

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The following recommendations and observations are proposed by the Communities and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel. These have been developed as part of a review, following evidence gathering sessions relating to the Community Asset Transfer Process.
2. The Panel recommends that:
 - a. **Recommendation 1: There to be an evaluation and review undertaken of the current Community Lettings and Asset Transfer Policy and this also takes account of Recommendations 2 – 6, and the observations and findings, included as part of the Panel’s review.**
 - b. **Recommendation 2. Improving Communication between the Local Authority and Community Groups to be further explored as part of the assets transfer process.**

Reason

Members were informed of the lengthy process that Community Asset Transfers (CAT) could be subject to. Although it was recognised that there were reasons for this, it was felt that better communication between the authority and Community Groups (and Ward Members) would improve the process. The Panel found that poor communication could lead to community groups losing volunteers and funding opportunities, and becoming disillusioned particularly where there were delays in the CAT process. The Panel believed that better communication at the beginning would help understanding and expectations of the process being clearer for groups to have better clarity of their status, as to understanding what was happening and why. It was also noted that feedback from community groups was not generally sought following the process and it was recognised that there could be value in receiving this in future.

- c. **Recommendation 3. Consideration be given to the Ways of Providing Additional Support to Community Groups (and Ward Members), to ensure they are equipped and prepared to move through the process and successfully take on and maintain the leasing of an asset.**

These could include:

- Regular attendance at Ward Member meetings by officers (on a quarterly basis).
- Having a dedicated resource/specialised officer for Community Asset Transfers within the Asset Team and closer links with Stronger Communities (and other key groups that would support this process).
- Better information, guidance and signposting to what is available to community groups, for example, signposting to training for Community Groups at an early stage to ensure they are prepared and aware of their responsibilities in taking on a community asset.

- Consider the potential of involving third sector organisations and through partnering with other groups, to support both the Council and Community Groups in going through the process and providing additional capacity and resource e.g. Locality (national charity organisation).

Reason

Members heard during an evidence gathering meeting that some groups and Ward Members did not understand the obligations and responsibilities of taking on a community asset, for example, statutory maintenance and therefore felt that more needed to be done to make them aware of this and the support that was available to assist them

It was felt that this could also help protect council assets, preventing risks arising due to worsening conditions of buildings and support groups in continuing to add value to their communities.

It was noted that the Assets Team was a small team with a number of responsibilities and limited capacity. This also applies to the work of the Stronger Communities Team, who have a number of increasing demands and expectations on them. Members recognised that the Stronger Communities Team already provided a range of support, for example, providing introductions, backgrounds, advice and support with activities that the community group may want to do later on.

- d. Recommendation 4 – The monitoring of transfers that have taken place be included within the lease agreement.**

Reason

It was felt that this would provide a mechanism to ensure that the process is more robust. Members heard from another Local Authority, that they undertake monitoring 6 months after the transfer has taken place, although it was noted that it could be a challenge to retrieve appropriate information.

- e. Recommendation 5 – To improve clarity and transparency within the Community Asset Letting Process.**

Reason

Members felt that greater transparency within the wider remit of Asset Management would also benefit the Community Asset Letting Process.

During the period of its review, Members were provided an opportunity to input into the proposed Strategic Asset Management Strategy 2023-2030, prior to its consideration at Cabinet on the 1st February 2023. Reviewing the wider strategy highlighted some of the issues around openness and transparency and helped inform Members views in relation to issues that were also applicable to the Community Asset Lettings Process.

As part of the feedback provided on the strategy, the Panel asked that consideration would be given to the following;

- The strategy be strengthened to provide a greater transparency within the process and accessibility to information, such as, making the asset register more easily accessible to the public and that Asset Board decision meetings be held in public.
- Reflects the importance of providing an opportunity for public input and ensure that Ward Members consultation and engagement has taken place prior to decisions being made (particularly on community lettings of a higher value and that has significant impact on the local community).
- More clarity is provided around the process itself and appeals process as part of the governance around community and commercial lettings.
- On page 17 of the strategy, the paragraph relating to Governance is made clearer around eligibility of assets for community leases and what can be undertaken.

f. Recommendation 6 – To look at the potential role of Parish and Town Councils in relation to what value they can add and what support to the process.

Reason

It was felt that there were opportunities to better engage and utilise Town and Parish Councils within the process, due to their local knowledge, position and connections with the community. For example, they could be involved more as a consultee at an early stage or as an alternative body to take on a freehold transfer, where community groups were unable able to do so.

3. **In undertaking the review, the Panel made a number of observations, which it believed were important issues and should be noted as part of its findings.**

Key Observations:

- a. **Links to Localities Model** - It was recognised that understanding local key assets and their value were important to our communities and this should link strongly to the localities agenda and be further embedded as part of the localities model.
- b. **That there are a number of challenges faced by the Council around availability of assets and legal considerations.**

These include;

- That there were now less assets available across the borough.
 - That there were varying lease arrangements and different letting types (for example, community libraries that are managed uniquely).
 - The need to meet Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES).
 - Buildings with restrictions.
 - Consent required for alterations.
 - General conditions of property.
- c. **Lack of available capacity/resources within the Council** – it was explained that this was about managing the expectations of what support can be provided above and beyond the necessary work undertaken by teams within the Council. It was heard that this could lead to a risk of being more reactive to issues than being proactive.
- d. **Improved ‘Easy Read’ Community Lettings Policy** – Members were informed that the policy would soon be adapted into an Easy Read format (in collaboration with the Communications team) and this would be made available on the DMBC website. The Panel welcomed this initiative.
- e. **Impact and consequences of the delays and length of time transfer is taking** - It was commented that delays and the length of time taken for the transfer to go through had, in some instances, resulted in community groups losing funding and volunteers and could lead to worsening conditions of unused buildings. On a strategic level, it was felt that this could further impact the Council’s ability to deliver the priorities of Delivering Doncaster Together.
- f. **Other Challenges** - The wide and diverse range of community groups wishing to take over local assets could on occasion result in challenges such as difficulties in collaborating with other groups (for example, Charity Law conflicts), or providing effective support including to those that relied on a small number of people. It was also seen that there were instances where groups might not be fully aware of their responsibilities or be fully prepared to take on a community asset.