

LEARNING POINT 25:

developing buildings as community assets

What next?

Developing community assets can seem daunting. In the future it will be important to:

- continue to learn from others who have already developed assets.
- make sure information and knowledge to support asset development is available.
- understand better the balance between financial returns and community returns.
- develop specific guidance on how to devise and implement an effective feasibility study
- support people to get the best out of the advisors and professionals involved.

If you would like more information

If you would like more information about any of the issues mentioned in this learning point, please contact:

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Further reading

Lorraine Hart's publications *Asset transfer – a 'can do' guide* and *To have and to hold* are available from the Development Trusts Association (DTA)
telephone: 0845 458 8336 or from its website (www.dta.org.uk)
DTA Scotland website www.dtascot.org.uk
telephone: 0131 220 2456

Funding

Details of the Big Lottery's Growing Community Assets Fund are available on the Big Lottery website at www.biglotteryfund.org.uk.

Details of the Seeing is Believing and the New Ideas funds are available at www.scr.communitiescotland.gov.uk

Other formats

You can also ask for this publication in large print, Braille or on audio cassette, and we can also provide translations into other languages. Please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email her at janette.campbell@communitiescotland.gsi.gov.uk

The Scottish Centre for Regeneration is part of Communities Scotland, the Executive's housing and regeneration agency.



What are learning points?

Learning Points share what people have learned from their experience in regeneration. They share the lessons from people working or talking together, or from research into issues and evaluation of what is happening. Learning Points are one of the ways that help people and organisations identify what works and what doesn't work to improve their practice.

What is this learning point about?

At the Scottish Centre for Regeneration, we believe that communities can gain long-term benefits by taking responsibility for the ownership and control of buildings, and developing them to meet community needs.

This learning point captures the key lessons from our Masterclass, 'Delivering Buildings as Community Assets', which was led by Lorraine Hart of the Environment Trust. Lorraine has over 20 years' experience in helping communities and organisations to develop their assets.

It focuses therefore on issues that are important if agencies are to help communities successfully take on the challenges involved.

What are the important issues?

- Making sure a community gains from the development of an asset. That applies not just to any financial gain but also to people's ability to achieve what they want for their community more generally.

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- Deciding what might be an asset and what might be a liability. Some things may turn out to cost more to maintain than they bring in by way of income.
- Managing the process of development. For example, taking ownership of a property or developing a new building means working with planners, architects, funders and others to make sure that the final product is one that can be managed and maintained properly.
- Working with local communities and being clear about their role and responsibilities. Are they merely being consulted, are they partners or will they be fully in control of the asset?
- Managing community expectations, either about the potential of the asset itself or how it can provide for community needs.
- Whether asset development provides an alternative to grant funding by creating other sources of income.
- Whether asset ownership really helps community development. Does it give communities more control over things affecting their lives or simply burden them with unnecessary responsibilities?

What is known already?

That there are problems and barriers to overcome:

- Communities often lack the confidence, skills and knowledge to develop, own and manage assets. For example, they don't know how to go about buying an asset, or how to start the development process off.
- It is not always clear which comes first – the opportunity to develop and own an asset, or the need that the asset can help provide for.
- Communities are frightened of getting involved because the risks seem too high.
- Communities may also feel that focusing on asset development draws attention away from smaller projects and delivering services in response to specific community needs. It can also result in resources being sidetracked.



- It takes a long time to develop a community asset and this can make it difficult to sustain community interest and participation.
- A lack of support from public agencies can hinder progress and make it harder for a community to keep up their motivation.

What has been learnt?

- From the start it is important to be clear why an asset is being developed. Discussions should include why the asset is needed, how it will benefit local people and if it is really going to be an asset or a liability.
- It is important to get support from local people in place from the start. This needs to continue throughout what is often a lengthy development process, especially if the asset is to work well for the community over the long term.
- Local people are more likely to support developments if they feel fully engaged and supported to take part through all the different stages from planning to implementation. This will require a long-term commitment from everyone.
- Possible assets may be identified by simply walking around the local area and by talking to local people.
- But not every building is an asset. Some are

unviable. It is foolish to be tempted by an offer to take on a building at a low price – the development and maintenance costs could make the idea unsound.

- Successful asset development requires a business-like approach. It's about balancing community need with sound commercial sense. It is important to find ways to generate income to help secure assets for the long-term. For example, if a community needs a new community centre, designing the building so it also has managed workspaces for rent can provide an income that can be used to support other community projects.
- Be realistic. Even if income is being generated it will still be necessary to apply for some grant funding to support specific projects.
- Each project is unique and has its own set of challenges. However, there are key stages to work through: testing out the idea, engaging the community and public agencies, planning and designing the building, securing finance and implementation.
- It's not a straightforward journey through the different stages. It is possible to be involved in several of the stages at the same time. Therefore there is a need to be flexible.
- Groundwork is essential for success. It is important to do a feasibility study which looks at whether the asset makes financial sense and if it can be kept going over a number of years.
- A feasibility study can be a useful way to thoroughly test an idea with the community.
- At an early stage risks should be assessed and plans made to cope with things that might go wrong.
- A business plan must be produced. This should look at all aspects of the asset's development and its future use. The plan should also include detailed financial planning and consideration of all possible sources of support.
- Buildings are there to serve a purpose and provide for community needs too. The business plan is not just about money – it should include

ideas showing how support or services to the community will improve.

- Adopting a 'business personality' can also help enormously – it should be ambitious, positive and tenacious. It is important to act professionally and to not feel less powerful than others in any negotiations. It is surprising what can be achieved by being bold and just asking. Going directly to developers or the private sector may help secure what is needed.
- Securing finance for the development may require selling the idea to many different people who will all have different points of view. Taking time to really help them understand the project is essential.
- Talking to other people who have already developed assets is time well spent. Use the support and advice which is available and take the time to build relationships and build the community's trust in professional advisors.
- It's worth all the effort. Successful asset development can create a domino effect which stimulates other community developments and projects. The creation of a new source of income under community control is empowering and can bring long-term community benefits.

