a level of complexity but trying to encourage people and have a little bit more hand holding through that process.
- The idea of a single point of contact I think is an excellent one.
- Another level of complexity and putting it onto the group in terms of the just simply the comprehension of the liabilities that that groups can have under leases is not always easy for a third sector organisation to fully grasp what it means and in most sector organisations you will have a group of trustees or committee members. They were all equally responsible and liable for the actions of their organisation.
- Maybe this is a time to actually look at that again and see is there a way that freehold transfers could be done just to make the process simpler and reduce down the legal costs compared to a leasehold.
- Overall, I think that there are the organisations that have seized this and are in a really good position for delivering good community benefit, which in the end is. From my understanding, this is what's behind the Community Asset Transfer scheme is wanting to put assets into the hands of those who are closest to the asset so that they can maximise the benefit. I believe that the way the Council is going about it is going absolutely in the right direction. They have some excellent officers who want to see these things succeed and they really do try their best support the groups.

Allan Jeffrey (Councillor)

It is the third time now. I have heard that comment about a single point of contact. Would that be within the Council and if it is, is it a staffing issue or is it a department that is not yet fully developed? It is just the fact that I have heard it a couple of times. I am just wondering what the situation is there with that.

Tracey McNulty (Head of Leisure and Cultural Services)

- From our point of view, we can nominate a single point of contact from within our service. The single point of contact implies a dedicated service in itself and by that, I mean a single point of contact that could represent legal services, could represent property services etc.
- I think if a few of the nuances that have come out from today that have not been touched on that the Council isn't the driver for asset transfer. The Council does not seek to periodically go out into the community and find people to take on

playing fields or parks or any other community assets. But back in 2014, 2015, when there was austerity, it hit us hard. There was a priority within a recovery plan for Community Action and that was very much about mainly people in my service area working with community groups to help protect, to help develop the assets of value to the Community. Hence the, you know, a large number of friends groups and how we establish committees and yellow licences to govern and manage community centres.

- The drivers for this sports facilities have tended to be available availability of grants, which have come from national organisations. So, for example, Football Foundation Association of Wales, they will periodically announce grants, as will support Wales, with quite short turnarounds and that tends to be the driver for leagues local football clubs.
- To coordinate and consolidate so there is not a single point of contact within the Council that can lead it end to end because there is not a Council service as such to facilitate the transfer of Council assets to community organisations. It is a responsive act; it is something that we listen to the groups and the clubs will weigh up the benefits.
- Due diligence is incredibly important for us to understand. For future generations that these facilities remain open and accessible to the wider community, which does take a lot of time. There are different factions. We get need to get one bit right. From asking legal to draw up the paperwork, the paperwork needs to be right before we can get the Council decision to enter into the agreement, so it is unfortunate, we have heard, perhaps experiences where there have been delays caused by, you know, staff shortages. But it also depends on what else is going on at the Council at specific times, there is a finite resource in the Council.
- What we can do is make sure that these relationships and the need to be engaged in these relationships does feature in people's job descriptions going forward and that people like Gemma are able and supported to be able to prioritise relationship building and hand holding. But at this stage, unless we were committed as an authority to prioritise the transfer of assets, I am not sure we could create a service officer dedicated to it and I am not sure where they would set.

Stuart Rice

The contact would be a facilitator rather than somebody who could actually address the whole issue of a transfer, which was my thought.

Geoff Bacon (Head of Property Services)

- If you look at other authorities, they have large, dedicated teams specifically to communicate, to transfer some maybe half a dozen officers who are dealing with these sorts of issues and we don't. So, we are dealing with it within existing resource. We have lost Lewis who was my dedicated property officer and but he would only be dealing with it in theory from a property perspective. But quite often he was being involved in trying to act as that single point of contact across the organisation. But every part of the organisation is struggling with resource and that is a common theme as you as you know.
- One other quick point from a property perspective about Freeholder supposed to leasehold. The fundamental rationale behind a leasehold disposal is to ensure that the body who is inheriting the asset from the Council is the very least inheriting it for the purposes they originally indicated. So, we can control that with

lease. It is incredibly difficult, if not impossible to control that, if you just have a free wholesale, you can have restrictive covenants, but they are very difficult to enforce, notoriously difficult to enforce.

- What you can do though, which is what the intention of the original guidance was, was to create a legal transfer that should be straightforward and simple, a virtual freehold if you like, because it is effectively a freehold as you sell, you sell an asset and there are no restrictions. You could do the same with the leasehold to a large extent, but you control the use in particular or any other community requirements of Tracy actually referred to that that we know we're holding it for the benefit of the community.
- To keep those leases as simple as possible, the leasehold transaction should be really, really simple. What tends to happen is that organisations will be concerned about their rights and responsibilities, rightly so, and as a result you have a debate around what they can and cannot do. I am not going to deal with that fence or that tree. All those boundaries or that roof or that wall or that party wall or whatever it is, that is where it gets complex. You wouldn't have those debates if it was a straightforward freehold disposal because that will be that will be undeniably the responsibility of the organisation you've taken on the freehold. So that's where it gets complex, and that's very, very common theme is the fact that once you get to that, the negotiations around the lease, then that then becomes a due diligence.