

## How We Did It: Transferring assets to communities



Local facilities can thrive under community ownership.

In our latest [How We Did It](#) event, we spoke to Zoe Sharratt of Gateshead Council. They've passed around 45 buildings and spaces to communities.

This includes around 20 community centres as well as community gardens, nature reserves, bowling greens, leisure centres, and even a boxing club.

Zoe spoke about what they've learned and the difference it's made.

Watch or read our interview below.

Watch our interview with Zoe:

What's behind Gateshead Council's approach to asset transfer?

Our asset transfer policy was formally introduced in 2012. But it really put a formal name to something that we had been doing for many years, which was basically granting leases to community organisations in relation to things like sports pitches and community centres.

We take the view that the voluntary sector has a vital role to play in service delivery. So it is beneficial for that sector to be strong and sustainable. And community asset transfer can help them do that. Because it gives them the possibility to generate an income and raise capital that the council can't access.

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For us, it helps us too, as it helps us rationalise our estate and make savings. But it also helps facilitate continued service delivery of what I would describe as the ‘softer’ or ‘secondary’ activities that councils get involved with. And this enables us to focus on the really key functions such as social services.

What makes a space or a group suitable for community asset transfer?

The most successful ones that we’ve done, are, in a nutshell, assets which are already being used by the community but that have potential to deliver more than they currently do.

We had a number of properties that we’ve transferred which are community centres. And what tends to happen is when we were looking after those is you’d have one person looking after maybe a dozen community centres.

They had a budget and they had an income target for each centre and once they’d hit that income target, that was fine. They’ve done what they had to do. And they would stop and they would concentrate on other things.

That’s not what community groups do. They just keep going. Because they think, well if I can have one group using that room, why can’t I have four or five during the day? And they work to accommodate as many people as you possibly can.

But it’s not just the building. It’s about finding the right group, because they have to fully understand what they’re taking on, and be absolutely up for it and know what all the implications are.

The types of organisations that we’ve been involved with are organisations like the Salvation Army, the scouts, some local church groups, alternative education providers, community associations (quite a few of those obviously), and we’re just getting involved now with community bowling clubs and community football clubs.

A lot of the groups occupying these buildings just wanted to run the activities, they weren’t really interested in running the buildings. And so we try and marry up organisations. We keep a note of any groups that are looking for buildings, and we then we try and marry them up with some of these smaller groups to aid the sustainability.

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If you get an application from a group wanting to run activities, you start thinking immediately, how do we do this? How do we solve the problem to get it across the line?

For example, one of the bowling clubs that’s being transferred at the moment, the bowling club is taking on the transfer in partnership with Age UK, who were looking for some space to run activities from. There is space within the bowling club to do that. And Age UK are going to be doing a lot of the grounds maintenance on behalf of the group and support them in terms of governance, in exchange for being given free accommodation.

Tell us about the Wickham community centre, one of your first asset transfer projects.

This is one that we started looking at in 2012. We wanted to reduce services, partly as part of the austerity measures that we were being made to introduce.

And we started working towards transferring approximately 20 community centres. We undertook a full range of consultation to get that buy-in right at the start. We had an advisory group, which was officer-led.

Then there was a number of member seminars set up to talk about the strategic approach that we were wanting to take, which was creating a network of community centres. Locating things strategically so that there was a community destination in virtually every location.

We obviously looked at the buildings. Running costs, strengths and weaknesses of the management committees, things like that.

And then we got down to the crunch of giving the occupiers three big options, really:

- Take over the building yourself
- Allow another group to come in and take it over
- Or close the building

Our community workers worked alongside them. We phased it in over three years. So we started with the strongest groups that we knew could take the building on, that it wouldn't be too difficult for them. The buildings were pretty well used and in reasonably good condition too. That always helps.

And Whickham was one of the first of those in that phase. We worked closely with them on their business plan to make sure that it was good, robust business plan, so they knew what they were going to be doing.

We talked to them about grants – Whickham is in quite an affluent area, so they don't qualify for as many grants as some groups and we had to do some thinking about 'how do you raise money?' and talk through things like that. They had a good strong committee.

And since they've been in there, my involvement with them has been very little. If they need to do an alteration or something like that, I'm their landlord. So I would then approve that in the in a normal way that you would do for any sort of commercial lease.

But it's the community workers that still continue to work alongside them.

And when groups like that do get into trouble, the community workers are the first ones to find out. The community workers usually find out that the group is getting into trouble. And they know why. And then we start discussing, what do we need to do to try and resolve that? You know, is there something we can do? Or is it going to fail?

Quite often, we've had a situation where a group has relied very heavily on one person to get it across the line, and then that person then becomes ill. And then almost the whole thing falls apart. In that sort of case, we've been known to step in and then set up the organisation again to spread the load. And when we've done that, the group has flourished.

What has Gateshead learned?

Some things we still do the same. We've learned about political buy-in – we work closely with the councillors all the way through the entire process. On issues like, for example, why we need fences around certain sports pitches.

One thing we've learnt is that not all community asset transfers should be for nil rental. There are some which I think we should have had rent review provision. Even if we hadn't charged initially, we should have had at least a rent review provision in there so we could have gone back and revisited that.

And the big thing we've learnt from Whickham is increasing the level of support we offer. Not just from my team – for example, the energy team get involved when we're handing over buildings to talk about options when we're handing over utilities. Insurance and compliance teams are also involved.

We hand over buildings very carefully with them to make sure they truly understand what they're doing. And we're doing that more and more. We learned a lot when we gave a community centre to a mental health user group. We made a number of visits and we said, you watch us do it first. And then we'll watch you do certain things. Gradually they took over in three or four visits. And again, they're flourishing.

We generally take the view as support that we're not going anywhere. We're not abandoning them. So if they have a question, all they have to do is ring us and ask us. But we're also looking at how we can support them, once they're in place.

Another big thing that we've learned is understanding the running costs. When we first started doing the asset transfers, we just took the property accounts as read. That's how much it costs to run it. Not a problem. We just quoted what was ever against the property. But when you drill down into those accounts, you realise that there's a lot of costs which aren't there. Grounds maintenance in particular, caretaking.

And the other things we're learning are the little everyday barriers that pop up. For example, we're being asked to help with getting wi-fi in. But providers are finding it difficult to actually locate the buildings. So they come back to us and go we need more information.

Another one is where do you know where the letters get posted to? Because there's no letterbox you need a postcode for a letterbox. Those little bits and pieces like that.

We're still learning every day – which is what makes them enjoyable!