



Community Asset Transfer Policy Framework consultation, DSD

August 2013

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the draft Community Asset Transfer policy framework.

About Healthy Cities

Since 1988 Belfast has been a leading member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network, which has a membership of 98 cities. Belfast Healthy Cities currently holds the WHO Secretariat for the European Network.

Belfast Healthy Cities is an independent partnership organisation that is responsible for delivering the WHO goals and objectives on behalf of Belfast as a WHO European Healthy City. The aim of Belfast Healthy Cities is to improve health equity and wellbeing for people living and working in Belfast. Belfast Healthy Cities has a strong track record of delivering the WHO goals and objectives within each five-year phase.

Role of Belfast Healthy Cities

The focus of the global Healthy Cities movement is on the wider physical and social living conditions that shape health and wellbeing, and creating conditions that support health and tackle inequalities. The role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to bring stakeholders together to consider these issues. We see our role as supporting organisations to achieve their aims, but in ways that also support wellbeing. Our role includes sharing evidence and testing new concepts and ways of working.

In the current Phase V (2009 – 2013) the overarching aim for Belfast and all WHO European Healthy Cities, is Health Equity in All Local Policies, supported through the core themes of Healthy Urban Environment (including Climate Change and Health) and Healthy Living, (including Active Living and Wellbeing). It is within the context of Belfast Healthy Cities' role that this response is made.

Our work focuses on developing new programmes, piloting innovative concepts, capacity building, and collating and sharing evidence. We have a track record of delivery and our work has influenced developments including the Investing for Health Strategy, the Belfast Strategic Partnership, the intersectoral Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership in Belfast and emerging regional and local active travel policy and practice.

Of particular relevance to this consultation, the approach is also reflected in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, to which Belfast Healthy Cities submitted evidence highlighting how land use plays a vital role in setting the context for health and wellbeing.

Introduction

Healthy Urban Environment has been a core theme of the WHO Healthy Cities movement at a European level over a number of years. Evidence from across the region strongly suggests that the quality of physical space and the built environment has a significant influence health and wellbeing.¹

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes this consultation. In particular, we are pleased to see that in launching it, the Minister for Social Development highlighted the potential for regeneration initiatives supported by Community Asset Transfer (CAT) to make a positive contribution to the health and wellbeing of communities.

It is important to recognise that poor environments disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities, adding to the health burden and compounding social and economic difficulties that significantly contribute to health inequalities. While changing circumstances that may have evolved and become embedded over a period of time may be difficult, they can be challenged. Building community resilience is one way in which these issues can be addressed and it has been shown that the most resilient communities are those who are involved in self-help² and are engaged in decision making at a local level.

As noted by Murtagh 2012³ the concept of asset transfer also supports asset-based approaches to neighbourhood development and improvement. While Belfast Healthy Cities recognises that understanding need is essential, approaches that identify the talent and resources already in existence within communities, and put them to use, are to be welcomed as they can benefit overall health. Engaging people in this process and encouraging them to think positively about their area establishes new relationships, people feel more supported and that can lead to the development of stronger mental wellbeing and resilience. There is also evidence that improving public spaces improves access to the local environment and can also boost levels of physical activity.

Evidence from WHO Healthy Cities from throughout WHO Europe suggests that this is a universal experience and that, even in the most challenging circumstances, supporting people to build on existing strengths in addressing their own situations is an essential approach. We would be pleased to share evidence and examples, if that would be helpful.

We have included some additional information in relation to measuring the impact of built environment on health and wellbeing as Appendix 1

¹ WHO Europe: Phase V (2009–2013) of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network: goals and requirements

² Davison (2012) *Surviving, Thriving or Dying*, ESRC

³ Murtagh (2012) *Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland*, JRF

Comments on draft proposals

Do you consider that the proposed ground rules are an effective means of achieving a focus on outcomes?

It is important that there is a coherent and strategic rationale for the transfer of public assets to community organisations. While it is not a completely new process in Northern Ireland, and indeed it should be acknowledged that there a number of very successful examples of the process in existence, there is a need for a shared understanding of the process across all sectors.

Belfast Healthy Cities is also pleased to see that the ground rules are intended to support the priorities of the Executive, linking with the Programme for Government and the Concordat between the Voluntary&Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government. As community assets are held by a wide range of government departments and bodies, Belfast Healthy Cities feels this initiative has the potential to demonstrate how closer intersectoral collaboration can be achieved.

It is also important that the examples given of types of community asset transfer in this section do not become established as a hierarchy. While there is considerable interest in the development of social enterprise in Northern Ireland, which is to be welcomed, community assets can be used to support a wide a range of schemes.

It is reasonable that public bodies apply the ground rules that provide the highest public value in the context of a particular project. Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased that the draft Framework highlights non-monetary benefits, but there is a need for a shared understanding of how this is assessed

The proposal to transfer assets at less than market value or 'best consideration' on a case by case basis is welcomed, as organisations who may be interested in securing publicly owned assets vary greatly as do the assets they seek to develop. This is an important flexibility, which has the potential to ensure that a broad range of factors, including the specific needs of individual areas and communities of interest are taken into consideration.

It is welcomed that the Framework recognises the potential of a range of options, including leasing and 'meantime' usage up to and including full outright purchase. This has potential to ensure that organisations take on appropriate assets and risk is managed in a constructive way.

Belfast Healthy Cities recommends that a plan detailing the actions that are needed for the development and management of any project should be formulated, engaging a wide range of stakeholders as a key element of the process. It is noted that in some cases in England and Scotland projects have progressed without a clear plan beyond securing the asset, which in some cases has distracted organisations from their core aims and objectives.⁴ It is important that a Framework for Northern Ireland utilises learning from elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

⁴ Dobson (2011) Community assets: Emerging learning, challenges and questions, JRF

Do you consider that the proposed ground rules are an effective means of ensuring accountability?

Perhaps the most important factor is that assets are protected for community use and that the Framework discourages commercial disposal. It is also essential that community need and community support for schemes is established and that physical community assets are accessible and used to their full potential. How organisations plan to promote accessibility and accountability to all of the local community should be included in the initial project plan to ensure it is integrated in the development of the scheme.

It is important that organisations that are successful in securing assets are legitimate and preferably constituted. However, this may exclude some newly formed or ad-hoc groups, say a group of concerned residents, from eligibility. This barrier could be mitigated by signposting potential applicants onto relevant agencies that may enable them to build capacity at a later stage. Alternatively, as suggest by Community Foundation NI (2011)⁵ these more informal groups could form partnerships with or be supported by other larger more developed groups in securing local assets, where it is allowed by their respective constitution. A pilot project approach could help identify the most effective mechanisms.

A simple reporting mechanism, such as a self-evaluation model could also be used as part of this process to monitor if the intended outcomes were achieved, what other learning was achieved and how difficulties were addressed. This learning could be shared as widely as possible to provide guidance for future schemes. As importantly, these outcomes will also contribute to a more developed and shared understanding of non-monetary community value.

Do you consider that the proposed ground rules are an effective means of governing decision making?

It is to be welcomed that both land and physical assets will be considered for transfer, as this presents opportunities for a wide range schemes to terms of size and activities. This presents the potential for innovative projects, such as the development of alternative energy generation as seen in Scotland.

Belfast Healthy Cities has a long track record of successfully initiating and facilitating intersectoral collaboration. We strongly support fostering collaboration, and suggest that closer formal and informal links could be established between schemes with shared goals to enable maximum use of resources and exchange of learning.

Transparency and the demonstration of best practice in decision-making will be important in establishing the credibility of such a new approach. Access to information about available assets is particularly important. The Scottish model of a publicly available register of available assets may be one way to ensure all interested parties are aware of opportunities for asset transfers.

⁵ Community Foundation (2011) Observatory Policy Basic: Development Trusts

Some aspects of assessments, including assessing the value of 'non-monetary' and 'community benefit' have potential to be highly subjective, and it is important stakeholders are involved in further development of a shared understanding of how public bodies agree on that value. Ongoing evaluation and shared learning from schemes may also contribute to the monitoring of this and could in the future be applied to improve decision-making.

It is reasonable that economic appraisals are carried out, but these should be proportionate to the scheme proposed. It is also appropriate that EU monies are drawn down where available, as all opportunities for finance should be maximised.

Do you consider that these proposals will be effective in raising the profile and understanding of Community Asset Transfer as a tool for investment and regeneration?

Belfast Healthy Cities believes that the resourcing of Development Trusts NI to undertake a range of awareness raising events is a good starting point for introducing and raising the profile of CAT in its expanded form to Northern Ireland. Similarly, the proposed on-line resources will support this process and contribute towards the establishment of a shared understanding of how the policy can be rolled out.

However, Belfast Healthy Cities would like to see a longer-term support role for an independent umbrella organisation to support organisations, promote best practice, foster innovation and encourage the development of relationships between sectors. It could also be the role of such a body to monitor geographic areas where there is low uptake in proportion to available assets and identify issues or barriers that could be addressed at an early stage. It could also monitor the uptake of opportunities amongst particular 'communities of interest', to identify gaps in participation at an early stage

Do you consider that these proposals will be effective in 'Mainstreaming' Community Asset Transfer as an option for public sector asset management and addressing current operational barriers?

Embedding a new approach to community asset transfer will be a long-term process, and will require sufficient time to explore the most effective approaches and create a culture whereby the process can be truly considered mainstream. Belfast Healthy Cities supports the Framework's aim to support an ambitious and long-term strategy, which has the potential to improve communities and ensure that public money is used more constructively.

The creation of an 'enabling environment' both in the public sector and within communities is an important aspect of this approach. The recognition that operational barriers may impact on the development of the Community Asset

Transfer to its full potential and the intention to amend financial guidelines to address is welcomed. The intention to create a single contact point for information and ensure it is up to date and accessible will help this process. For communities, it will demonstrate that the process is transparent and help increase the chances of successful bids.

Do you consider that these proposals will be effective in creating and maintaining the necessary skills within the public sector and third sector organisations to support implement of Community Asset Transfer and long term sustainable management and development of assets?

As stated by the Young Foundation (2012)⁶, 'community resilience does require public spaces but it is more than about building a new community centre, you need the people to run them.' Investing in people to develop skills while retaining experience and enthusiasm is key to making Community Asset Transfer sustainable and successful in the long term.

However as suggested by Murtagh (2012)⁷, there is also a need for a balanced approach, which harnesses social, community, and physical capital in a balanced way. Capacity building should be offered to all stakeholders, including relevant officials as well as community representatives. This may be a role that an independent umbrella body could lead or support.

Please also see response to question 10 for additional, relevant comments on professional expertise.

The Community Right to Buy or Right to Bid exists elsewhere in the UK as part of the enabling environment for Community Asset Transfer.

We are interested in exploring opinion on whether an equivalent community right could support asset transfer in Northern Ireland.

If you would like to comment on this, please do so below.

Right to buy and right to bid should be explored as part of the enabling environment in Northern Ireland as both seem to have been successful in other regions.

By allowing a pause in the sale of an asset designated as socially valuable to a neighbourhood, communities have an opportunity to think about how the asset could be used and secure resources to do so. It allows for better planning and helps ensure the most effective outcome.

A time limit to complete purchase is reasonable but six months may not be sufficient where proposals are more complex, or where there is poor community

⁶ Young Foundation Presentation Building Community Resilience and Wellbeing: Practical examples presented at Belfast Healthy Cities Conference Creating Resilient Communities and Supportive Environments, November 2012

⁷ Murtagh (2012) Community Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland, JRF

cohesion. As is the case elsewhere, there should be flexibility depending on the proposed scheme. One suggested approach would be to allow agencies and community organisations to come to an acceptable agreement as part of the application process.

While this consultation relates to publicly owned property, Belfast Healthy Cities would also welcome a discussion regarding an extended policy that would involve privately owned the transfer to communities of assets that have been abandoned, or have fallen into disrepair. As is the case in England, Scotland and Wales, there are many buildings that are not in public ownership that could be put to good use by communities.

Learning from initiatives such as the Big Lottery Space and Place funding programme may demonstrate how this can be achieved in Northern Ireland. It may be worthwhile to undertake an analysis of how the framework, as proposed, can complement the work of other sectors.

Appendix 1

Regeneration and health

Regeneration, when it works well, can deliver multiple benefits. Belfast Healthy Cities would highlight synergies between social and environmental domains, and notes that regeneration activities that bring existing physical assets back into use for the benefit of the community not only contribute to social wellbeing, but also have the potential to strengthen environmental sustainability.

There are direct economic improvements that can increase income levels and prosperity in a community, which is a key factor in tackling inequalities. Additionally there are human benefits, including better relationships between residents, more opportunities for physical activities and improving access to services that can also contribute to better health and wellbeing outcomes.

To support a deeper understanding of these issues in Northern Ireland, Belfast Healthy Cities has sought to share evidence with policy makers on the relationship between the built environment and health and contributed to policy development processes, including the Committee stage of the Planning Bill in 2011 and also the Planning Bill 2013.

The challenge of measuring success

The 'Good for Regeneration, Good for Belfast, Good for Health' discussion document was produced as part of the European Union Urbact II programme, 'Building Healthy Communities'. It was developed by a partnership, chaired by Belfast Healthy Cities, building on the experience of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) accumulated in the city of Belfast. Members of the development group included all five Belfast Area Partnerships, Belfast City Council, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Public Health Agency and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The approach of the framework is gather key information across agencies and sectors that can be used to inform actions that maximise health benefits and overall return on investment.

It proposes a range of adaptable indicators that can be used to monitor the economic, social, environment and access factors of proposed regeneration that will impact upon health and wellbeing.

Further information can be obtained at www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications.