

Community Ownership and Management of Assets Programme Final report and findings of Thurrock COMA Partnership, February 2016

About Your Project

- 1. *What was your vision, and why is it important that the multiple assets or complex single asset which your project focussed on, are transferred into community management or ownership? (for example appetite from community, inability to deliver services without community involvement, need to dispose of assets, etc).***

Our vision for Thurrock is a progressive and ambitious approach to the management of assets founded on collaborative principles that harness community energy and lead to sustainable resident led enterprise and social outcomes.

The key drivers for our community assets work was to meet community demand around taking on community assets and enable the council to better manage its asset portfolio and relationships with community partners.

Our intention when we launched the assets programme was threefold, to 1) raise the profile of community assets while scoping out local interest, 2) build the capacity of groups working towards asset transfer, and 3) develop and formalise a community asset transfer (CAT) policy for Thurrock.

At the outset we recognised that strong community engagement, genuine partnership working and viable business models could ultimately lead to successful asset transfers, and because of this, three cross cutting themes - engagement, capacity building and policy making – were designed to channel the strengths and skills of local people and organisations.

- 2. *What was your starting point, key milestones and how many have you got ahead of you? (for example, what is your long term goal/outcome and has it changed since you started the Community Assets programme?)***

We focused on three areas: community engagement, capacity building and policy/strategy development. The nascent assets agenda in Thurrock demanded this approach, which alongside a commitment to partnership working, ensured solid foundations and coherent strategy were developed from which coordinated activity could flow.

At inception the partnership, made up of local authority departments and community groups, agreed a set of aims and objectives and a set of development needs that would be met through a package of support based on the three areas identified above and as follows to:

1. implement a programme of community engagement to inform, inspire and mobilise Build the capacity of local groups in the stages of taking on listed assets;
2. formalise a CAT policy for Thurrock Council;
3. create a product to capture learning and inform future work, and,
4. establish an overarching joint strategy for CAT in Thurrock that includes a clear set of future priorities to implement from April 16.

A series of community engagement workshops were commissioned as part of the consultancy resource. The workshops were designed to furnish a group of community stakeholders with the requisite knowledge around legal and practical aspects of CAT. A workshop was also planned for local authority officers and members although it was determined that a small and focussed session in March 2016 with key strategic

leads for the Council's Regeneration, Growth and Environment Services would provide a robust foundation for wider consultation on the Council's CAT Policy in the future. At the time of writing two well attended community workshops have taken place where, in addition to representation from community groups and organisations, delegates have included Council officers, managers and members.

A successful pre-feasibility grants application enabled us to commission two organisations, Neal Howard Ltd and Oxford Brookes University, to deliver bespoke business development support for a number of key asset transfer projects: Hardie Park and Lightship Cafe. This fantastic capacity building support has provided groups with a suite of new resources to strengthen business cases for CAT including business plans and energy audits to support financial forecasting and highlight means to increase the environmental sustainability of both community buildings. Accompanying green energy and waste management training has also been provided to both community organisations. A surveying service will furnish the Council and Lighthouse Café with information on the condition of Grays Beach Café to support both business planning for Lighthouse Café and the Council's assessment of a future CAT. The majority of this work has been delivered at the time of writing with the remaining being tied up before March.

A report to the Council's Cleaner and Greener Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2015 highlighted difficulties faced by the organisation in light of budget pressures with the latent opportunity to support community groups to take on parks and green spaces where there was interest to do so. Members of the Committee recommended that Cabinet authorise Council officers to enter into detailed negotiations with groups expressing an interest in developing community based services and report back as appropriate. This was later approved by the Council's Cabinet in September 2015.

A set outcome of the programme for us was to develop a CAT Policy. This would provide a clear and consistent operational framework for the community and public bodies and assist the transfer of sustainable projects. We had hoped for Cabinet approval in March 2016 but this has moved to June 2016. During the course of the COMA programme, the CAT Policy has advanced from initial drafting stage with the partnership providing a valuable consultation body through each stage of its development in conjunction with Council officer scrutiny.

Convening the partners at regular points throughout the lifetime of the programme was important to enable relationships to develop and members to feed the process and draw on their experience and networks. A physical meeting every four to six weeks was held to check progress and plan work accordingly. We have begun to bridge assets work with our 'Stronger Together' partnership and to embed this with related area coordination activity around community building, community rights, volunteering and networking.

Multiple community asset transfer

3. How many asset transfers did you aim to tackle at the beginning of the project? How many have taken place during COMA? How many will take place soon?

A collection of assets and associate groups were identified at the outset for development support with a view to asset transfer. Because of the emerging asset transfer scene in Thurrock, we began the programme with realistic expectations around actual asset transfers, but were hopeful of moving key projects along their pathway to a sound proposition.

The assets list that has been the focus of our work includes: a park maintained by a Friends group, and riverside building with café facilities called Grays Beach Cafe stewarded by a board of trustees (entitled Lighthouse Café); a large new-build community house in Grays supported by an interim board; and a set of 5 community hubs.

We are encouraged by the progress of both the park and café which have both received business planning support designed to strengthen their case for asset transfer and will be in a strong position to submit a stage 1 asset transfer application within six months. The community house has developed in parallel with the COMA programme with a member of the board of trustees for Grays Riverside Community Association updating regularly on project development. A report seeking approval for the transfer of Community House will be presented to the Council's Cabinet in March 2016.

Community hubs and centres across Thurrock are set-up as a partnership between local groups, voluntary organisations, and Thurrock Council. They are recognised as positive models for redesigning services as well as reshaping the relationship between state and citizens. Community hubs are in a slightly different position due to their new build and existing use status respectively, but are still in scope and remain viable future asset transfers. There are 5 currently active hubs in Thurrock as follows: Acorns Community Hub, Stifford Clays; Aveley Community Hub; Chadwell St. Mary Centre; South Ockendon Centre; Tilbury Community Hub; a sixth is planned for Purfleet.

4. *If your partnership were reviewing multiple community asset transfers, have you attempted this before? What were the unique challenge(s) for investigating multiple asset transfers?*

In recent years the Council has adopted several approaches to support the leasing, licensing and management of the buildings and other assets that it owns. A Community Sport Facilities, Leases and Licences policy was approved by Cabinet in 2010 with a view to establishing a range of sustainable self-management options for tenants allowing for the variation of terms and conditions of licenses in some instances allowing for leases to be set below market value. Since adoption in 2010, the policy has focused on a small number of village hall management committees and sports clubs and administered by the Council's Asset's Team where opportunities have presented. CAT has been undertaken in recent years with a new build multi-use building – The Beehive – transferred to Thurrock's CVS on a freehold basis.

The creation of a CIO by Thurrock's CVS entitled 'Community Hubs Thurrock' provides the potential to achieve multiple asset transfers for community hub buildings in the future. A wider strategic debate between the Council, community and public sector partners is now required with the involvement of the local CCG to ensure that any plans of this nature link to an emerging 'Health Hubs' programme in Thurrock. The adoption of a formal CAT Policy will provide an essential tool to structure future dialogue.

Services delivered

5. *What type of services will be delivered through the assets which your partnership are considering for transfer/acquisition (high level description)?*

Lightship Café, the charity leading the business plan for the Grays Beach Cafe building set in Grays Beach Park are focusing on a community share governance model based around a social café offer that will: promote affordable and healthy eating; provide volunteering opportunities and work experience; and put ownership in the hand of residents and users. An increase in the number of visitors will increase use of the recreational offer in the park, promoting healthy living and strengthen community ties.

Friends of Hardie Park are campaigning for park improvements and championing local management and maintenance of the park. The group have a pool of volunteers and have made improvements to prevent vandalism of equipment and anti-social behaviour. Excitingly they have secured £140K that is funding a brand new stake park which will be open in the Spring and provide sports and leisure opportunities. A prefabricated building has also been erected and will contain a café and space to deliver training sessions. A core offer available at all community hubs is support and advice for citizens to self-serve for information and to assist with on-line applications to services / benefits with signposting from trained volunteers. All

hubs have carried out local surveys to shape a community offer beyond self-service support and additional services include hosting outreach from third sector or community health services, self-help groups, cultural and social groups and advice sessions. Their main aim is to reduce demand on statutory services by working with communities to design more holistic and effective community based solutions to issues in their area. They will also act as a catalyst to supporting public services plan effectively between residents, councillors, public services and business.

6. *Will these services be new or continued services, and how will the community asset transfer benefit them?*

The majority of services being delivered are new and resident led. Asset transfer will mean the community will be able to enjoy greater opportunities for entrepreneurial management to improve services, borrow against assets and bid for external funding currently unavailable to the Council.

The Friends and volunteers working to maintain the park are doing so in partnership with the parks service and hope to co-design and collaborate on future projects and services.

The hubs are currently operating but are seeking new and improved ways to support local service transformation. Hubs enable the delivery of the Council's wider transformation programme providing residents with: a digital by design service - access to web based information; demand management – diverting people away from social care services to community based solutions which are more sustainable and support quality of life; growth of business – development of local enterprise which further embeds local priorities; and flexible working – helping staff hot desk and work flexibly. All are committed to prevention and managing demand on services through a community based support offer co-produced with residents. For example, close working relationships exist in each hub area with a Local Area Co-ordinator.

7. *What do you envisage the project's impact to be for the area (e.g. increase social cohesion, increase job opportunities, economic development opportunities, etc)? (Please do include any statistics etc if available).*

We see the principal impacts of the community ownership and management of assets programme to date as community empowerment and local economic development. We recognise that a strong, engaged community and successful community asset transfers is a virtuous circle and must be well supported.

Within Thurrock the volunteer base building around assets and the groups working to take on assets drive community engagement and therefore improving social cohesion and the ability to follow through on ambitious enterprising projects. We have seen that active citizenship breeds more engaged communities and this is in essence what we are striving to achieve.

We are working to support the groups to achieve their potential around becoming part of a cultural landscape and for the named assets and associated groups to support high levels of participation therefore projecting cherished assets for the benefit of the natural and built environment, as much as the community itself.

Learning and Experience

8. *What went particularly well and according to plan? Can you identify 3-5 things you are particularly pleased about?*

Partnership working and communication: the development of the COMA partnership in Thurrock has brought people around the table, developed relationships and focused minds. The partnership will continue

and indeed grow beyond the programmes lifetime to support the burgeoning assets scene. Crucially partners have listened and been responsive to the needs and demands of others and have sought to find collective solutions to hurdles.

Community engagement: COMA enabled a blend of activities that provided resource in the form of events, consequently people have started to participate in conversations and are driving their own ideas. There is a genuine excitement within the community about community asset projects. The partnership have levered their networks to champion and support local groups. The Council are increasingly receptive and more recently senior leadership have been taking a proactive interest.

Corporate engagement through CAT policy development: the development of a draft CAT policy has been crucial as a focus for the partnership and will form work ongoing. A wide consultation process has taken place within the Council and senior leaders are supportive of its review at cabinet in June. The dedicated officer resource has been invaluable in driving its development as well as related programme activities.

9. What were the top unforeseen issues you have had to tackle? How did you manage this?

In October 2015, a Council-wide organisational review led to changes in corporate structures, loss of key personnel, and some delay to strategic discussions concerning the CAT policy. A key objective of the partnership was to formalise a CAT policy for Thurrock and implement a programme of awareness raising in the Council to support its implementation. This has not been possible during the programme but will take place within six months; a Cabinet meeting in June has been identified.

The impacts of the restructure were mitigated by the RM speaking regularly with the council lead to think through risks and produce alternatives. The council lead has also been regularly making the case to senior colleagues and keeping CAT firmly on the agenda.

There is recognition that the case for CAT needs to be made by senior corporate levels to lever political support. Alongside capacity building, the wealth of knowledge accrued and progress made as a result of the COMA programme provides the partnership with the resources required to influence key decision makers around policy and ongoing investment.

10. Thinking about your response to questions 3-5 - Are there 3-5 things you are could have done better?

Senior engagement: we could have engaged senior council staff earlier in the process, but the challenge of a council review was difficult to overcome within the timeframe. Now things have settled there is a renewed vigour to engaging in conversation.

Links to other services: we could have made more strategic links to other service areas e.g. sports, culture. Given the relatively low level nature of Thurrock's community assets work we felt that developing a track record and a smaller more manageable partnership would then feed new working arrangements, which is indeed what has occurred, but it might have been better to bring in other areas at the outset.

Manage expectations: as a partnership we were aware of what we could achieve within the timeframe of COMA but perhaps could have communicated that better across the wider network and into the public domain. The development of the CAT Policy and a marketing plan will help to keep communication with the wider community open and transparent.

11. Thinking about your response to questions 3-5 - what are your top 5 lessons you would like to share with other communities?

- **Build relationships** – get to know people and what they are trying to achieve
- **Meet regularly** – creates collective drive and joined up thinking and innovation
- **Do your homework** – gather and use information and learn from others
- **Grow local support** – find your leaders, ambassadors, residents to make you stronger
- **Be patient** – it will always take longer than you think!

12. Thinking about your response to questions 3-5- what are your top 5 lessons you would like to share with other local authorities?

- **Build relationships** – get to know people and what they are trying to achieve
- **Meet regularly** – creates collective drive and joined up thinking and innovation
- **Welcome challenge** – be open and transparent and engage widely
- **Broker and hold to account** – make links with key people and services and seek to unblock
- **Share knowledge** – make information readily available

Partnership working

13. How do you feel your partnership has developed during the programme, from the initial scoping meeting?

The partnership has grown and strengthened in representation since inception. All partners are active and have attended most, if not all, meetings and community engagement events.

We are planning to develop a terms of reference for the partnership to define what its role will be beyond the programme and gradually invite other members to join from the wider pool of stakeholder who have shown an interest. The terms will also seek to encourage partners to take a broader remit and generally champion community asset transfer across the sectors and organisations in which they operate.

14. Considering your response above. Excluding Government-sourced funding/grants/capital - what could have made achieving your project easier/quicker/possible?

Simply we would have valued more time to develop the work and the infrastructure in which it needs to operate. This would have enabled us to do more foundational work and lobbying that would lead to greater impacts during the programme. We believe in the principle of developing at the community's pace and were keen not to rush to the detriment of overall sustainability. The CAT policy requires engagement which takes time, particularly to garner senior council and political support. That said we are proud of the achievements that have been made in such a short amount of time and are excited by the potential of where the work is going.

15. What community financing routes did you consider/use to progress asset ownership/management (e.g. Community shares, social investment, crowd-funding and loans)?

The charity looking to take on management/ownership of the café building is working with Plunkett Foundation and engaging Community Shares to establish a share offer which will enable local people to invest in the venture.

16. Did you receive any in-kind support, or match funding? If so from where, or who?

During the programme we have received significant in kind support from the Council's Community Development and Equalities Team. The partners themselves have also provided in kind support in the form of room hire, marketing for events and volunteer support.

Friends of Hardie Park have secured funding from Veolia (£120k) and matched by the Council (£20k) for the development of a skate park. This success is further building the CAT business case for the group.

The Hubs currently have revenue support available via the Transformation Challenge Award (£550k for three years). £100k directly pump primes community hubs, £150k supports community development for hubs (volunteer training, learning and development, enterprise support). £300k is available to support service transformation through hubs – for example Housing has contracted with two hubs to provide Customer Service Support, replacing housing led support. The Council has committed £1m in capital funding to 2017/18 to support the development of hubs – part of this budget will match housing investment.

17. Are you able to identify any savings that have been made, or predict any savings to be made through the Community Asset Transfer?

Due to the current position of projects, accurate cost savings are currently not possible to quantify.

Anecdotally the two asset transfer projects that are furthest along, Hardie Park and Lightship Café, aim to deliver outcomes of increased awareness of health which should result in cost savings in terms of GP and hospital admissions. Furthermore increased feelings of ownership and pride in community assets should increase community satisfaction/safety and levels of engagement therefore lessening the need for reactive responses from agencies.

Direct Support and grant funding

18. Can you summarise what benefits the technical support (consultancy) brought to the project? What was learnt /gained from it?

Technical support comprised a series of community engagement activities (events) and a package of tailored resources. This support was purposefully designed to meet the two partnership aims: 1) to implement a programme of community engagement to inform, inspire and mobilise; and 2) to build the capacity of local groups in the stages of taking on listed assets.

This support sought to:

- create excitement around improving Thurrock through community led action using assets for community benefit;
- promote an understanding of community assets and commitment from Thurrock Council to develop a policy;
- test people's understanding of social value;
- manage expectations of groups with good ideas so they are aware of what is involved;
- increase confidence to take on sustainable and effective community asset management;
- provide an understanding of community enterprise and the importance of a robust business plan, and,
- complement existing networks.

19. How did you feel the relationship management worked? Are you able to include any benefits, or anything that could be improved?

Locality's Relationship Manager (RM) in Thurrock – Lawrence Walker - has provided invaluable support helping to transform a range of conversations taking place across the Council and with communities into a strong Thurrock CAT partnership that will sustain beyond the COMA programme.

The RM has helped the partnership to form clear objectives to develop the social and corporate appetite for CAT across the borough and realise opportunities for community benefit where viable. Best practice advice and guidance has been shared with the Council's lead officer (Becky Price) at regular intervals enabling the advance and development of the Council's CAT policy as well as opening debate with officers and members on the benefits CAT can bring to communities and public services.

Two community engagement sessions were hosted in Thurrock by the RM who, owing to his wider experience and connections to members of the partnership, was both knowledgeable and able to demonstrate a vital understanding of the local area and challenges faced by services and communities. Delegates' feedback from both events was positive and created avenues to extend the CAT partnership in the future.

The RM has provided a great deal of support to move the CAT agenda forward in Thurrock over the last 9 months, as such, there are no suggested improvements to the assistance that has been provided.

20. Can you summarise how the grant was spent and what was achieved with this fund, which could not have been achieved without it?

COMA pre-feasibility grant funding has principally supported the advancement of two specific assets and associated groups in Hardie Park and Lightship Café. This took a three pronged approach focused on business planning, green audits and waste training and surveys. Training around business planning and energy management was offered out to the wider stakeholder group. A study visit was also arranged to the Sunlight Centre in Gillingham to inspire and support local project development by giving a clear understanding of what needs to be in place to manage an asset.

21. Any other comments?

Going forward by the time the programme ends we feel will have the knowledge and resources locally to extend the programme further to new partners and a greater range of assets.

Quotes:

Friends of Hardie Park, Rob Groves: *"The programme has enabled Thurrock Council to work intentionally with our organisation to pursue the common goal of asset transfer and partnership working whilst increasing our capacity through consultancy and training to optimise the opportunity that asset transfer presents to us as a relatively inexperienced and new body of local people. It has also helped establish a precedent for similar future public/voluntary sector partnerships across the borough by establishing a proven way of working and the necessary policies and procedures"*. **Lightship Café**, Andrew Blakey: *"The Community Ownership and Management of Assets project took a wish and started to turn it into reality. This was the spur that drove the project forward. COMA allowed us to access resources that were not available to us"*.

Report prepared on: 25 February 2016

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