

Asset Transfer Programme

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council (Sustainable Neighbourhood Services)

Introduction

This case study describes the contribution that adult learning has made to developing the skills of local residents to support them to take over community assets in their area as an alternative to closure in the context of local government cuts. As a result of the significant reductions to public sector funding announced in the spending review in October 2010, Blackburn with Darwen Council needed to find a 20% (£20 million) reduction in spending. Tough decisions were faced by Elected Members and Chief Officers about the prospect of cutting support to local groups and communities to run local community centres. The resolution was an agreement between the Council and communities that there would be a phased withdrawal, over a four year period, of Council finance and staffing support to the community centres and a transition to community groups taking over management of these assets.

The activity

In response to the need to help and support community groups to develop their skills and knowledge to take on responsibility for running local assets, teaching staff from the Council's Sustainable Neighbourhood Services developed and delivered a programme of training and learning support (the Community Asset Transfer programme) to community groups. The first tranche of community centres to undertake the training included four situated within some of the borough's most deprived areas and one located in a rural ward. All of these centres have now been transferred to community ownership and are being successfully managed and run by volunteers.

Community voluntary services were consulted prior to delivering the sessions and offered further support for recruiting and supporting volunteers, governance and business planning. Groups were signposted for further learning in these areas. The Community Asset team, who maintain responsibility for the buildings, continue to monitor and support volunteers and management groups. During the CA Programme, volunteers identified a range of additional training they felt they would require and Community Assets support access to training. This team also ensures that each group maintains and update their skills; see the additional materials section for details of the offer .

The areas of learning within the programme included:

- Health and Safety
- Risk Management
- Finance and budgets
- Recruiting and supporting volunteers
- Constituting a group
- Safeguarding
- Fundraising
- Event management

First aid and food hygiene were provided in-house for volunteers at the end of the programme.

The differences this approach has made

Learners

The learners were individuals and groups of volunteers within their communities. The key difference that the Community Asset Transfer programme has provided for them has been to maintain community centres within their neighbourhoods which would otherwise have faced closure under the cuts to public sector spending. All the buildings remain open and well utilised with some in particular being thriving examples of a vibrant community-run hub (e.g. Ivy Street).

Many of the volunteers involved in the first training programme were given a lot of responsibility. They were also encouraged to recruit more local people and ensure they had specific roles and responsibilities and the training they needed to carry them out.

This gave rise to people developing their social networks, feeling more confident in their own abilities, accessing new learning opportunities and making a positive contribution to their community.

The groups also developed relationships with partners who were able to offer support, resources and provide learning opportunities for the volunteers and the wider community (e.g. Housing developers in one area supported the centre activities financially).

Managers, staff and volunteers

For managers and staff within the service, this approach has meant a positive shift from 'doing' services for local people to supporting their empowerment to influence and run those services themselves.

The training enabled tutors to recognise the true nature of community development and see how good community development is underpinned by education and learning. They saw their work through to the ultimate goal, seeing volunteers taking full responsibility for managing community activities. Tutors from different backgrounds with a variety of curriculum specialisms were able to learn from each other, sharing knowledge around management and communities (practicalities of managing buildings and people, systems and processes), good practice and teaching methods.

The organisation

The key difference for the wider Council organisation has been the contribution the Asset Transfer Programme has made in meeting the cost efficiencies required of local government within the climate of public sector spending cuts. Rather than imposing the closure of community centres on local people and potentially facing damaging public opinion, the Council has supported individuals and groups to take on the responsibility and influence of running their own assets and services. This has laid the foundations for similar approaches by the Council through its 'Your Community Your Call' campaign which includes initiatives such as Community Clean-ups, the Winter Grit Squads and Dog Solutions, all of which have been supported through the adult learning service's programmes of training and learning for local individuals and groups.

Challenges and solutions

The primary challenge was to ensure that the programme built strong community groups with the confidence and resilience to believe that they could take on the significant responsibility of managing their own community buildings. The key factors in overcoming this challenge were that staff:

- demonstrated clear commitment and support for the groups;
- negotiated the training and learning from the start and throughout the programme;
- assured groups that they would receive on-going support and refresher training to meet their needs.

Critical factors for success

The two most critical success factors were:

- identifying the range of existing skills within the groups and
- encouraging individuals to build on these for the greatest effect; for example, recognising the skills of a retired volunteer with experience of running systems and processes.

The "golden moment"

The most fundamental achievement was seeing the Community Centres continue to serve their neighbourhoods and local people, remaining a vital facility for their areas.

On an individual learner success level, one young woman could barely read or write when she first became involved in the Community Asset Transfer Programme. However, being given responsibility has boosted her confidence to the extent that she has since enrolled on many more learning courses with our service, continually building her skills and is now highly active within her local community.

Additional materials

- Proposed initial training programme for Community Organisations.

This document sets out the training undertaken by community centre volunteers. Sessions ran for 9 weeks including the initial negotiation session, followed by 8 learning sessions of 2 hours each. Tutors were also able to provide one to one support when necessary. Two tutors were allocated for each group, with different curriculum specialisms.

- Community Centre training summary.

This document sets out the annual training needs assessment carried out for each community centre group by the Community Assets Team.

Contacts for further information

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