

Rural Assets

Policy and Practice Insights from England



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Contents

1	Executive summary	7
2	Introduction	10
2.1	Aims and Objectives	10
2.2	The policy context for community asset acquisition in England	10
3	The England Study	13
3.1	The England rural case study	13
3.2	Interviews with public authorities and key stakeholders	14
3.3	The national Knowledge Exchange (KE) event	14
4	Findings	17
4.1	Motivations for rural communities in England to take on public assets	17
4.2	Motivations for public authorities to transfer assets to communities	18
4.3	Key barriers for rural community engagement in asset acquisition processes	19
4.4	Key facilitators for engagement in asset acquisition processes	26
4.5	Impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities	28
5	Conclusion and recommendations	33



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1. Executive Summary

Across all jurisdictions of the UK, the acquisition of local assets, such as land and buildings, is promoted at a policy and public authority level as a valued means of strengthening communities. While research has established that owning community assets can positively impact on communities, less is known about the conditions under which processes of asset acquisition lead (or do not lead) to increased empowerment, wellbeing, and resilience.

The project 'Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations' aimed *to understand the impacts of the processes of community asset acquisition upon the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities*. To achieve this aim, primary data was collected through interviews and Knowledge Exchange events with rural community members, public authorities, key national support organisations and policymakers from across the UK. This report will specifically outline key findings from the England study. Findings from across the UK, and details of wider activities related to the Rural Assets project, such as the community co-production element, can be found in our Main Public Output.

Summary of key findings

Through our study, we found that the key driver for rural communities in England to pursue asset acquisition was the threat of public service withdrawal and the closure of local key services, including vital social infrastructure. From a local authority perspective, the key driver for transferring assets to rural communities was to dispose of liability assets, and to reduce costs associated with running and maintaining assets. Processes of 'disposal' also included the transfer of assets to lower levels of local government, in particular rural parish councils.

Key barriers to rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition in England:

- A lack of capacity of rural communities to engage with policy and process due to smaller population sizes and fewer pools of volunteers with specific skills and capacity required for asset acquisition processes.
- Perceptions that local authorities are unwilling to let go of assets due to their focus on financial gain and a lack of trust in rural communities to run and sustain assets.

- A lack of public assets available for transfer in rural areas due to parish council ownership/stewardship processes.
- A lack of understanding of policy and practice, in particular the role and value of the Localism Act 2011, which was felt to be underpromoted.
- Ineffective and weak rights for English communities under the Localism Act 2011, in particular, a lack of a community right of first refusal and a right to buy.
- A lack of clear and coherent process for community asset acquisition at a local authority level, including out of date guidance, varying practice amongst different tiers of local government, and levels of bureaucracy deemed unnecessary.
- A lack of capacity within local authorities to engage with community asset transfer due to budget cuts and restricted resources.
- The high sale price of public assets and a lack of strategic funding available to rural communities to purchase assets.
- A lack of clarity for local authorities around the disposal of assets at lower than market value, and restrictions on their ability to offer discounts.

Key facilitators for rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition in England:

- Improved policy and legislation, with study respondents calling for further community rights, and a need for asset transfer policy to be adopted across wider public authorities, not just councils.
- Supportive and proactive local authorities were found to be key in facilitating effective asset transfers, including those who were able to identify potential assets for transfer, and worked closely with communities to support them through the process.
- Support from local and national organisations was found to be invaluable in helping rural communities to navigate complex asset acquisition processes, including pre, during and post-acquisition support.

The impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities:

Our evidence showed that asset acquisition processes **empowered** rural communities through:

- Giving them control and ownership over local socio-economic development;
- Bringing communities together for a common purpose;
- Recognising skills and knowledge within their communities;
- Achieving an asset acquisition and feeling empowered to take on more assets. ;

However, rural communities felt **dis-empowered** by:

- Decision making control and power over the asset transfer lying in the hands of local authorities;
- Local and national party-political contexts that could impact on an asset acquisition success or failure;
- The deferral of responsibility to run assets (as key services) onto rural communities;
- Where the only option is to take on liability assets, rather than assets that would most benefit communities.

Rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted positively on their **resilience** by:

- Offering the ability to protect local services and facilities;
- Giving them confidence and motivation to pursue further community development.

However, rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted **negatively on their resilience** through:

- The continued threat of losing vital services and facilities should processes be unsuccessful.

Rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted on their **wellbeing** through:

- Creating spaces that generate community wellbeing and tackle local challenges, such as social isolation and loneliness.

However, rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted **negatively on their wellbeing** through:

- Being unnecessarily complex and stressful, placing burden and stress on volunteers.

Recommendations

Considering the presented evidence, we provide the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in delivering key services and facilities that are tailored to the key needs of local populations, as shown by our case study in Trawden. To do this communities require policy support that considers the rural context, and facilitates access to funding, as well as upskilling and capacity building within local community groups to allow them to pursue public assets.
- Findings show that use and understanding of the Localism Act 2011 is low, and the current legislative mechanisms 'lack teeth'. Therefore, our research emphasises a requirement for further rights for first refusal and rights to buy to truly empower communities.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes across all tiers of local government. This could be assisted by the introduction of duties on public authorities to comply with formal legislative measures and to regularly update and publish public asset registers. Further, resource support and training are required for local authorities to enable them to fully engage with and embed community asset acquisition into their everyday practice.
- The introduction of standardised measurement tools for social value would be beneficial to both communities and public authorities, to enable the recognition of community benefit when assessing the financial value of assets. This would also allow for the option for the disposal of assets at less than market value as more common practice.

A red-tinted photograph of a suburban house with a white circle overlay. The house has a gabled roof, a central entrance, and several windows. A car is parked in the driveway to the left. The word "Introduction" is written in white text inside the circle.

Introduction

2. Introduction

Rural communities across the UK face long-standing challenges, such as outmigration of young people and geographic isolation, that affect local socioeconomic development and threaten community resilience and wellbeing. These issues are potentially exacerbated by contemporary events such as Brexit, COVID and climate change, making rural communities more vulnerable to spatial injustices and inequalities. Across all jurisdictions of the UK, the acquisition of local assets, such as land and buildings, is promoted at a policy and public authority level as a valued means of strengthening local networks and the sense of community empowerment that contributes to resilience and wellbeing. While research has established that community assets can enhance wellbeing in rural contexts, less is known about the conditions under which processes of asset acquisition lead (or do not lead) to increased empowerment, wellbeing, and resilience.

Our project 'Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations' was a novel comparative study that drew upon co-produced knowledge of policy, processes and implementation of asset acquisition. Through a comprehensive policy analysis, the collection of primary data from rural community case studies, and an approach that co-produces outcomes with communities, we sought to identify the people, systems, and structures involved, highlighting the barriers and facilitators emerging in the narrative accounts of pathways to community asset acquisition across the different UK jurisdictions. While a UK wide study was undertaken, this report specifically outlines key findings from England.

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2.1 Aims and Objectives

The Rural Assets study aimed *to understand the impacts of the processes of community asset acquisition upon the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities.*

Through comparatively identifying the people, processes and structures involved in community asset acquisition in England, we sought to elicit what is and is not working at each key stage of the process. To achieve this, the project had the following objectives:

1. *To identify existing policy and practice level structures and processes for community asset acquisition and their application in rural contexts;*
2. *To understand the lived experience of rural communities who engaged with asset acquisition processes and the impacts on their empowerment, resilience and wellbeing;*
3. *To identify specific facilitators and barriers for rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition;*
4. *To promote shared learning and create solutions with communities, policy makers and practitioners on how to enable empowerment, resilience and wellbeing in rural communities through asset acquisition processes.*

2.2 The policy context for community asset acquisition in England

In England, the Localism Act 2011 includes provisions giving communities a right to identify a building or land believed to be of importance to their social wellbeing: if the asset comes up for sale, there is a moratorium period during which community interest groups with a legal identity can submit an intention to bid.¹ Whether a particular building or other land in the local authority's area is of community value depends on the local authority's opinion as to whether it furthers the social wellbeing or social interests of the community, or did so in the recent past and will realistically continue to do so, or could do so within the next five years.²

Part 5 of the Localism Act 2011 enables a suitably constituted community interest group to nominate local assets to be listed as Assets of Community

Value, whether these assets are currently in public or private ownership.³ Assets may only be included in the list of Assets of Community Value in response to a community nomination or where otherwise permitted. Community nominations are defined as nominations made by a parish council or a voluntary or community body with a local connection.⁴ Local authorities in England are then required to maintain a list of assets of community value.⁵ Differently here to the asset transfer requirements under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, community interest bodies under the Localism Act 2011 include parish councils, which are the lowest tier of local government in England.

The owner is prevented from disposing of an asset listed as of community value unless certain conditions are satisfied, including that the owner must notify the local authority in writing of their wish to dispose, and that a relevant moratorium period has ended.⁶ Specifically, that an interim moratorium period (of six weeks) has ended without the local authority receiving a written request from a community interest group for the group to be treated as a potential bidder, or that a full moratorium period (of six months) has ended. The moratorium on sale under the Localism Act 2011 gives communities a right to bid for an asset before the owner can transfer to anyone else. This is different to the asset transfer process under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, where the relevant authority must agree to the community's asset transfer request unless there are reasonable grounds for refusing it.⁷

English local authorities can be expected to have a strategy in place for asset disposal, which should include a community asset transfer policy outlining expectations and processes. However, research published in 2020 by the Co-operative Group Limited and Locality, *In community hands: lessons from the past five years of Community Asset Transfer*, found that many local authorities do not have a community asset transfer policy in place, either as a standalone policy or embedded in other policies such as asset management or localism policies, and that many other authorities had not updated their policies in the five years covered by the report (2014-2019)(Co-operative Group Limited and Locality, 2020).

¹ Localism Act 2011, section 95.

² Localism Act 2011, section 88.

³ Localism Act 2011, Part 5 Community empowerment, Chapter 3 Assets of community value.

⁴ Localism Act 2011, section 89(2)(b).

⁵ Localism Act 2011, section 88(1) an actual current use of the building or other land that is not an ancillary use furthers the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community, and (b) it is realistic to think that there can continue to be non-ancillary use of the building or other land which will further (whether or not in the same way) the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community. If the asset does not meet these requirements, it might still be of community value if, in the opinion of the authority: Section 88(2) (a) there is a time in the recent past when an actual use of the building or other land that was not an ancillary use furthered the social wellbeing or interests of the local community, and (b) it is realistic to think that there is a time in the next five years when there could be non-ancillary use of the building or other land that would further (whether or not in the same way as before) the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community.

⁶ Localism Act 2011, section 95(6) specifies the moratorium periods.

⁷ Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, section 82(5).

The background image is a photograph of a traditional English pub, likely a 'Golden Arms' as indicated by the signage. The building is constructed of brick and features multiple windows and chimneys. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. A large, thick white circle is centered on the image, framing the title text.

The England Study

3. The England Study

As part of the Rural Assets project, primary data collection and analysis took place to better understand the key facilitators and barriers to rural communities engaging in processes of community asset acquisition, and to explore how engaging in these processes may impact on their empowerment, resilience and wellbeing. Data was collected using three specific approaches:

- (1) In-depth interviews and fieldwork with a rural community case study in England who had been through an asset transfer process from a public authority;
- (2) In-depth interviews with public authorities from across England, and key national stakeholders;
- (3) Data collected at an England specific Knowledge Exchange event that brought together rural communities, practitioners and policymakers.

3.1 The England rural case study

Trawden (formally called Beardshaw) is a village in the civil parish of Trawden Forest, in the Pendle district of Lancashire. The parish has a population of 2,765, with a relatively older demographic of retirees. The village has a high street, but is mainly dispersed across farmland, with a number of smaller hamlets. Trawden is traditionally a farming community, with historic links to the textile industries. As the village is surrounded by farmland, it is self-contained, and considered by many as an isolated community or 'the last frontier of Lancashire'. Trawden is located 30 miles from Leeds and approximately 9 miles from Burnley.

Trawden Forest Community Centre (TFCC) is a registered charity, with a board of eight trustees and over 100 volunteers. The size of the board commonly fluctuates depending on availability and capacity, and required skills for particular projects. The organisation was formed after the community in Trawden came together in response to the news that their community centre was due to close in 2014.

Closure of the community centre was part of a wider closure of community services across the region due to budget cuts and cost saving, and also based on the fact that the centre was underutilised. The owner, Pendle Borough Council, approached Trawden Parish Council and stated that if the community were not willing to take on the asset it would be closed. The community therefore set up a working committee and public meetings to gauge interest and explore options for ownership, and subsequently set up TFCC with a board of 15 local trustees. They were clear that they would not be able to offer market value for the asset, and were strongly supported by the local parish council and the wider community to pursue ownership. The asset transfer was described by the TFCC as having been reasonably straightforward, with positive communication with the council and very few legal requirements. Six months after setting up the charity in October 2014, the group took ownership of their first asset, the community centre, from the council on a freehold basis. They were successful in receiving funding from the local council, the Lancashire Environment Fund and Power to Change to complete renovations on the building to bring it up to working use.

In 2016 the last grocery shop and post office in the village closed. In the same year Lancashire County Council announced that they were going to close the local library (as well as many other libraries in the region) due to budget cuts. Part of the library had previously been a Sure Start children's centre,⁸ but had closed years previously due to funding cuts. The TFCC was approached by a local councillor to consider taking on the building, and invited to submit an expression of interest to the county council. Members of the TFCC recalled the application process for taking on the library as having been difficult due to the requirement for a detailed business plan and the need to deal with different departments and levels of authority, maintaining lines of communication and negotiating the terms and conditions of a restrictive lease (which was the only option offered).

⁸ Localism Act 2011, section 95.

While the council accepted the TFCC's application, progress slowed down significantly due to the leading political party changing in 2017 from Labour/ Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives, who did not support the closure of libraries. This resulted in the process being stopped completely until an internal council review could take place. The council eventually came back to the TFCC in 2018 and stated that they could take on the building as long as they kept the library. After years of negotiations, the group finally got the keys to the building in August 2018 on a 125-year lease at peppercorn rent. The building was in poor condition, but with a team of local volunteers and the help of local companies and small grants, the TFCC managed to renovate it. To meet the wider needs of the community, TFCC decided to keep part of the building as a library, and turn the other half of the building into a local shop. The community also installed a post office bureau which is in operation one day a week. The shop and library are now in full working use and provide a central grocery shop and meeting place for the community. The shop and library are registered as a limited company that is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Trawden Forest Community Centre charity.

In 2021, the Trawden Arms pub went up for private sale, and the community came together to purchase the asset using a community shares approach. This involved people from across Trawden and the wider region purchasing approximately 350 shares of the pub to raise funds for its purchase, and to ensure that the pub was owned and managed by local shareholders. While for the purpose of this study the process of acquiring the pub was not considered (due to it not being owned by a public authority), the community felt that through acquiring the community centre and library/ shop, they had built the capacity and skills to be able to also acquire the pub.

Throughout all of these processes, the community received help and support from national organisations including Plunkett UK⁹ and Power to Change,¹⁰ as well as local and regional businesses and associations and the local parish council.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 4 community members who were directly or indirectly involved in both of the community asset acquisitions, including board members and volunteers of Trawden Forest Community Centre, library and shop. Two further interviews were conducted with a local borough councillor (and ex county councillor) who was involved in the process, and a representative of a local community sector association.

3.2 Interviews with public authorities and key stakeholders

Public authorities in England include different tiers of local government (councils), the NHS, the police and higher education institutes. The structure of local government varies from area to area, but in most parts of England there are two tiers: county and district councils. Some district or 'metropolitan' councils are also referred to as 'borough' or 'city' councils. In some parts of England there are also town and parish councils, which exist below district councils as the lowest level of local governance. There is a total of 317 councils in England.¹¹

There are a number of national organisations that support communities with asset acquisition processes, including Plunkett UK (in mainly rural areas), Locality¹² (in mainly urban areas), and both Shared Assets¹³ and the Community Land Trust Network¹⁴ (for land related acquisitions). There are also a number of regional-based support organisations in existence.

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from two local governments (at county council and district council level), an ex-borough council worker, and four national support organisations. These interviews allowed us to gain a national picture of community asset acquisition processes and the extent to which rural communities are engaged and supported.

3.3 The national Knowledge Exchange (KE) event

On the 12th June 2023, we hosted an online Rural Community Assets Transfer Knowledge Exchange Event, bringing together rural communities, practitioners, local authorities and policymakers from across England.

The research team teamed up with representatives from key UK and England based organisations that provide support for community ownership to design an event that could provide attendees with the basic information needed to start thinking about acquiring assets. The English landscape for asset acquisition was felt to be distinctly different from the other nations, with much less information available to both authorities and local communities. For this reason, the event focussed on:

1. Raising awareness of community ownership and acquisition processes, benefits and best practice;
2. Signposting support available to rural communities from different organisations.

Speakers at the event included Plunkett UK, the Community Land Trust Network, Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), and the UK Government Community Ownership Fund policy team. The event was attended by 39 participants, broken down by sector and organisation type below:

Sector/ organisation	Number of participants
Rural community development trusts or groups (or individual community members)	18
National or local community support organisations	11
Local government representatives	4
Policymakers	6

Throughout the event participants were asked to reflect on our key research questions and data was collected using note taking, Miro Boards and mentimeter.

⁹ <https://plunkett.co.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-government-structure-and-elections>

¹² <https://locality.org.uk/>

¹³ <https://www.sharedassets.org.uk/>

¹⁴ <https://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/>

The background of the slide is a photograph of a two-story stone building, likely a post office, with a red circular overlay in the center. The building has a stone facade, several windows, and a red postbox on the left. The word "Findings" is written in white text inside the circle.

Findings

4. Findings

Findings from interviews with our rural case study, local authorities and key stakeholders, and our Knowledge Exchange (KE) event, have been combined and are outlined below. First, we discuss the motivations for asset transfer, on the part of both the community group and the public authority. The perceived barriers and facilitators to the process will then be presented, before we discuss the impacts of the process on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities.

4.1 Motivations for rural communities in England to take on public assets

The threat of service closure and withdrawal

The key motivator for English rural communities taking on public assets was the threat of spaces, facilities and services being closed or withdrawn. This was reported by most of our case study interviewees, and also confirmed by the participants in the KE event. Indeed, key themes from the KE event were around stopping the loss of vital services, and providing for community need that was not being met by statutory services.

“Unfortunately, it strikes me that adversity is the greatest single driver that I’ve seen...it may be where a community’s crying out for some services that aren’t being provided and they have with the get-up-and-go and the gumption...to run with that, and do so in quite hostile circumstances”

(Local borough councillor interviewee)

This was also the key driver for our rural case study, Trawden, where the community either faced losing vital social infrastructure within their community, or the current services being provided were underutilised or inadequate.

“...if we lost the pub it would be the social aspects and the dining aspects would be lost. If we lost the shop or the post office, they’d lose those facilities... they’re all crucial to the community”

(Community case study interviewee 1)

“...it was just inevitable it was going to shut...the community centre, before we took it over, I can’t remember it ever being open really for the community... we see a lot of places that are either parish or local council, and they just aren’t doing anything with them”

(Community case study interviewee 2)

In our case study, the closure of assets was related to reduced budgets for local authorities to be able to fund the running and upkeep of buildings, as well as the delivery of services within them.

“...up to the 1970s people relied on your local council to provide services, and it was felt that that’s what should happen because it always had done. But things started changing because funding became less and less, and now of course it’s got down to the local councils doing the minimum, what they have to do by statute, and anything else they want to offload”

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Many interviewees from our case study felt that if the community did not try to acquire local assets the very survival of the community would be threatened; therefore, entering into each asset acquisition process was not always necessarily a positive experience or something driven by choice. This was reflected in the KE event, where participants reported that assets in rural areas are often a “community lifeline” and losing local spaces can be catastrophic if they are the last available for communities and there are no alternative services to access. Both case study respondents and KE participants also expressed concern about “what would be done with that land if the community don’t acquire it” (KE participant), especially in relation to land or buildings being sold to private developers who might create something that did not meet the needs or wants of the community.

Relatedly, participants in our KE event reported that rural communities are often driven to secure local assets from local authorities as, historically, rural areas have far fewer assets than urban areas, and there has been a historic lack of investment in rural areas. This was seen as creating a feeling among rural communities that assets in rural areas are “more precious”, and as making their transfer to communities feel “more meaningful”.

4.2 Motivations for public authorities to transfer assets to communities

Local authorities may want to rid themselves of a potential liability

Some interviewees expressed the view that caution was sometimes required when being approached by a local authority about a potential asset acquisition, as they may seek to pass an asset on to the community for reasons other than community benefit.

"I have heard anecdotally that communities need to be a kind of wary of going into an asset transfer process blindly because the public authority might essentially be trying to dispose of an asset and so therefore, the community needs to be wary of taking on an asset that isn't particularly financially viable"

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

"Those [who own buildings] have probably gone through a process whereby the council or somebody else said this is a ball-ache, we don't want it, thank you very much, over to you [the community]"

(Local community sector interviewee)

Surplus assets are seen as too costly to local authorities

Our evidence showed that local authorities decide to transfer assets primarily due to budget cuts. Both interviewees and KE participants stated that transfers were "driven by finances", due to authorities "trying to save money and offload [assets]", tales of "rising costs", "closing down" and the need to save maintenance costs and liability costs arising from assets from where services used to be run but had ceased due to "budget cuts". As one community case study representative put it: "...it eventually became obvious that they just weren't interested in continuing to run the assets because of the rising cost...there were a lot of things closing down".

The local authorities interviewed did confirm that their key motivations for transferring assets to communities were budget costs and the rising costs of running and maintaining services. This was reported to be part of standard procedure.

"...normally what happens is they're either nudged by Estates because they want to get rid of stuff, because they have a long-term plan to reduce maintenance costs. And if it's surplus to requirements, they want shot of it straightaway; either selling it for a capital receipt or getting rid of the maintenance"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

Rural case study participants, rural community members from the KE event and key stakeholders also reported that rural community groups are often approached by local authorities who wish to dispose of assets.

"...we still can't afford to maintain the level of services that we think local people want...the reserves are running out...So, we are driven by necessity to look at further asset transfers and, let's be blunt about it, cost transferring onto other organisation"

(Local borough councillor interviewee)

This was also the case for the rural case study, who were offered the local community centre as a way for the local council to cut costs.

"I think the council just wanted rid of it as soon as possible because it was a liability to them, it was costing them money...the rent they were paying nowhere near covered the costs...So overnight we cut the overheads by 75% on that building"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

A key part of the process was reported to be the transfer of local government assets to parish council ownership, with the intention that the assets would then go into community level ownership or 'stewardship'. A key driver of this being the shift of costs of running and maintaining assets from a county or district to a community level. Further, such transfers were considered to be less risky as assets could then be reverted back to principal authority ownership should anything go wrong, and parish councils could also raise their precept to cover additional costs.

"...myself and colleagues at the borough Council recognised that we couldn't afford to continue to deliver services and facilities because the resources to do so were being withdrawn by government... the context of that was very much in the sense of parish and town councils didn't have any council tax cap so in other words if it costs money to run a service then they could add that to their precept and the council tax payers for that area would pick up the tab. So, it was shifting the burden of funding from borough council level to that community level"

(Local borough councillor interviewee)

4.3 Key barriers for rural community engagement in asset acquisition processes

Lack of capacity of rural communities to engage with policy and process

A clear theme of the evidence was that the capacity of people in rural communities to engage with the policies and processes of transfer varies. As a local authority interviewee put it: *"for our rural villages, a lot of them are very, very small. And again, it goes down to the people that you have within those villages- what they do for work"*. As also stated by a national support organisation representative:

"...you're basically trying to get like low-capacity people and by low-capacity I mean low in terms of time, culture, emotion, finance as well. Incredibly low-capacity communities and people to enter into a highly sophisticated process"

Part of this was linked to the simple number of people living within a particular rural area, as well as the nature of that area.

"In rural areas there's been a long-term decline of assets and services...the more that a community loses its local assets, like its shops, its public transports and so on, the less livable they become... so you have rural depopulation happening where you have a decline in young families living there... you have fewer people who have a vested interest in acquiring and establishing assets there or who have the time to do so"

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

This was reflected in our KE event where participants stated that the recruitment and retention of volunteers to engage in asset acquisition projects, especially individuals with the skills and knowledge required, is one of the biggest challenges for rural areas. In particular, they reported high levels of volunteer burn out and fatigue because of the smaller pools of people available to take on volunteer roles; participants described volunteering as often *"stressful"* and *"lonely"*, with *"negative impacts on individuals mental health"*. KE participants felt that the effects on volunteers would dissuade others from volunteering their time, and could also have negative impacts on other ongoing projects due to resources being thinly spread.

Limited capacity within rural communities was also relevant to issues around legacy and sustainability. As stated by one KE participant: *"Legacy is a challenge as projects are usually led by a small few. What happens if key members move on?"*. Succession planning can be challenging given that *"community members in rural areas tend to be older"* and *"younger generations do not engage in volunteering"* due to job commitments.

In interviews, it was reported that in many cases where rural communities had fewer community groups and lower levels of community activism, they would be less likely to be 'reactive' to assets becoming available to transfer.

"...where you don't have many pre-existing community organisations with that kind of capability, that are just going to be able to react to something going up for sale and being able to get a bid in in the right window of the Community Ownership Fund, and unless all these things align you won't be able to purchase that asset"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

As well as issues of capacity to undertake an asset acquisition, smaller population sizes in rural areas were identified by interviewees as presenting difficulties in garnering sufficient levels of engagement and support.

"Often more rural communities struggle with getting larger levels of engagement...I think generally more rural communities do struggle with not necessarily getting buy-in, once people are in they're in, but getting the numbers is quite difficult"

(National support organisation interviewee 3)

Some key stakeholders characterised certain rural communities and rural community bodies as having a “paternalistic” culture that leads to a lack of wider community engagement. As one support organisation interviewee put it: *“it is a question of who is participating, and our impression is that a lot of rural [organisations] don’t have as much focus on participation”*. This was combined with a view that some rural community bodies focus on what they are doing *for* the community, rather than *with* and *as part of* that community.

The variable quality of internet services and some people’s limited digital capabilities were also identified as impacting on online engagement with processes. Face-to-face engagement with authority officials visiting community sites was seen as especially important by all groups responding to our research, however, the challenges of such engagement in rural communities, including due to limited public transport and officer time, were noted. The high value of in-person contact was well-captured by a professional stakeholder who noted that:

“...in-person visits is something that they [community groups] would really value and through which they would be able to personally convey what they needed but also what their impact was and it would help link them up with other services that the local authority might be overseeing”

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

Perceptions that local authorities are unwilling to let go of assets

Rural community interviewees stated that they had been given varied reasons for refusal of asset transfer by their local councils, most notably that councils don’t want to lose their assets *“without good reason”*. One case study interviewee stated that they had been refused an asset because the council stated that they did not want to give away *“all of the family jewels”*, even though the asset had been lying derelict with no plan for its future use.

While community members reported that local councillors may be supportive, it was felt that dealing with the council could sometimes be problematic due to their focus on finance over social value. One community case study member felt that councils’ Estates Departments were reluctant to transfer assets as it would reduce their

portfolio and therefore threaten their jobs. Another community member stated that they had presented a solid business model for how they might run a public asset, and liaison staff had supported them in developing this plan, however elected officials reasoned that if they themselves adopted this model the asset would no longer be a liability and therefore should not be transferred.

Most of the local authority interviewees admitted that they may refuse an asset transfer request due to the motivations of different areas of the council, such as Estates and Finance. However, some council interviewees stated that decisions were primarily based on an assessment of community capacity and skill to run and maintain the asset. As stated by a local borough councillor:

“I think the greatest reticence was a failure of confidence that these community groups were competent to take things on, so... they just couldn’t get their heads round community groups having the competence to run the service or run the facilities”

In many cases, rural community members viewed this as an issue of perception and council culture rather than hard facts about community capability.

A lack of (known) public assets in rural areas available for community acquisition

The rural English local authorities engaging with our research stated that they generally did not receive many community asset transfer requests, and other respondents, including support organisations, similarly considered that requests for the transfer of public sector assets to communities are less common in rural areas. Some county and district authorities stated that they simply did not have a lot of assets available to transfer in rural areas. This was related to the fact that many ‘public’ assets were under the ownership or stewardship of parish and/or town councils. However, across our evidence, awareness of, and engagement with, parish councils was seen to be limited and decreasing. As one local authority interviewee put it: *“there’s broadly, in the general population, complete ignorance about what town and parish councils are there for. And they always struggle to get new people in”*.

In rural areas stakeholders also noted that there was a lack of publicly owned land available for communities to acquire.

"The majority of rural community land trusts have bought private land assets, not transferred from public sector bodies...county councils and district councils in England don't own very much anymore, and if they do it is usually operational"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

There was, however, said to be more activity in rural areas in terms of transfers from private owners. Such transfers often involved communities taking over the final remaining privately run services in the area, such as shops, post offices and pubs.

"...the issue with rural [areas]...it's it is largely shops and pubs and village halls... where there is the absence of anything, where there's an enterprise behind it or a shop and a pub, and where there's a building already existing or there's a potential for a new build"

(National support organisation interviewee 4)

Community interviewees and KE participants stated that they are not necessarily always aware of the sale or closure of council assets, or the possibility for them to assume ownership in order to keep them open. In particular, rural communities generally stated that there was uncertainty over what level of local government owned what, and what exactly parish council ownership meant for local communities and their use of assets. According to support agencies, information about surplus community assets was often passed through word of mouth in rural locations, rather than provided by the local authority themselves, due to a lack of public transparency over public asset ownership. This was reported by one support organisation to lead to clusters of 'known' assets in certain locations and a scarcity in areas where such knowledge is not held.

A lack of understanding of policy and legislation, among local authorities as well as communities

Our evidence suggests that local authorities have varying interpretations of the requirements of the Localism Act 2011, and it was felt by most participants that there could be better guidance on set approaches or recommended procedures for local authorities under the Act and/or improved awareness of guidance that already exists.

This lack of awareness by both local authorities and communities themselves of policy was found to greatly hold back advancements of asset transfers to communities. As one local authority interviewee put it:

"I really do think it's interpretation of, for instance, the asset of community value, the Localism Act, and how a decision should be made. There's no clear guidance to say, 'This is what your process should be.' So again, it goes within the local authority, and all local authorities are very, very different"

KE participants emphasised a lack of understanding and awareness of the Localism Act among staff at community organisations, many of whom had no idea that such legislation even existed, and a feeling that it wasn't very well advertised or spoken about, especially by local government. Community case study representatives felt that policies and procedures could be more easily accessible, more clearly explained, and should include example case studies. As one community case study representative put it: *"...trying to find information from your local council for doing anything like this or a government database and it's just all legally, it just puts people off, it's just not in English"*.

Local authority interviewees identified a lack of understanding among their colleagues, primarily due to lacking the capacity and/or time to engage with policy and law. They felt that relevant local authority staff needed to be more aware and cognisant of the process to be able to evaluate the ability of organisations to successfully assume ownership over assets. As stated by a local borough councillor:

"I think perhaps understanding and the knowledge that this can be done perhaps needs to be wider amongst decision-takers so that people don't instantly dismiss...novel forms of organisation who are rejected out of hand"

Interviewees called for any new or altered legislation to be accompanied by support and training for local authority staff. While the legislation was claimed by local authorities to be quite straightforward, publicisation of the process was said to be restricted by limited council funds.

Ineffective and weak rights for communities under the Localism Act 2011

Across our evidence, especially from support organisations, authorities and KE event participants, the rights to list an asset as of community value and to bid for it during a moratorium period, were variously described as “weak”, “lacking teeth”, a “paper tiger”, based on “misunderstanding the way that the land market operates”, “irrelevant”, “pointless” and “really of limited use”.

Much of this negative commentary stems from the fact that the 2011 Act only gives a window in which communities can bid, it does not give them any right of first refusal, or the right to have their bid properly considered or accepted even when it might be at market value. Interviewees and KE participants variously described this as leading to community “labour for nothing”, noting that:

“a group can spend six months raising the money to put in a bid for an asset and be refused for any reason. Their bid does not need to be considered at all even if funding is in place from the UK Government through the Community Ownership Fund”

(National support organisation interviewee 4).

In relation to the operation of the 2011 Act, our interviewees and KE participants variously spoke of “loopholes” and insufficiently “tight” definitions, particularly around classification of assets and the nature of community value, which were seen to give authorities “leeway” to work to the disadvantage of communities. It was also raised more broadly that the Localism Act 2011, and localism policy generally, does not fully empower communities because decision-making power is still firmly in the hands of public bodies; this is so even where there are community rights to list and bid for assets, and where authorities do comply with their legal duties.

Lack of clear and coherent process for community asset acquisition

Our evidence showed that some local authorities do not have community asset transfer policies and procedures in place, while those that do have these policies may not update them regularly and/or may fail to ensure that they interact clearly and coherently with other policies across the authority. Policy guidance had sometimes been found to be out of date and therefore difficult to follow, as stated by one local authority interviewee: “...when I

took it over, the policy hadn’t changed [for years] and it related to external partners that no longer exist, the internal departments that no longer exist”. On variability, one support organisation noted: “...each and every local authority has a different robustness of process or engagement around community asset transfer”.

Another support organisation interviewee noted that local government lists of assets of community value often “weren’t up to date” and that with regards to designating assets “there isn’t an easily available template for all councils to use, where they could just upload that to their website instead of creating their own template” and that sharing of “best practice and what a good application should look like and so on would be helpful”.

During our England KE event various participants made comments around the complexity of legal processes and that this can be particularly daunting for communities. Our evidence found that the length of processes is a particular issue; even when there is understanding within communities about the steps that must be taken, it was felt that more could be done to manage expectations of timing. As one community case study interviewee put it: “...quite often some people get so dissatisfied with the length of time, they don’t realise just how long it takes for this process to happen”. Another said that situation could be improved by not having “to work so hard” for the asset transfer. Nonetheless, it was recognised by some that processes were required to be robust and thorough to ensure that communities had the capacity and skills to ensure an asset’s sustainability.

“...I think in acquiring assets, there needs to be a really good understanding of what the long-term model is in terms of management. There needs to be due diligence that gets undertaken to make sure that when it’s handed over, that there is a sustainable model on the other side to catch it and to run it and to operate it”

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Community members also stated that levels of bureaucracy, legalities and regulatory structures can often be “too much for small community groups to navigate”, especially where there may be smaller volunteer pools and a lack of specific skills and knowledge in rural areas. This was seen to be a much slower and more complex and risky process than with a private purchase on the open market. As stated by one support organisation:

"I think probably most community land trusts would much rather buy off a private seller than a council body as it is a lot more straightforward. You just quite quickly get an option together, that is the price, and that is done. Whereas local authorities, yeah it is a long drawn out process"

Confusion and uncertainty over the specific processes required for asset acquisition and which levels of government need to authorise an asset transfer were also expressed by the community case study and national support organisations.

"...the liaison officer was liaising with their legal department, and then of course there were county councillors involved, and they'll all...then there is a cabinet within the county council, and so each cabinet member has a different brief...But they just didn't seem to be able to liaise together to come up with quick responses and quick answers and quick solutions"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

In particular, it was reported by interviewees that, while local authorities might be supportive of the transfer, barriers and complications can occur when the council's legal department assesses the application, due to a lack of knowledge of the legal vehicles involved and whether the transfer would fit the definition of achieving 'best value' from the asset's disposal. This can require communication with multiple local authorities, including different layers of councils, to receive permissions, each of which can take months to process.

Lack of capacity in local authorities

Budget cuts within local authorities were found to have a notable impact on their ability to engage with asset transfer processes themselves. Local authority interviewees stated that they were variously undertaking multiple roles, with community asset transfer being only one part of their work. One stated: *"anything that fits the community, that ends up on my desk"*. It was noted that community asset transfer is not part of delivering statutory services and is therefore more vulnerable to budget cuts. As one support organisation representative put it:

"Local authorities are just less and less well-resourced, so these legal negotiations [around asset transfer] can take a very long time". Similarly, another said "...this is the sort of dual effect of austerity, selling off all the public assets, reducing the capacity of local authorities to engage with us to develop a robust process".

Austerity was also felt by local authority interviewees to have reduced the number of staff that local authorities have to support communities through sometimes complex and time-consuming asset transfer processes. Local authority interviewee 2 noted the negative effects of a lack of funding and infrastructure, including not having *"the members of staff that have the skills to be able to go out and build the capacity in the communities, 'cos that is what is needed, that's not there"*.

Lower levels of local authorities are closer to communities

The smaller and lower levels of the local authority (e.g. borough, town and parish) were considered by rural community members to be far easier to deal with than larger county councils, in terms of being able to access the correct people and those with decision-making authority. Furthermore, local layers of government were seen by community members to be more knowledgeable of the local community context, and therefore more able to recognise the potential impact of transferring an asset.

"[Parish councillors] tend to live in their community and are often volunteers and so very committed to supporting their local residents. Then there is that kind of extra level of local government, which is perhaps seen as more approachable or more available than high levels of local government"

(National rural support organisation interviewee 1)

In contrast, county councils were viewed as being too large, and often not having any knowledge of the community or the asset in question, bringing their ability to support the development potential for the project into question.

"They've got this reputation now, the county council, not just from our experience but generally, of being too big and unable to do things quickly, or even at a normal speed. Everything is so laborious and so slow"

(Community case study interview 4).

"So, the (council staff) who had a brief for the libraries...he was put in charge of this community asset transfer. He lived in Blackpool, which is sort of an hour-and-a-half's drive away, he'd never heard of our village, he'd never been to East Lancashire and he knew nothing about this area at all... We offered to meet, and that was unacceptable, it was all by email, and very frustrating"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

The sale price of assets

The availability of funding for communities to acquire local authority assets was considered by many interviewees to be patchy, and processes overly complex. While the UK Government Community Ownership Fund (COF) was recognised by some interviewees and KE participants as being useful for some communities to purchase public assets, it was felt to have numerous limitations. In particular, challenges were recognised in sourcing adequate match funding (50%, as required by COF), and being able to keep to timescales where public authority processes were found to be slow and complex. This was felt by one support organisation interviewee to have a disproportionate impact on poorer groups who may lack the capacity to navigate the funding process while being held to "unachievable" standards.

Concurrently, public authorities were increasing the price being asked for such assets. Since the start of the policy of austerity, the approach of local government towards the disposal of assets was felt by a large proportion of our interviewees to favour the highest value of 'capital receipts' over the potential social value of transferring to the community.

"The other thing in the background related to austerity is the increasing desire of public bodies to just get as much cash as possible... And so the rug has been pulled out from underneath the community organisation after years of negotiations, because now they are being told basically that the Council is trying to find ways to say, "You are not really charitable and you need to pay us a commercial rent and all the rest of it"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

A challenge highlighted by interviewees was the range of policy, legislation and guidance relating to local authority disposals at below market value, with some respondents stating that there is a lack of clarity and a degree of confusion between various duties on authorities to offer discounts on sale prices, making local authorities cautious and reluctant to exercise their powers.

A support organisation representative suggested that the matter of sale price of assets "...needs to be fixed at a national level, because councils are hesitant to do what is already within their gift, within the current powers, because of the lack of clarity and the confusion between these things..." and that authorities are not selling to communities not because they decided they wanted the cash more, but because they are worried about the legal position".

While key stakeholders reported exceptional circumstances where assets were sold at lower than market value due to political advocacy, the general policy has been to maximise revenue. As stated by one local authority interviewee:

"That's definitely the thinking at the moment is if we're going to get rid of this land or property, can we get a capital receipt out of it, that will go into the capital programme, it'll make us be able to regenerate this, that and the other...the community benefits are seen in redistributing that capital somewhere else"

Community members reported that, due to such policies, proposed transfers of more valuable land and assets had been either rejected or obstructed by councils seeking to make greater financial gains from asset disposal by selling to the private sector. As reported by one support organisation interviewee, this was problematic as the private sector would buy the most viable assets, leaving councils with only “liabilities” to offer to communities, or nothing at all.

Restrictions and conditions placed on communities when seeking to transfer an asset

Both community and support organisation interviewees stated that conditions and restrictions were often placed on transferred assets. The willingness to transfer freehold assets or provide ‘clean’ title without ongoing usage restrictions was claimed by one support organisation interviewee to be constrained by council cultures of not trusting communities. Further, they felt that such restrictions sought to hold communities to a standard not met during public ownership, with requirements for a business plan, financial models and strategic plans (none of which had existed previously) arbitrarily set.

Council interviewees and support organisations variously told us that it was more common for communities to acquire a leasehold than a freehold (ownership) for an asset. From the perspective of the authority, this can be down to maintaining financial control. As one local authority interviewee put it:

“What tends to happen as well with asset transfers is we rarely give out the freehold, we usually retain the freehold and then if the county council wants to borrow money, it’s got its capital freehold list and it borrows on the back of the property that it owns”

Our English community case study had experiences of both leasehold and ownership. Noted problems of leasehold were conditions on leases, including around the need to seek various permissions in writing from the lease-holder, limitations on sub-letting, and the potential for councils to take back assets. As one community case study interviewee said about lease-holding: *“...what we were worried about, was hang on, if we do all this improvement and we build it up, and we make it a really viable, attractive prospect, are they just going to come and decide actually we want it back now”*. Ensuring

leasehold conditions are favourable to community organisations was seen as an area where communities are especially vulnerable and where good legal advice is essential.

Party political context

Many rural community members and support organisations saw the party-political platform as a factor affecting asset transfers.

“...a lot of [the process we went through] was more power plays with the politics aspect of it, rather than legalities, or anything... it was more just different parties wanting different things. We’ve got a very mixed political make-up especially between [our areas], the make-up of the councillors can be quite different”

(Community case study interviewee 2)

In particular, there was a feeling that Conservative-run councils were less willing to transfer assets to communities, with some reports of obstacles having been put in the way of potential transfers. The reasons given for this included a political tendency towards wanting to assert control, disregard for the group seeking to take on the asset or the proposed future uses, and a lack of trust in communities to deliver favoured services, such as libraries.

“Partway through the process the political balance of the county council changed and it became controlled by the Conservatives and there was quite an abrupt change. Firstly, the Conservatives had campaigned to keep the libraries open so they sort of reversed a lot of the decisions in terms of the library closure programme but, secondly, the community library concept, they put rather a damper on that...we had been quite optimistic that a speedy transfer of the library building would change hands, that all of a sudden became quite a protracted process and at one point one of the Conservative leadership team said in the committee “Why would we give the family’s silver away?”...they regarded all these assets as their assets and they didn’t want to have community groups operating them”

(Local borough councillor interviewee)

However, one support organisation interviewee noted that Conservative councils in rural areas tended to be more supportive of community asset transfer than those in urban areas:

"I think on the whole our experience of rural Conservative Councils has been very positive towards [community ownership]...In urban areas, Conservative Councils are much less supportive. There just seems to be like two conservatisms in play in England in urban and rural areas, and I think it's the Burkian little platoons wanting to support community initiatives being very rooted in rural areas and understanding rural communities' desire to be their own entity and not be dominated by unitary Council"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

Some interviewees also reported that they saw very little difference in the approach and ideology of the different political parties, perceiving it more as a question of individuals' views of asset transfer within councils.

4.4 Key facilitators for engagement in asset acquisition processes

When asked about key facilitators for rural community asset acquisition, interviewees and KE participants spoke both about what already existed and also what they felt was required. Having strong and clear legislation and policy, access to support for asset transfer, and a strong and capable community organisation were all seen as key factors facilitating asset transfer. We elaborate on each of these below.

Improvements to legislation and policy

Further developments in legislation and policy were favoured by the majority of interviewees at both a national and council level. It was felt by some that, if England had similar Community Asset Transfer legislation to that in Scotland, that would streamline and formalise the acquisition process. In particular, they suggested the introduction of a community right to buy, and the establishment of a fund, much like the Scottish Land Fund, to support communities to purchase assets. Further, they identified a need to focus on the potential for other public bodies, besides local authorities, such as the NHS and Ministry of Defence (with the latter being especially relevant to rural areas), to transfer land and other assets to communities. As one support organisation interviewee noted:

"...the general consent of disposal and the ability for communities, for local authorities to dispose of community buildings for less than market value, less than best consideration, only applies in legislation under, to local authorities, it doesn't apply to the rest of the public estate"

Further, it was felt by both community and local authority interviewees that if local authorities had their own published asset transfer policy, this would help communities to navigate the requirements and understand more about the process in order to hold local authorities accountable for their decisions. Many interviewees also felt that standardising those policies and procedures throughout the country would allow best practice to be shared and improved.

"If we could have every local authority submit to one central place, "This is how we do things," and then from that, an agreed, "Actually, this is how it should be done," I just think it would streamline the process so much"

(Local authority interviewee 3)

Overall, our research participants concurred that legislative change to further empower rural communities through asset acquisition should not be rushed; and it should be carefully thought through in the context of other connected matters such as planning and community wealth building. It was also felt that new legislation must come with sufficient funding for implementation (including some form of asset transfer/land fund), sufficient public awareness raising and public legal education, and an aligned increase in capacity for the public sector to implement it and to comply with any new or expanded duties.

Support from local authorities

The support of the local authority was seen in many cases to be key to facilitating an asset transfer, however this was viewed by KE participants to be a "postcode lottery" depending on which council owned an asset. While the local authorities we interviewed were very supportive of asset transfers and could see benefits for both community development and council finances, they also reported a critical lack of resources, knowledge and training that often left them unable to support local communities.

"...if [the community] want to find information out, they can come to the council, they can go on the website and find out for themselves...but the biggest thing that's missing is the publicity and the knowledge in the areas... it's difficult enough for those that work within the authority sometimes to understand it, so to get a community to understand it is probably really difficult"

(Local authority interviewee 2)

Both the rural case study interviewees and some local authority interviewees identified instances where the asset acquisition process was supported, led and driven by the authority itself, having identified a worthy community organisation to take over.

"So, the county council were going to close this building, as were a lot of other village libraries throughout the county. And just put word out that there that if any community organisations were interested in talking it on, could put in a good case and a good business plan, they'd be open to listen to it"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Some interviewees described cases of local authorities providing support for community organisations going through the process, including advice and guidance on governance, strategy and finances, in order to support the ongoing sustainability of the new asset owners.

"Now [the community] weren't in any fit state to take it on and I had to work with them for about two years during COVID doing those sessions about governance and strategy and where the money's going to come from, who's going to do what. And we got them into a position where they could sign a lease with the parish council and take on the building of the school"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

In some circumstances, it was reported that councils had provided additional funds or small grants in order to renovate or refurbish a transferred asset so that it was in good working order for the community, provide some initial revenue, or pay for other essential services such as building surveys, legal fees, training and publicity.

"So, lots of bits and pieces [of funding] have come from some of the county council's own departments, and the borough council to an extent. Local councillors have helped quite a lot too, just in support, just in keeping us motivated sometimes"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

Generally, community case study interviewees reported that they would like to see more support and engagement from local authorities; as one community case study interviewee put it: "Hand holding throughout the whole process. Just totally throughout the whole process". Other specific suggestions for improving the support provided included having more senior council officers involved earlier on, and improving opportunities for networking and peer support between communities that have acquired assets and those at various stages of the process.

Support and guidance from local and national organisations

It was clear from interviews that rural communities have a wide range of support available to them from a number of organisations, including national third sector bodies (e.g. Plunkett UK, Locality, Shared Assets), local bodies (e.g. different levels of local government and third sector membership organisations) and other local organisations who have been through similar processes. The rural case study organisation had gained support from both local and national support agencies, including Plunkett UK.

According to national organisations interviewed, the support they offer includes providing a first point of contact for new projects, advice and guidance for funding applications (especially for those groups least represented), feasibility studies and building evaluation, assistance with negotiations with the owner, help with governance and legal structures, support with community shares, business planning and modelling, and help with community consultation. In addition, support organisations encourage local authorities to dispose of some assets in order to both support communities and reduce their own liabilities, even if it is for below market value, emphasising that the community will improve both the asset and the surrounding area.

However, rural community interviewees and KE participants highlighted that, while this comprehensive range of support is available, not all communities are aware of it. They identified a need for a general guide for the entire asset transfer process, and there were calls for some coordination between support organisations, bringing together different expertise and approaches in the process.

The rural case study reported that networking and visiting other similar community organisations to gather their experience had been beneficial throughout the process of acquiring the assets. More broadly, a strong network of community organisations with experience of having gone through the process was considered helpful in providing advice and ongoing support for those undertaking asset transfers.

"I think in terms of easing the process, ensuring that there is a good strong network of communities who have done this before, experience on offer, to communities I think that works well...it's been useful to talk about what we did to other communities and they've found it beneficial talking to me personally"

(Local borough councillor interviewee)

Having an effective community group/organisation

The rural case study interviewees were keen to emphasise that having a sufficient and suitable workforce to run the organisation had been a major facilitator to them achieving their asset transfers, however there was recognition that this might sometimes be difficult to achieve, perhaps particularly in other rural areas. In particular, they felt lucky that their board members possessed a number of professional skills as well as knowledge of local people and circumstances.

"So a lot of the people that helped were retired accountants, retired, you know, higher level management and so on, so they all had these networking connections from a lifetime in the village"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

"A lot of professional people live here and that sort of thing. And that's the advantage we had, whatever we needed, we had somebody who had those skills to help. You know, whether it was an accountant or a solicitor or whatever we needed, we'd always somebody on hand to give a bit of advice, even if they weren't directly involved"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

Armed with the advice given, the organisation could then make a more convincing case for the transfer of the asset. As stated by one support organisation interviewee, rural communities often have a heavy reliance on retired volunteers until their organisations are developed enough to employ paid staff, without whom the process can be very challenging.

Following the experience of going through the first asset transfer process, those involved with the rural community case study felt far better able to embark on subsequent attempts due to their increased knowledge and capability. It was felt that the success of the first acquisition depended entirely on the support of local people, which in turn resulted in a virtuous cycle of support and confidence in the future of the asset. Even if people weren't serving on the board, the voluntary contribution of their professional skills or support for community events was seen as having contributed to the confidence of the committee and the strength of the case for the asset transfer.

4.5 Impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities

Empowerment

Empowerment was felt by interviewees and KE participants to be built through a recognition that individuals can influence what is happening within their communities.

"I think for me the biggest part of the empowerment journey is around the individuals that are involved, because they can start to realise that they can have a say and it's heard... residents can speak up and they can have their say, either informally through knowing a trustee, for example, or through more formal means such as an AGM"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

The asset transfer process itself was also felt to be a source of empowerment through bringing the community together for a common purpose.

"...you aren't alone, you've got all these people, you're not doing this fight on your own and it's a case of there's that support network there of other people that are all coming together"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

This was felt, in turn, to boost empowerment through the provision of wider community support for ongoing activities and efforts of the community organisation. The case study community organisation also felt empowered by learning about the skills and knowledge that existed amongst the local community, which in turn boosted their confidence to pursue the assets.

"[The community group] had been drawn together in such a way that they got to know a lot more people who lived in the village and got to make friends and learn about skills that they didn't know that other people had and be able to use skills that they themselves had that other people weren't aware of"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

Wider interviewees and KE participants also recognised that empowerment could commonly be generated post-acquisition. Having a successful experience of achieving an asset transfer was felt to increase a community's confidence and sense of empowerment. Interviewees also felt that empowerment was often generated by taking control and ownership over local socio-economic development, which could also generate a drive to pursue further assets within communities.

"They have a sense that they can achieve change and I think that particularly at the moment, many people feel very disillusioned and like they have no control over wider issues like the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis. But by doing something locally, they have the feeling that they can enact change and that is something that is personally empowering and can also improve a sense of mental well-being"

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

"Again, going back to empowerment, we do have certain levels of autonomy and we can address things and issues that come up with the community probably more than we could do if we weren't part of that community asset"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

While the asset transfer process may have led to a sense of achievement and feelings of empowerment, it was also noted by some interviewees and KE participants that already confident, empowered, and energised communities are often more able to achieve successful asset transfers in the first place.

"I think generally, people in Trawden are quite confident in themselves anyway...I'm not sure that Trawden was a place that needed to feel as though they needed empowering in the first place"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

The asset transfer process was also criticised by many interviewees for being disempowering. The lack of control of the process and reliance on the whim and timescale of the local authorities often led to feelings of helplessness among community organisations.

"I think it was mainly the council aspect of it that was disempowering because you were at their mercy with everything and it's not a really clear process and you are relying on people taking a chance on you. You might have these policies and these acts and stuff but at the end of the day, you need someone to be able to say yes to the vision that you hold for the possibility in the future you're trying to shape"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

Further, community case study interviewees spoke of feeling disempowered by power and control over decision making lying in the hands of local authorities.

"As soon as people are in power either as members or as officers they're not really accountable to anyone...it feels to me like there's a missing step in Localism Act that doesn't recognise the power that local authorities do have in being a decision maker...it's quite difficult to talk about empowerment in that sense when there isn't a recognition of power in deciding where assets go"

(National support organisation interviewee 3)

Community case study representatives and professional stakeholders also noted issues of “control” in the context of local and national politics, which was seen by many to be intertwined with asset transfer process. For example, some interviewees stated that disempowerment could be felt when local councillors’ decision making was strongly influenced by party political affiliation.

Beyond the process of asset transfer itself, the concept of community ownership was considered by interviewees and KE participants to be disempowering in instances where the public or private sector were deferring responsibility for providing essential services to the community. Examples included community organisations that were providing broadband services in areas not covered by other providers, or cases where assets had been taken on by the community in response to a threat of closure or service withdrawal. Further disempowerment was felt where communities only had the option to take on liability assets from public authorities, which threatened their ability to sustain and operate assets to their full potential.

Resilience

Broadly, resilience was seen by interviewees and KE participants as a community’s ability to sustain itself without relying on external input, especially in times of challenge or need. Service withdrawal – a key driver of community asset transfer in rural communities – was really felt to threaten community resilience and, as stated earlier, rural assets were felt to be particularly precious because there are less of them and they often represent “a community lifeline”. Accordingly, rural community asset transfer motivated by a threat of closure or service withdrawal could be seen as protecting or bolstering the community’s resilience.

KE participants identified certain factors that made resilience particularly strong in rural communities, prior to engaging in asset transfer. For example, people living in smaller, closer-knit communities were seen as more likely to be proactive and willing to fill service provision gaps. Rural areas were also perceived to have clearer, more obvious communities of place – for example a village has clear boundaries. Finally, rural communities were felt to have a better understanding of their own needs than the public authorities that serve them.

The community case study interviewees felt that their resilience had been gradually strengthened as a result of going through asset transfer processes.

“I think first of all it was the experience of the community centre takeover that then gave them the confidence to go for the community shop and I think then the experience of the two operations then led the village as a whole to have the confidence to run the pub. So, you know, that’s my concept of resilience, it’s being able to think, “Oh we can do this”

(Community case study interviewee 4)

Nonetheless, community respondents felt that resilience of the community organisation was not yet possible to judge, as it would take many years of responding to ongoing shocks in order to test.

Wellbeing

Interviewees and KE participants felt that asset transfer could improve people’s wellbeing by giving them some control over what happens locally, linking wellbeing to empowerment.

“All of the markers that you consider around improving well-being and empowerment are those things about giving people voice, getting them to talk to each other, building a sense of community, having a sense of achievement”

(National support organisation interviewee 4)

Participants in the KE event also mentioned that all assets, whether community owned or not, increase both the economic sustainability and wellbeing of rural communities; thus, as with resilience, asset transfer motivated by a threat of closure or service withdrawal was seen as protecting community wellbeing. Wellbeing benefits were especially found to be associated with assets which provide a space for people of all ages and backgrounds to meet and strengthen community bonds, such as a cafe or community centre.

“We’ve got a youth action group that come down, we’ve got all uniform groups, the Cubs, Brownies and so on, it’s just making sure that there’s something for every section identified in the village...it’s making sure that who in the village is represented and what can we do for them and then how do we do it”

(Community case study interviewee 2)

More generally, by creating new shared spaces within the community, interviewees noted that asset transfer processes can ultimately increase wellbeing through providing opportunities to tackle loneliness and promote mental health within communities.

“That has an impact mentally because it helps them to feel less isolated and more in control of their personal circumstances. And as I mentioned earlier, in terms of mental well-being, it can help people feel more connected. It gives them somewhere to go during the day if they're a volunteer, then they can have a sense of purpose. If there's someone who lives on their own or who is kind of socially isolated”

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

KE participants also noted aspects of the acquisition process that can negatively affect wellbeing. For those involved in community organisations, this included stress associated with bureaucracy, responsibility and succession planning. Some community members also experienced feelings of guilt about lacking the time to be able to commit to being involved in the process or having to stop their involvement due to other pressures on their time.

The background of the slide is a photograph of a traditional British pub, likely 'The Golden Aspidochelone' as indicated by the sign above the entrance. The image is covered with a semi-transparent red filter. A large white circle is centered on the slide, containing the text. The text is in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

Conclusion and recommendations

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to understand the impacts of processes of asset acquisition on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities in England. We sought to explore the key barriers and facilitators to rural community asset acquisition at a community, practitioner and policy level, and what support was required to enable best practice.

In summary, our findings for England showed a number of barriers related to the rural context, most notably the inability of rural communities to successfully engage in asset acquisition processes due to smaller volunteer pools and a lack of individuals with the specific skills, capacity and knowledge required. This was mostly related to challenges in recruiting and retaining the volunteers required to undertake an asset acquisition and demonstrate legacy and succession.

Our research showed that the key drivers for local authorities in England to transfer assets to communities were cost saving and the disposal of potential liabilities. Communities viewed this as problematic reporting that authorities were sometimes unwilling to let go of assets with any financial value to them, and expressing frustration that authorities were unable to offer assets for anything less than market value, unless they could not sell to private buyers.

In terms of barriers to community asset acquisition, public authority processes in England were found to be overly complex and lengthy, with a lack of clear and consistent practice across different tiers of local government. Further, local authority process was sometimes felt to be influenced (both negatively and positively) by local and national party-political context. Local authorities themselves felt restricted by a lack of capacity and resources to be able to support communities through these processes.

Findings showed a general lack of understanding and engagement with the Localism Act 2011, which was widely considered to be 'weak' and 'ineffective' as it does not give communities any right of first refusal, or the right to have their bid properly considered or accepted even when it might be at market value.

Our research highlighted the impact of having supportive and engaged local authorities, who could recognise the role and value of rural community groups in taking on assets. Local and national support organisations had also provided invaluable support for rural communities in navigating such complex processes.

Considering the presented evidence, we make the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in delivering key services and facilities that are tailored to the key needs of local populations, as shown by our case study in Trawden. To do this, communities require policy support that considers the rural context and facilitates access to funding, as well as upskilling and capacity building within local community groups to allow them to pursue public assets.
- Findings show that use and understanding of the Localism Act 2011 is low, and the current legislative mechanism 'lack teeth'. Therefore, our research emphasises a requirement for further rights – for first refusal and to buy – to truly empower communities.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes across all tiers of local government. This could be assisted by the introduction of duties on public authorities to comply with formal legislative measures and to regularly update and publish public asset registers. Further, resources, support and training are required for local authorities to enable them to fully engage with and embed community asset acquisition into their everyday practice.
- The introduction of standardised measurement tools for social value would be beneficial to both communities and public authorities, enabling them to quantify community benefit when making their case for acquisition and when assessing the financial value of assets respectively. This would also allow for disposal of assets at less than market value to become more common practice.

While this evidence contributes to an important development area for policy and practice in England, we acknowledge that the research had a specific focus on rural communities, and that the views of all interviewees and KE participants may not be representative of all English community populations. With this in mind, further research exploring both urban and rural contexts, and focusing on minority or marginalised groups who may be excluded from asset acquisition processes, would be beneficial.



