Community Ownership of Local Assets: conditions for sustainable success

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1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom, the transfer of ownership of certain assets to local community control has been a common response to the financial constraints under which local authorities have operated since the global economic crisis of 2008 (see for example Hart, 2010; DSDNI, 2014). In a report commissioned by the Rowntree Foundation to explore the impacts of increased control of assets by Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Aiken et al. argue that, as:

> 'public sector bodies at local and national levels respond to current financial challenges, reviewing and rationalising their capital portfolios, the disposal of public assets has become a critical component of change in this field' (Aiken et al., 2011: 14).

Furthermore, the 'Big Society' theme adopted by the 2010-15 UK Coalition Government placed a heavy focus on local communities providing services for themselves with a corresponding reduction in state control (Fischer and McKee, 2017; Chanan and Miller, 2013). This approach was emphasised in the 2011 Localism Act, which held the assumption 'that localism and decentralisation have a positive effect on community empowerment' (Painter et al., 2011: 2). Both localism and the Big Society agenda have been presented as offering a solution to austerity that fits into a prevailing neoliberal ideology, 'removing the state as a primary actor in social welfare and instead focusing efforts to build capacity to put communities at the centre of welfare provision' (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014:431). One consequence of this is a potentially growing disconnect between the presence of and support for community assets. As Thorlby (2011: 42) argues, 'thus, whilst the possible supply of community assets is growing, public sector support to enable the acquisition and ongoing operation of these assets is diminishing.'

Aiken et al. (2011:13) suggest that 'little is known about the scale and pattern of asset ownership by CBOs and the characteristics, purposes and activities of different types of organisations in the field.' Nichols et al. (2015: 85) identify a 'need to further understand the voluntary service that is, in some cases, replacing state provision, and to identify the scenarios that make associating together more likely to happen, more successful at transfer and more sustainable'. This is particularly challenging for rural and semi-rural communities, which Osborne et al. (2004) argue are particularly challenged in their attempts at asset management unless strong voluntary engagement and community infrastructure is present. The transfer of community assets into this context therefore requires additional consideration.

This paper presents research on the management of semi-rural assets transferred from local authority into community ownership. It examines the conditions required for sustainable success of those assets by using research undertaken between January 2015 and March 2016, with some follow up in early 2018. The research was conducted partly in conjunction with the Community and Economic Development team at Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC), Gloucestershire, England, who identified the semi-rural communities of Churchdown and Brockworth as case studies of transferred assets run successfully in community ownership.

The analysis focuses on two key dimensions of generating sustainability for transferred assets: the legitimacy a transferred asset requires in its local community to be regarded of value; and the availability of essential community capacities for running such services. These aspects form the basis of the paper, outlined in the following discussion on asset transfer, then as the structure for the presentation of the data, and finally linking these topics to wider issues relating to the sustainable management of community assets.

2. Literature: the transfer of community assets

Asset transfers occur for a wide range of reasons and under a variety of conditions that can have significant impacts on the success of that asset. For instance, the transfer may be driven by an ideological belief in small-state neoliberalism, a financial imperative, or a hope for community empowerment. Nichols et al. (2015: 85) problematize the transfer of assets to community ownership through a series of questions:

> ‘Is asset transfer a short term political solution to the need to reduce public spending but not close politically sensitive facilities? Can it be economically sustainable, and if so will there have to be a continued relationship between the new organisations and the public or private sectors to meet capital costs? If this is the case how truly independent can these new organisations be?’ (Nichols et al., 2015: 85).

In a UK policy landscape characterised by a squeeze on public spending, a discourse on state withdrawal from various aspects of public life has emerged focusing on empowerment and invigoration of local communities. Communities have been encouraged to take on ailing public resources and services in order to strengthen them by using 'local knowledge, assets, and energy to rebuild local services on their own terms and in ways that meet their interests and needs' (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014:431). While localism can be seen as a means of developing social capital by freeing communities from a state that can suffocate voluntary community effort (Nichols et al., 2015), such initiatives can also be interpreted as ideologically driven, tacitly supporting a neoliberal agenda that offers the state ‘the opportunity to divest itself of key responsibilities, notably in the provision of welfare’ (Schuller et al., 2000:34).

Scott (2015: 130) suggests that 'the politics associated with localism contain ‘deep ambiguities’ between ideas of empowerment on the one hand and on the other the responsibilisation of local communities for situations beyond their control'. Kiernan and Porter (2014: 847) suggest the Big Society agenda exposed a ‘glaring disconnect between the rhetoric of empowered, inclusive communities and the burgeoning reality of cuts to publicly funded community provision.’ They also describe ‘the neoliberal co-opting of terminology seemingly free of politicized intent, such as inclusion, volunteering and community’, which ‘challenges public service provision as universal and government-based’ (Kiernan and Porter, 2014: 861). Lynch, Hobson and Dooley (2016: 596) identify this as a residualising pressure in which stretched public services face structural changes in a funding environment of increased competition and limited resources.

The questions Nichols et al. (2015) pose illustrate how the conditions under which assets are transferred can have implications on how they are subsequently managed. In his work on community asset transfer in Northern Ireland, Murtagh (2015: 224) argues that the success of a transfer is often hampered by policymakers tending to view community asset transfer in ‘narrow and functional ways’, with an emphasis on the mechanics of disposal and acquisition, and little thought given to ‘wider strategies of locally controlled economic renewal’. Murtagh (2015: 224) claims that this has a profound impact on the viability of such schemes, reinforcing concerns that the process 'is about unloading the expensive or unwanted estate, rolling back welfare and pushing responsibility to the poor'. In Murtagh's view, the benefits of asset transfer can only fulfil their full potential when they are integrated into the 'social-economics and local circuits of wealth creation and retention' (2015:224).

Through a rural and sustainable development context, Mackenzie (2006, 2012) highlights the implications of asset transfer and community ownership for institutional transformation, the place of neoliberalism, questions of legitimacy, and governance. Mackenzie argues that modern state restructuring is carried out under a context of the need to control public expenditure, resulting in two common responses, both of which ‘dispossess’ local communities: assets that are ‘unprofitable’ are under threat of closure, whereas assets that represent a profitable opportunity are transferred to the private sector. In her work on remote rural northern and western Scottish examples, Mackenzie (2012) identifies ‘post neoliberal’ possibilities for resistance to corporate ownership or absentee landlords. By achieving community ownership and the opportunity to benefit from assets, communities can avoid “dispossession by accumulation” (Harvey, 2003: 137), where transfer to private ownership sees assets ‘lost’ to the public. The concept of dispossession is important when considering the criteria required for the sustainable success of assets transferred into local ownership, and in this work we use the term ‘community’ dispossession to describe the loss of an asset to a local area. More positively, Skerratt (2013) argues that community harness human agency as a crucial component of community resilience.

This analysis focuses on two key areas: the ways in which an asset might come to be regarded as ‘legitimate’ by a local community, and therefore embraced and utilised as part of that community; and, the community capacity required to sustain that asset. The remaining parts of this section explores key literature and other studies related to these areas.

2.1. Legitimacy of community assets

Although asset transfers are often politically contentious they may also offer benefits to communities, which can help to legitimate the programme of transfer. For example, they provide opportunities for ‘communities to accumulate, build reserves and expand services that respond to local people's needs' (Murtagh, 2015: 222). Aiken et al. (2011) identify positive outcomes of community assets control across the United Kingdom, including the development of community identity, pride, social cohesion, and increased community access to local services and activities. They suggest that these benefits combine to create a ‘social good’ that enhances wellbeing and quality of life in the community and ‘resonates powerfully’ with the localism agenda (Aiken et al., 2011: 7).

Mackenzie (2012) uses the concept of ‘generational depth’ to explain the link between communities and the places they regard as valuable. She argues that place is the site of the construction of community and association with places offers a significant source of legitimacy. Such value and legitimacy is an evolving and performative process that produces and reproduces conceptions of community assets. Where there is a genuine association with a place, the community is more likely to view that as a legitimate resource where Skerratt (2013:45) argues ‘communities and their connections/connectors are active agents of creative change.’ While it would not be possible to recreate the concept of duchthas (the Gaelic word meaning ‘people belonging to a place’, but can be linked to inheritance, ownership and land) that Mackenzie (2012) identifies as driver for this in the

Scottish Highlands, the concepts of value and legitimacy are applicable to successful asset ownership and management in rural and semi-rural communities.

Mackenzie illustrates the opportunity to generate feelings of legitimacy in community owned assets when they are separate from the state. Woolcock (2001: 11‐12) similarly argues that ‘communities can be highly engaged because they are mistreated or ignored by public institutions’. Nichols et al. (2015) discuss ideas of ‘associative democracy’ popular in pre-War Britain, where small groups of volunteers come together in self-run organisations, independent of the state, and are empowered to better meet the needs of communities.

Parks et al. (1981) claimed, over 30 years ago, that consumers of public services should contribute to the production of the services they use. In many instances, consumer or community production is an essential complement to the efforts of regular producers. Amongst the co-authors of Parks et al.'s (1981) work was Elinor Ostrom, who went on to consider the extent to which common property resources - or 'commons' - can work in a range of contexts (Ostrom, 1990). Developed in part as a response to Garrett Hardin’s (1968) concept of the tragedy of the commons, in which environmental resources that are held in common inevitably become degraded, Ostrom identifies commonly held assets such as grazing commons, marine resources or community assets, where successful management models ensure that they are resilient and effective. Therefore, the success of an asset transfer and its ongoing sustainability relies in large part on its ability to connect with that community. It must be seen as a legitimate source of community value, and one with which the community has some form of connection.

2.2. Community capacity

It is not just the connection with a community that validates a service or an asset, it is the ability of that asset to perform a service for the community. In this work, we argue it is understanding the availability of capacity that can help us to gauge how likely it is for a community to be able to manage a transferred asset. Others have used a similar approach.

Hardoy et al. (2001) discuss some of the environmental challenges facing cities in the 'developing world', arguing that there should be a focus on the capacities of institutions when seeking to understand their ability to be effective in local communities. In a European context, Amin and Thrift (1992, 1994) use the concept of ‘institutional thickness’ to explain how cumulative institutional capacity can be a significant factor enabling regions to tackle challenges. Institutions require sufficient human capacity, transparency of organisation, and suitable assets in order to achieve this ‘institutional thickness’ that allows them to function and to overcome future challenges. In their study focusing on a small community asset transferred in Scotland, Fischer and McKee (2017) use the concept of community capacity to describe how communities may become empowered and resilient. They adopt an analytical framework presented by Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) that applies types of community capacity: personal, organizational, infrastructural, and cultural, arguing that it is the presence of these capacities that ‘facilitate or, in their absence, hinder a community's ability to take on responsibility’ (Fischer and McKee, 2017: 118).

Flora (2006) apply a Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to examine community change. The CCF identifies a range of different types of community capital: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built. They argue that these capitals are ‘the critical resource that reversed the downward spiral of loss’ when they are changes to a community (2006: 20). It is not just the presence of these capitals, but the ways in which they interact that contributes towards the building of capacity in a community. In this sense we can see capitals not just as simple skills but, particularly in the case of social capital, as complex and international process that are dynamic in the relationship between the individual and their socio-cultural circumstances.

In this analysis, we add to these approaches by deploying Carney's (1999) Sustainable Livelihoods Approach as framework to examine the importance of community capacity in achieving sustainable ownership of assets. Although most frequently used in the context of 'developing' countries, we see similarities in our case studies that are semi-rural areas in the UK and communities that similarly are at risk of lacking 'institutional thickness' (Amin and Thrift, 1992, 1994). The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (Carney, 1999) describes five forms of capital:

- Human capital: skills, knowledge, ability to work and good health.
- Social capital: the social assets people draw on for their livelihood, such as relationships with people more or less powerful (vertical connections) or with others like themselves (horizontal connections), or membership of formal or informal institutions.
- Natural capital: the natural assets that people can access for their livelihoods.
- Physical capital: the basic infrastructure that people need, as well as the tools and equipment that they use, such as energy, shelter, water and communications.
- Financial capital: economic capital, such as savings or assets, as well as access to income and financial services. These draw on the economic concept of capital and extend to wider social and environmental assets that people can access for their livelihoods.

The 'institutional thickness' and Sustainable Livelihoods approaches allow us to conceptualise how different forms of capital can work together and impact on the success of asset transfers. Typically, assets that are transferred from local authorities comprise buildings or open spaces used by community groups (for example community centres or playing fields) and can considered examples of physical or natural capital. In order to be successful, such assets require the human capital of volunteers and/or paid workers, and will function and develop as a result of the social capital of relationships between volunteers and community users. They are also reliant on financial capital in the form of the required economic resources. We argue that the greater the levels and linkages of these different forms of capital, the greater the 'institutional thickness' and hence the community capacity to take on and manage assets. CBOs that are able to draw on an 'institutional thickness' of a range of different types of capital are more likely to be successful and sustainable in the long term.

Use of such an approach is not without criticism. Applying the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach out of a context of 'developing' countries might be considered problematic, although those such as Rogoff (2003) and Lewicka (2005) have already done so effectively. Furthermore, Fischer and McKee (2017) identify issues with approaches that have a propensity to 'lend themselves to a 'check-list' type of analysis that statically assesses a community against a list of different types of capitals or capacities' (2017: 118). Nevertheless, as they argue comprehensively in their work, such schema do have the benefit of assessing a range of different dimensions to a complex set of relationships. In this paper we present our analysis of two community assets that have been transferred and are being successfully run in community ownership. The following section details these assets and the methods we used to collect the data.

3. Methods

In this work, we use the concepts outlined in Section 2, legitimacy and community capacity, as ways to explore conditions for sustainability in assets transferred from local authority to semi-rural community ownership. This research originated from a project undertaken for Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC) between January 2015 and March 2016, who were interested in the conditions for longer term success for assets that had been transferred into community ownership within the Borough. They have given their permission to be named in this research, although individuals have been anonymised and role descriptions within each CBO generalised.

Tewkesbury is one of the smaller Boroughs in the English county of Gloucestershire. The most recent statistics estimate the population as 86,890, the more populous portions incorporating the urban fringes of the two big settlements in the County: Cheltenham and Gloucester (Inform Gloucestershire, 2017). Tewkesbury Borough Council identified two semi-rural areas in which significant local assets had been transferred from local authority to CBO management: Brockworth, containing the Brockworth Community Project (BCP; now Brockworth Link); and Churchdown with the GL3 Community Hub.

The notion of rurality is important to the case studies this paper discusses, but is clearly a complex and contested concept (Lynch, 2005). As Halfacree (1993; 34) argued 'the quest for any single, all embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible.' The authors consider the locations of the case studies to be 'semi-rural' because, although agriculture as a land use and employer is not a significant component of the communities, empirically their loose and low-density nature and socially and culturally distinct communities construct and perform rurality through their layout, design and practices. And yet, their proximity to Gloucester and Cheltenham have ensured strong urban influences in everyday practices such as commuting, employment, leisure and consumption. The category is therefore not wholly based on a friable empirical definition, but an understanding of the problems of defining the locations of the communities along an urban-rural continuum. The authors were more interested in the understanding of the context of the case study communities and the linkages to rurality and urbanity that offered these communities opportunities and assets, as well as barriers to their development (James, 2001). This paper will therefore use the category semi-rural to describe the case study communities.

Brockworth is an outlying, semi-rural neighbourhood near the city of Gloucester. It has the larger population of the two wards at 7686 (Inform Gloucestershire, 2017). Whilst it is not a part of Gloucester City, they share a border on one side, while on the other side are smaller communities including several farms. The case study asset is a library building that was transferred from Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) ownership in 2011. The building and services are managed by Brockworth Community Project (now known as Brockworth Link), a small local charity which now also runs youth services from the library location. Brockworth Link also use the space to provide adult education classes and other community based programmes, such as employment skills, IT, money management and social inclusion, as well as for other community events and activities. The library service makes significant use of volunteers, with a small number of paid managerial staff. The project retains a paid youth work manager and youth work staff, as well as making use of volunteers. Funding comes from grant and lottery funding and commercial sponsorship. At the time of data collection, Brockworth Community Project was receiving funding from the Parish Council to run the library, but this has since ended.

Churchdown has a population of 4,150, and is situated in between the city of Gloucester and the large town of Cheltenham, although it does not directly border either. The transferred asset is a former youth work building in Churchdown now managed by GL3 Community Hub, which was established after the decision by Gloucestershire County Council to close the Youth Club. With financial and personnel support from the parish council, the trustees of the Churchdown Neighbourhood Project took ownership and management of the building. This required a significant renovation, funded through grant funding, fundraising and volunteer hours, and included the addition of a conservatory café to the existing structure. The space is now used as a community hub, providing a range of activities including youth work, day services for elderly people, sport clubs and exercise in the renovated sports hall, and the provision of IT facilities and training. GL3 receives funding from the Parish Council and other grant funding sources and also generates income through its cafe, room/space hire and sporting activities.

The data for the research came from both the Borough Council level and from the CBOs responsible for the asset management. The focus for data collection was on those with direct involvement in the transfer and management of those assets. A contact at Gloucestershire County Council was approached for interview but this offer was not taken up. At the Borough Council level, the research team gathered data via regular contact with a TBC Community Development Officer (CDO), including four informal meetings and two formal, recorded interviews. Additionally, a research assistant spent two weeks embedded with the Tewkesbury Community and Economic Development team working to identify the range of community assets in the area. This research generated the GIS map of assets by type and location shown in Fig. 1.

At the asset level, researchers visited each project (once in Brockworth, twice at Churchdown) where they were accompanied by project staff and spent some time exploring the sites and observing how they were used. In these visits, there was a particular focus on observing the ways in which space has been developed and was being used, and the variety of services and opportunities at each site. Field and observation notes were made during and immediately after the visits, and these have informed the analysis in the work.

The visits to each site were accompanied by semi-structured interviews with six key stakeholders in the management teams, three at each location. At Brockworth, this was a manager of a service, a senior member of the community project, and a Parish Council representative. At Churchdown, this was two senior members of the GL3 charity, and a Parish Council representative. The questions focused on the roles of interviewees in relation to the transfer process, current issues relating to community ownership management and engagement, the impact of having a community-owned asset, and wider perceptions of assets in the community. Four of the interviews were face to face, taking place at the asset or at a convenient location, and due to limited availability two participants completed the interview via email.

In total, 192min of interview material was recorded at the CDO and asset levels at the asset. This material was transcribed and thematically analysed alongside the data collected by email correspondence. Respondents are referenced to by their role (CDO) or location (Brockworth or Churchdown).

4. Results

This section sets out the findings from our research in two sections, first considering issues of legitimacy, and second issues of community capacity and the capitals required for successful community ownership.

4.1. What constitutes a legitimate community asset?

One of the initial aims of this research was to identify and map the mix of community assets in the locality of each case study. As a result, we spent time with the Tewkesbury Community and Economic Development team identifying and mapping local assets in the two areas of Brockworth and Churchdown. The results of the mapping exercise are shown in Fig. 1, which identifies assets including a Community Centre, Green Space, Library, Sports Facility, Place of Worship and Burial Ground, and their locations.

There was a broad similarity between the list generated by the Community and Economic Development team and the key stakeholders that we interviewed. For instance, when asked to define what they considered to be local community assets, the stakeholders focused most heavily on physical assets, particularly infrastructure and buildings. They included sports centres, children's centres, churches, the doctor's surgery, banks, schools, pubs, Post Offices and shops. There were also examples of physical spaces that were listed as community assets, including: playing fields, parks, the cricket pitch and a landscaped area alongside a brook. Some stakeholders also identified some material amenities that they considered to be an asset for the local community, including play equipment in local parks and public spaces, community or parish noticeboards and public seating. Each of these asset examples has a degree of financial benefit or cost associated with their management, and they are 'located' within a specific area.

Whilst understanding what key stakeholders consider to be community assets is an important dimension of the discussion around managing assets for communities, when it came to defining community assets the aspects they identified as key were inclusivity and openness. They suggested to us that assets gained legitimacy when they were valued by and open to the community:

> 'Something whole community can use and feel welcome using… As long as everyone feels they can use it, it's a community asset.' (Brockworth)
>
> 'A community asset is something valued by the community, e.g. library, village pub, green open space.' (Brockworth)
>
> 'Anything that only benefits a small section of the community is not a community asset.' (Churchdown)

This discourse was underpinned by post-transfer developments in both case study areas, which saw an increased range of activities intended to engage a wider range of community users. Interviewees emphasised the increased flexibility and responsiveness to perceived local community need that community ownership offered:

> 'There is a better understanding of what's needed, in communities, based on those local conversations' (CDO)
>
> 'The building now gets about 1,000 to 1,400 visits a week, whereas the youth centre was getting about 30-40 children a week. The hub tries to cater for 0-90s and give open access to all.' (Churchdown)
>
> 'I think in many ways it has improved service provision, in that we are now able to be more flexible, so we can tailor services to local needs and preferences. An example would be changing opening hours of the library.' (Brockworth)

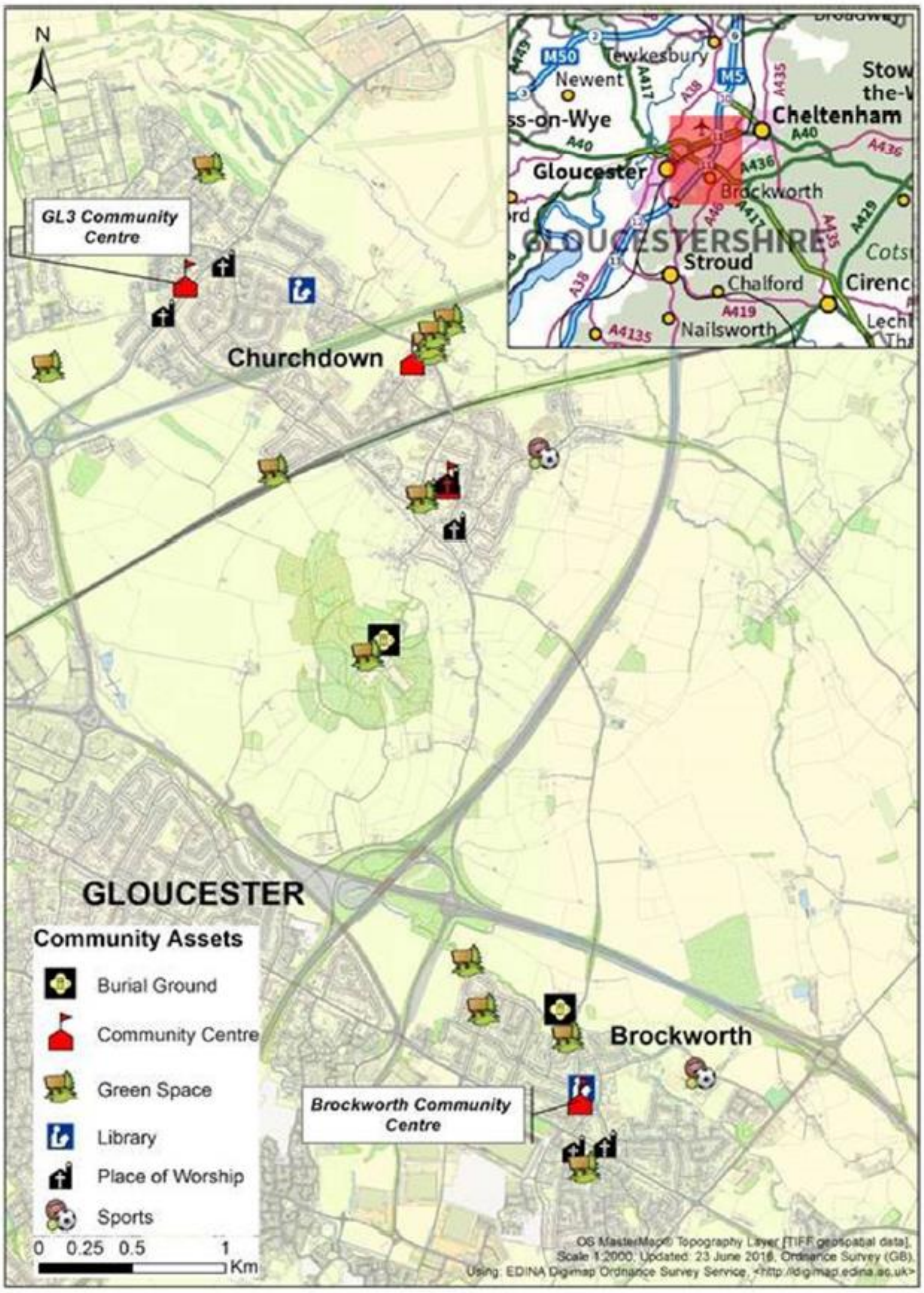

Figure 1 Map of types of local community assets in Brockworth and Churchdown

Stakeholders in Brockworth also emphasised the potential benefits of the development of a sense of ownership over an asset, while also acknowledging the challenges of communicating a change in ownership where service delivery has been maintained:

> 'There is now a real sense of ownership and an emotional attachment to the project that would not have developed if we had not made the asset transfer.' (Brockworth)
>
> '… it has taken us a long time to communicate the fact that essentially 'we' i.e. the community now 'own' the library building and the provision of the services … Even now we still have users who assume that the library is still run by the county council.' (Brockworth)

These perceptions of enhanced responsiveness and sense of ownership meant that stakeholders considered the asset transfer as being a positive experience for their community. Such experiences can be viewed as providing a source of legitimacy for the transfer of community assets. The asset transfer process was not without challenge, however. In both case study areas, stakeholders provided examples of opposition to the transfer from parish councillors or members of the public who objected to parish council providing funding for services they perceived as beyond its remit. In particular, Brockworth experienced legal challenges to the library transfer that led to delays in BCP taking on the library. Brockworth Parish Council had been part funding the community library for three years at the time of data collection, but this funding has since ended. Our data revealed complex debates around the respective roles and responsibilities of community groups and tiers of local government:

> ‘Is the parish council enabling principal authorities to be let off the hook on not raising council tax?’ (Churchdown)

> 'The strange benefit of funding cuts is the [assets] that have survived will probably be around for a long time … One of the things it's broken is that reliance on the public sector … Yes a harsh lesson, a more collective approach to “doing with” communities rather than “doing to”.' (CDO).

> ‘… each funding decision [by the Parish Council] has been a close vote often with significant ill-feeling from those opposed to supporting the library (for whatever their reasons). I contrast this with some of the other community libraries in Gloucestershire and the relationship they have with the local council, to the extent that often the same people represent both.’ (Brockworth)

This final quote illustrates the local controversy that changes in asset ownership may generate, as well as the way in which positions of responsibility in a community are often concentrated in the hands of a few key individuals. This was the case for the management of both case study buildings:

> ‘From the beginning there was a core group within the project who fully understood that we were taking ownership of the project/building etc.’ (Brockworth)

> ‘There are also issues of continual reliance on one person or a small group of people’ (Churchdown)

This raises issues of the legitimacy of community organisations that are run by few members of that community, as well as issues of the capacity of groups for running community assets effectively. Overall it is clear that, from the perspective of interviewees, the expanded activities of each asset provided a powerful source of legitimation. However, there remain questions around post-transfer management, particularly whether all communities have the required capacities to take control of local authority assets. The next section considers these issues of community capacity in more detail.

4.2. Community capacity as a key to sustainable assets

In this section we build on the concept of community capacity as key to creating sustainable assets. Here we contribute to approaches used by those such as Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) and Fischer and McKee (2017) by developing a framework based on four of the five types of capital identified by Carney’s (1999) Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: human capital, social capital, physical capital and financial capital. The fifth of Carney’s (1999) capitals, natural capital, is less relevant to these case studies, which involve types of built environment. Crowther (2011) has used this capacity, however, when considering the value of village greens as community assets.

4.2.1. Human capital

Human capital comprises skills, knowledge, ability to work, and good health (Carney, 1999), and the importance of having such capital available was frequently raised in stakeholder interviews. At both assets, issues around maintaining and increasing the size and skills base of their volunteer management team were identified. As noted in section 4.1, this raises issues of legitimacy as well as capacity. Assets were considered to be at risk if they are over-reliant on a few individuals:

> 'One [issue] has been establishing and maintaining a management team of trustees of sufficient size and experience to provide a broad range of management support and capacity.' (Brockworth)
>
> 'Succession planning is another issue. You need a 'critical mass' of people, skills and purpose.' (Churchdown)
>
> 'All of this is done on a part time voluntary basis as I also have a full time job in an unrelated area. The most challenging aspect of my role with BCP is finding time to be an active trustee/volunteer given the demands of my day job' (Brockworth).

Volunteers with leadership, strategic and financial and business expertise were required to commit their time both in organising the initial stages of transfer and through the ongoing management of the assets:

> 'The people in charge need very sound business skills - focus on making income, mining experience, sweating the asset to get income in. Not just about the business plan, about key targets, increasing income, review and reset targets - more strategic forward planning skills' (Churchdown)
>
> '[It] needs to be led by someone who has vision and business nous.' (Churchdown)

One way to help this is to support communities to have adequate time and resources to be able to develop new skills. The Community Development Officer at Tewkesbury Borough Council described how one of the ways in which it sought to express its support for the new community-owned assets was to facilitate their access to training. In Brockworth it was suggested that the library transfer might have been better handled in stages as this would have enabled the community to develop the required skills at a more reasonable pace and to source additional support for complex issues around managing a building. A stakeholder in Churchdown identified training as a potentially problematic issue for the organisation:

> 'You need someone to train, retain and manage volunteers. This is tricky. The organisation doesn't spend enough time looking into the needs of volunteers' (Churchdown)

Identifying, maintaining and developing a sufficient pool of human capital was an ongoing issue for both case study organisations, both in terms of the numbers of volunteers contributing their time to manage and run services and the breadth and relevance of their skills.

4.2.2. Social capital

There was evidence from our stakeholder interviews of the importance of social capital for the asset's success. In particular, the presence of vertical connections (Carney, 1999) between stakeholders and key personnel in local government. When asked about barriers to successful asset transfer, stakeholders from both communities and the community development officer for

Tewkesbury identified a lack of communication between the community organisation and principal authorities as a key issue:

> ‘You can always have better and more communication with everyone involved’ (Brockworth)

> ‘Breakdown in relationships [can] hold … things up’ (CDO)

Stakeholders also described how the increased range of activities in each asset had increased the horizontal connections (Carney, 1999) between community members:

> 'It has also made a great contribution to community cohesion as many people have made friends and contacts with people outside of their normal social circle' (Brockworth)

In both cases, the evidence suggests that although communication between statutory bodies and communities may be challenging, the very existence of a transferred community asset is an indication that vertical social capital connections have worked to secure the transfer. This does raise questions about the ability of communities without such reserves of social capital to benefit from the asset transfer programme.

4.2.3. Physical capital

Each asset acted as a source of physical capital in their community, and it was the threat of the loss of this capital that formed the motivation for each asset transfer. However the functionality of each building was very different for each case study. In Churchdown the youth centre building had become dilapidated, and required the investment of financial capital in the region of £300,000 plus human capital in the form of volunteer hours to make the building serviceable again. The result was that:

> ‘The building has been rejuvenated’ (Churchdown)

By contrast, in Brockworth:

> ‘The functionality of the building involved in the transfer was already established’ (Brockworth)

The management of physical capital was regarded as a particular challenge in human capital terms. This required a range of skills including managing structural issues and facilities management. These represented a significant additional burden alongside the other dimensions of taking control of the asset:

> ‘Managing a building was an added complication and I would suggest this would have been better managed in stages, the service first then the building management.’ (Brockworth)

It was clear that the presence of suitable, accessible physical space both draws on and allows for the continued performance of other types of capital. For instance, the asset buildings provided a location for the development of the vertical social capital connections described in the Social Capital section above.

In this way, retaining the physical capital, not just in its manifest space but also in its availability to the community, was essential to the development of other forms of community capital.

4.2.4. Financial capital

Financial stability was described by the stakeholders as essential to success, but they also discussed how this was challenging to achieve in the current funding climate. In both case study areas, the stakeholders emphasised the importance of sustained, long-term funding and the difficulty of running services on shorter term, rolling funding contracts:

> ‘The sustainability of the grant to GL3 from the parish council is really important.’ (Churchdown)

> ‘Provide longer term commitment of finances, even if for smaller amounts ‑ i.e. it is better to have £2000 per year guaranteed for 5 years, rather than £10,000 but with no guarantee for follow on funding. You cannot budget [or] run an organisation on a 12 month basis.’ (Brockworth)

For Churchdown the ongoing grant from the parish council allowed for a degree of financial security in service provision, while in Brockworth although the parish council were contributing to the service during the period of data collection, this support has now ended. This suggests that some forms of financial security depend on the ways in which assets can generate support within the community. In both cases, the cycle of fund-raising for grant funding has the potential to hinder service planning and therefore provision as it creates a burden of work for staff and volunteers on a yearly basis in identifying and applying for potential funding sources.

> 'There is a lot of time and effort sourcing funding. [we] would have to reduce sessions or reduce hours or redundancies if funding had not been in place' (Brockworth)

> ‘[We] don't have time to tap into the whole market for grants … One application for crowdfunding which proved unsuccessful was time consuming.’ (Churchdown)

> ‘60 to 70 percent of managers’ time is looking for funding, is that a good proportion of managers' time?’ (CDO)

This is clearly an ongoing issue, as it is often constraints on financial capital that have driven asset transfers. The need to secure funding adds a significant further pressure on those that have taken on responsibility for the management of the assets.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this section we consider some of the key findings from the analysis of data around the conditions required for sustainable management of transferred community assets and avoidance of community dispossession. As with the other sections, this is divided under the two headings of legitimacy and community capacity. Each considers the importance and significance of the findings and the challenges this might bring to semi-rural communities such as our case study locations.

5.1. Legitimacy

As our data has shown, community perceptions of legitimacy are key to an asset being regarded as belonging and being of use to a community. There are, however, questions over how this can be achieved particularly in the types of semi-rural communities described in this work, that have dispersed physical infrastructure and institutional “thinness” (after Amin and Thrift, 1992).

Our stakeholder definitions of a community asset imply that a physical place may only be seen as a legitimate community asset if it engages with the whole community. Furthermore, the stakeholder interviews also suggest that legitimacy for asset transfer may be established through engaging a wider range of community members and a greater sense of community ownership post-transfer. This suggests that the value of an asset lies in its continual social inclusion, where such value is reproduced through constant use. The importance of the performativity of community (Mackenzie, 2012) is framed by a constant process of legitimation and the ability of citizens to shape and reshape services.

Murtagh (2015) discusses the role of 'trailblazers' who are highly motivated volunteers that pursue their vision of a more cohesive and productive community space, and several of the stakeholders we interviewed appeared to fit into this categorisation. Such volunteers are not always available, however. Bayley (1994) suggests that volunteerism in civil society is more likely to flourish in rich communities than in poor ones and communities that can benefit the most from enhanced cohesion may be less likely to do so. He used this argument to support the contention that it might be desirable to 'responsibilise communities, but it cannot always be desirable to deresponsibilise the state' (Bayley, 1994: 216). Thus, the difficulty in ensuring different communities benefit equally from asset transfer is a challenge to the legitimacy of the very idea of asset transfer itself.

Although the legitimacy brought by social and community action is key, it is important to consider the legitimacy that is brought by having a physical space and place for the performance of community. Buildings can provide powerful symbols of legitimation, giving the appearance of a community that is working well. Certainly, there is an inherent attractiveness to those community initiatives that are seen to have a physical and tangible presence, a bricks and mortar community resource that is open to all. This becomes all the more important when one considers the extent to which the term 'community' can often be deployed cynically by state agencies in the form of a: 'convenient political and rhetorical device used like an aerosol can, to be sprayed onto any social programme, giving it a more progressive and sympathetic cachet' (Foster, 2002: 173). The effective use of physical resources can therefore be seen as an important part of building community cohesion as well as the legitimation of new forms of local autonomy for delivering services. However, there was evidence of some opposition to these new ways of 'doing' community, and unresolved questions in relation to the roles and responsibilities of community assets and tiers of local government.

5.2. Community capacity

The second key finding from our research was the importance of available community capacity for sustainable assets, expressed here through four of Carney's (1999) capitals: human, social, physical, and financial capital. Although there was a focus on physical capital in our stakeholders' definitions, the physical space was strongly related to the ability of the performance of the other capitals. Physical assets offer a place for a community to meet, to discuss local issues, to play sports, and hold social events and in doing so support the venue. In effect, physical assets offer a means through which social capital can be networked, providing a space in which social connections can take place and a locus for the development of further social capital. In this sense, physical spaces provide a 'social infrastructure', what Mackenzie (2012) calls 'places of possibility', whereby the physical space offers the community a location for the performance and development of other forms of capital.

As well as the availability of physical capital and the opportunities this offers for developing a service, there must be a suitable body of individuals in the community who have the skills and time to manage the often complex needs of a service. These are the groups that provide the human and social capital, and can help access financial capital in the form of bid writing and other networking opportunities.

The dangers of a lack of institutional thickness is threefold: first, an absence of suitable capacity in the first instance may mean assets struggle in the early stages of transition to local control. Second, an overreliance on a small pool of individuals is problematic for longer term success. Both Simpson et al. (2003) and Fischer and McKee (2017, p188) talk about the dangers of community capacity becoming 'depleted', and this can occur through key stakeholders moving, dying, or for various reasons no longer wishing or able to contribute to the asset. This is a significant challenge, particularly in semi-rural communities where distance from the asset creates an additional travel to overcome. This raises questions around how far communities without a necessary 'critical mass' of skills or the ability to upskill quickly are able to benefit from asset transfers. It may be that only communities already well endowed with individuals with these capabilities can take advantage of the asset transfer landscape.

Field (2003: 1) emphasises the central idea underpinning increasing social capital: that 'relationships matter'. Communities are strengthened when people have more opportunities to interact, to create personal relationships, to establish support networks, and to exercise informal social control (Bazemore, 2000). It is therefore vital that effective community assets are accessible to a wide spectrum of local citizens and be able to both draw from and help generate the required capacities.

The importance of community assets as spaces developing social infrastructure was clear in our data, but relied heavily on the presence of the capitals in order to be effective. Gittel and Vidal (1998) and Putnam (2000) identify distinctions between 'bonding' and 'bridging' forms of social capital. 'Bonding' social capital refers to the networks/connections between homogenous social groups who share particular attributes in common (for example, family, class or status). This type of capital reflects pre-existing close links between individuals, but is not necessarily inclusive. On the other hand, 'Bridging' social capital links heterogeneous groups who share a community but do not otherwise have strong ties with each other. This paper suggests that assets in semi-rural areas offer a space for building a wider range of 'horizontal' connections (Carney, 1999) between diverse and dispersed community members in line with the concept of bridging social capital. This is also reflected in the work of Emery and Flora (2006: 25), who likewise found that it was the presence of bridging social capital that 'facilitated mobilizing resources that increased the stocks of other capitals'.

Woolcock (2001) developed the idea of bridging capital further, describing a 'linking' social capital that goes beyond bridging social bonds to facilitate the development of political networks and community action. We similarly argue that it is not enough to just bridge relationships between diverse groups, but that sustainable asset ownership requires bonds that facilitate the strengthening or development of capacities that are not sufficiently present. This is particularly important in semi-rural areas as the ability of community assets to generate new forms of linking capital can increase community participation, ownership, and, ultimately, help avoid dispossession.

Finally, property ownership and management comes with a financial cost, and Aiken et al. (2011) argue that adequate and sustained financial support is needed for the work of CBOs to be financially sustainable. CBOs require sufficient financial capacity to maintain buildings and the activities organised by community assets require suitable people to employ, train and volunteer. Community asset managers are perceived to be defined by their independence from both public and private sector. Seeking their finance independently is an important defining characteristic. Linking with capital from private or public sectors could be seen as compromising this independence. "Central to this are the power dynamics of capital investment. The legal and transactional mechanisms that frame such investments can alter the control of the organisation's strategic agenda and generate mission drift" (Nichols, 2008; 40). Furthermore, there is an additional difficulty in that such assets are being forced into competitive markets in order to generate income. As a consequence, Thorlby (2011: 46) talks about a situation in which:

> 'there has probably never been a greater supply of community assets from the public sector, or a willingness to consider disposal. Experience in how to deliver such projects has also been broadening out in recent years. Yet at the same time, the specialist public sector programmes to fund and support these transfers are smaller than before, and community organisations and social enterprises face a double whammy of both falling income from public service contracts and difficult trading conditions in the wider economy.'

The two assets in our case studies were successfully run in community ownership, drawing on a mix of funding sources. This success was partly due to some financial and advisory support from the Parish Councils and Borough Council. However these post-transfer relationships were still developing and subject to change. Such conditions relate back to the questions posed by Nichols et al. (2015: 85): that if the success of a community asset is dependent on support from a central authority, then 'how truly independent can these new organisations be'? In this sense, we argue this is part of a wider political legitimacy issue relating to the overall ideological basis for asset transfer, particularly in rural and semi-rural communities.

6. Conclusions

This research has continued a discussion on the conditions required for successful management of assets once transferred from local authority to community ownership. Although every case will have individual characteristics based on the local circumstances, the type of asset, the needs of the community, and the reservoir of capital, there are important commonalities that can help identify the conditions required for avoiding community dispossession.

Two key dimensions to creating these sustainable assets emerge from the work. First, in order for community assets to be legitimate their services must be perceived as responding to a wide range of community needs. As with Mackenzie (2012), we argue that such a space requires a constant process of legitimation in which the community is actively engaged in shaping and reshaping services as needs and populations change. There is, however, a tension in this generating this belonging that can be described in the difference between what Scott (2015) terms 'responsibilisation' and 'collective responsibility'. In her work, Mackenzie (2012) presents opportunities for collective responsibility through community initiated resistance to neoliberalism in the ownership of rural community assets. However, those such as Kiernan and Porter (2014) and Murtagh (2015) are highly critical of the state divestment from ownership and management of assets that are a part of the landscape of communities, arguing the main motivating factor is often the reduction in costs and a neoliberal forced-responsibilisation of communities. Social capital assets and institutional thickness alone are unlikely to address the uncertainty expressed by the respondents in our research. It is important for projects managing community assets to have clear financial strategies, otherwise community capital asset transfers could be viewed as a simply as an attempt by local authorities to off-load property they are no longer prepared to support. Nichols (2008: 11) argues that in transactions of this sort it is "important to bear in mind the power relationships inherent in any transactional situation. Such relationships generate several different perspectives on social investment depending on the actors' transactional position and power." The consequence of this is either the outright closure of community assets where communities are not able to facilitate their transfer or the shifting of assets to local communities that may struggle to manage them, making community dispossession much more likely.

The second dimension in this work is the importance of community capacity, expressed here as the presence of different capitals. We add to the analysis of those such as Emery and Flora (2006) and Fisher and McKee (2017) by applying four of Carney's (1999) sustainable livelihoods categories: human, social, physical and financial capitals. We argue that where such capitals are present, communities enjoy an 'institutional thickness' (Armin and Thrift, 1992) that means they have sufficient capitals to pursue successful ownerships of assets. Where such capitals are not present, serious consideration should be given to whether or not a transfer should take place, and if so what support is available to develop the necessary capacity.

What is clear from it is clear from this work is that a community asset is a complex, contested, and socially constructed concept. Zimmerman (1951: 15) claims that 'resources are not: they become', and we argue that community assets are no different. It is ongoing community engagement and a sufficient volume of capitals that can help to avoid community dispossession.

Conflicts of interest

None

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