

# Community Assets Evaluation Update



Funded by



HM Government

Delivered by



**First published**

March 2010

**Need more information?**

Visit our website at [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk) or call: 0845 4 10 20 30 (textphone 0845 602 1659 for those with hearing impairment).

**Copyright**

© Cabinet Office 2010

**Cover Photo**

Taken by Olivia Woodhouse at Townfield Community Centre, Hillingdon

**Further copies available from**

[general.enquiries@biglotteryfund.org.uk](mailto:general.enquiries@biglotteryfund.org.uk)

Also available on request in Braille, on audiocassette and on disc or in large print.

This document sets out some of the background to and progress of the Community Assets programme, which the Big Fund (BIG) delivers on behalf of the Office for the Third Sector (OTS). It is mainly based on the first two reports from the evaluation of the programme.

Some of the key points discussed here follow:

- Community Assets aims to empower communities in England by providing £30 million to refurbish buildings that will be transferred from local authorities to third-sector organisations (TSOs).
- The programme is one of a number of initiatives in England that support community asset transfer. Community Assets is particularly focused on providing capital support for asset transfer.
- While the design of the programme has favoured projects that had planned and were ready to begin transfer and refurbishment, demand from eligible projects far exceeded the funding available.
- Funded projects do however appreciate and make use of different types of support available. Some projects suggest that funding to support a project manager would be very helpful.
- There are generally very good working relationships between local authorities and third-sector organisations; some of the latter felt that communication could be improved.

Those partners who had worked together for longer tended to be more satisfied with the relationship.

- Both partners in most projects are very confident about the future. Third-sector organisations feel more confident about their own stability; most are planning to extend their services.
- The evaluation will review progress further during 2010.



### What is asset transfer?

The last few years have seen growing policy and political interest in how to get people and communities more engaged in decisions and processes that affect them. This is most widely referred to as ‘community empowerment’.

Linked to this is consideration of how the third sector (that is, voluntary and community groups) can help to strengthen and support communities and help to deliver better public services. To be able to do that, many third-sector organisations

need to have more financial security. It is also essential to strengthen and maintain partnerships between third-sector organisations (TSOs) and public-sector authorities such as councils, health services and the police.

Asset transfer is one way of bringing these concerns together. The idea is that communities – including local residents and third-sector organisations that work with them – can be strengthened through more direct control of assets like buildings. Transferring a building to TSO control can also strengthen the group(s)



that run or use such assets, because they will have more financial security and flexibility to meet community needs.

There have been several initiatives in England to support asset transfer. Many of these have concentrated on helping TSOs to think about the possibility and developing their skills to allow them to take part in the transfer process. Taking on an asset is a complex, long-term commitment and involves new ways of working for many groups that could benefit.

## The Community Assets programme

In 2007 the Office of the Third Sector consulted on approaches to supporting asset transfer. This process also responded to the Quirk Review of the asset transfer field.

As a result of the consultation, OTS worked with BIG to develop and deliver the £30 million Community Assets programme. The overall aim of the programme is community empowerment, supported by three specific outcomes:

- Local third sector organisations have greater security and independence, and are better able to meet the needs of the communities they serve;
- Communities have more access to better quality facilities that respond to their needs;
- There is more effective partnership working between local authorities and the third sector.

To achieve this, Community Assets funds partnerships between local authorities and TSOs to refurbish and transfer suitable buildings to the TSO partner. OTS was keen to ensure that buildings would be fully used to meet community priorities, that they would not become burdens to the TSO, and that they would be financially and environmentally sustainable.

In comparison with other asset transfer programmes, Community Assets focuses strongly on providing capital support for the refurbishment and transfer process to happen. But the programme also includes a support and development programme delivered by the Development Trust Association.

The programme launched in September 2007 and applications had to be submitted by 15 November of that year. Those applications had to outline plans to have successfully completed an asset transfer process by early 2012.

This meant that the programme would favour partnerships that had clear plans and were ready to begin refurbishment. As part of the process, successful projects would receive 'in-principle' awards that would allow them around six months to come up with more specific plans.

Community Assets is delivered on behalf of the Office of the Third Sector by the Big Fund.

(See 'Finding out more' on page 10 if you want to know more about the programme and what it has funded.)

## The evaluation

OTS, BIG and others involved in asset transfer are keen to follow the progress of the programme and to highlight what we learn from it.

So early in 2008 we appointed Rocket Science to evaluate the programme until late 2010. The evaluation considers how well the programme is working towards its aim of community empowerment, and how individual projects are getting there.

Rocket Science have set out four strands of the evaluation, covering the following:

Strand 1 (2008)	– Reviewing the background to the programme; who applied, who was funded, and early views of those involved.
Strand 2 (2009)	– Looking in more depth at the experiences of projects once work had begun on site, and identifying themes, successes and potential challenges.
Strand 3 (2010)	– Continuing the work of strand 2 and focusing on a sample of funded projects, reviewing the achievements of the programme as a whole and promoting discussion among those involved.
Strand 4 (2010)	– Developing resources to enable projects to measure and track their achievements after support from Community Assets and the evaluation end.

This update document is based on findings to the end of strand 2 of the evaluation.

More detail is available on the Community Assets evaluation page of BIG's website, [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk)

## Applications and funding

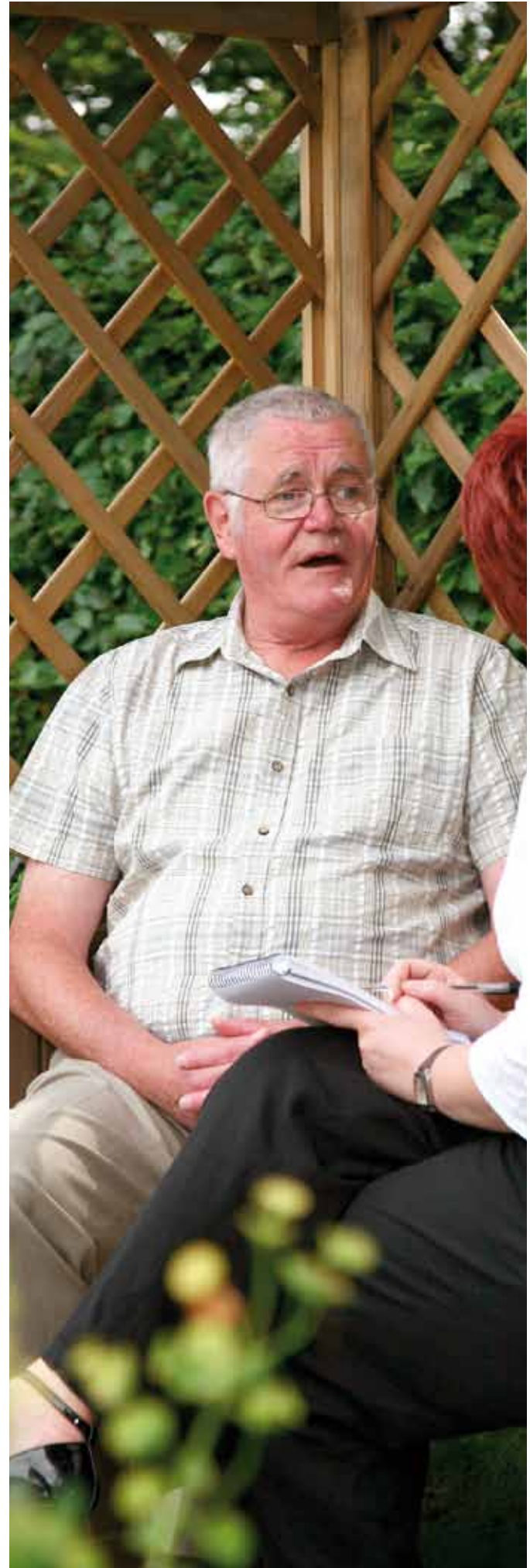
There was great demand for Community Assets funding. Despite the fairly short turnaround time for applications, BIG received 220 proposals. Of those, 137 met the basic criteria to be funded. Between them, those applications requested about £100 million. Ultimately the programme offered in-principle awards to 38 of those because only £30 million was available in total.

What this shows is that not only is there great demand for funding of this sort, but that much of that demand comes from projects that are apparently ready to begin the transfer process.

Community Assets support has gone to projects across all regions of England. About two thirds of the projects are located in areas that are among the 20 per cent most deprived in the country.

A handful of new awards were made after some of the original in-principle award-holders were unable to continue. This is because of such factors as local government arrangements and unforeseen planning difficulties.

At the beginning of 2010, 37 projects were being supported. All have completed their early capital development plans, so their awards have been confirmed.





## Project experience and progress

In September 2009 the evaluators interviewed 57 representatives from 32 of the 34 projects that had completed the capital development plan phase. Some of the main findings follow.

- Projects were overwhelmingly confident about the future and happy with progress so far.
- About a fifth of respondents expressed concern about work running over schedule.
- Nearly two thirds of respondents felt that the partnership was working well and that this was a key element of the project's success. In general, the longer the partnership, the stronger it is. Some TSOs felt that communication with the local authority partner could be improved.
- Fewer than half of the respondents were concerned about business planning. Only one project had so far looked for finance from sources other than grants.
- About two thirds of projects were planning to widen the services they offer to the community, and about the same amount were developing relationships with other organisations to complement this.

## Supporting projects

The Community Assets programme has tended to fund partnerships that had been in place for some time – most, in fact, for over two years when they applied. This suggests that they had achieved a degree of knowledge, networking and progress.

But asset transfer is a complicated process, so BIG contracted the Development Trust Association (DTA) to provide more focused support to the successful applicants.

Both TSO and local authority partners have taken up this support, and almost 70 per cent report that they have been 'very satisfied' with what has been provided by both the DTA and BIG. In other cases, projects have benefited from support available within the local authority.

The most common areas of support requested have related to developing business plans and dealing with legal issues. Some projects note that they would also benefit from specific funding for a project manager.

## Progress towards outcomes

**Local third sector organisations have greater security and independence, and are better able to meet the needs of the communities they serve.**

- Looking forward to having a new base has made TSOs very confident about a more secure future.
- Many intend becoming community hubs that will offer both third-sector and statutory services under one roof. This should provide local people with better and more efficient access to services they want and need.
- Few TSOs have considered such sources of financial independence as loans, with most thinking about grants and income from the services they will eventually provide.

**Communities have more access to better quality facilities that respond to their needs.**

- At the time of the last survey no project had yet been completed, but the programme and responses from successful applicants have focused on improving standards and increasing accessibility from the outset. By February 2010, nine projects had opened.

**There is more effective partnership working between local authorities and the third sector.**

- The programme relies on strong relationships between TSOs and local authorities. Working together on the refurbishment has strengthened and deepened these partnerships. TSOs have often developed wider links with local authority staff, although this can sometimes weaken overall co-ordination.

## Conclusion

Although this update reports on the programme at an early stage, it already seems clear that the approach of the Community Assets programme is an effective way of building partnerships – and, in due course, of supporting community empowerment.

There is clearly a high level of demand for funding to support asset transfer; many other projects are likely to be ready to begin the capital works involved. So the Community Assets programme complements the wider range of asset transfer programmes and support available.

The remaining strands of the evaluation will continue to record experiences and learning and so contribute to wider knowledge about how to support asset transfer.

## Finding out more

### **The evaluation and its findings:**

[www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/qa\\_eval\\_comm\\_assets\\_prog.htm](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/qa_eval_comm_assets_prog.htm)

### **Background to the programme:**

[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector/community\\_action/community\\_assets.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/community_action/community_assets.aspx)

### **How the programme works and what it has funded:**

[www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog\\_community\\_assets.htm](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_community_assets.htm)

### **Development Trust Association:**

[www.dta.org.uk](http://www.dta.org.uk)

### **General information about asset transfer:**

[www.atu.org.uk](http://www.atu.org.uk)



