

Rural Assets

Policy and Practice Insights from Northern Ireland



Dr Danielle Hutcheon, Dr Sarah Nason, Dr Bobby Macaulay, Dr Margaret Currie,
Dr Davide Natalini, John Hallett, Kieran Sinclair, Richard Osterhus

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Contents

1	Executive summary	7
2	Introduction	10
2.1	Aims and Objectives	10
2.2	The policy context for community asset acquisition in Northern Ireland	10
3	The Northern Ireland Study	14
3.1	The rural case study	14
3.2	Interviews with public authorities and key stakeholders	15
3.3	The national Knowledge Exchange (KE) event	16
4	Findings	18
4.1	Motivations for rural communities in NI to take on public assets	18
4.2	Motivations for public authorities to transfer assets to communities	19
4.3	Key barriers for rural community engagement in asset acquisition processes	20
4.4	Key facilitators for engagement in asset acquisition processes	27
4.5	Impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities	29
5	Conclusion and recommendations	34



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Bun a Bhann d'Alla



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1. Executive Summary

Across all jurisdictions of the UK, the acquisition of local assets, such as land and buildings, is promoted at a policy and public authority level as a valued means of strengthening communities. While research has established that owning community assets can positively impact on communities, less is known about the conditions under which processes of asset acquisition lead (or do not lead) to increased empowerment, wellbeing, and resilience.

The Rural Assets study aimed *to understand the impacts of the processes of community asset acquisition upon the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities*. To achieve this aim, primary data was collected through interviews and Knowledge Exchange events with rural community members, public authorities, key national support organisations and policymakers from across Northern Ireland. Wider UK activities related to the Rural Assets project, such as the community co-production element, can be found in our Main Public Output available at: <https://ruralassets.weebly.com/>.

Summary of key findings

Drivers for rural communities in Northern Ireland to pursue asset acquisition include tackling youth outmigration through the provision of services and facilities, boosting local socio-economic development, and transforming assets with negative historical associations. Public authorities reported that they were driven to dispose of their assets as a required government process aimed at making financial savings.

Key barriers to rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition:

- Smaller volunteer pools due to youth outmigration, and a lack of skills, knowledge and capacity to successfully participate in processes.
- The complexity and length of public authority processes. There was also found to be a lack of clear or consistent process across public authorities. Public authorities themselves reported being restricted by a lack of resources to enable them to support communities with asset acquisition.

- A reluctance from public authorities to give full ownership of assets to rural communities, and a lack of support and encouragement from authorities for rural communities to pursue public assets.
- A lack of policy direction and government level mechanisms for community asset acquisition. In particular, political instability and a lack of clear accountability across government departments meant that approaches to asset acquisition were viewed as confusing, inconsistent and disjointed at a national level.
- A lack of strategic funding options, exacerbated by the inability of public authorities to sell land and buildings for anything less than market value or to formally recognise social value. Available funding was found to be small scale and poorly joined up, with a lack of direct capital funding available for rural communities to acquire assets.

Key facilitators for rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition:

- General support for community asset acquisition across government departments, although a political stalemate was felt to have held back progress in policy and practice.
- The introduction of a policy framework and guidance was considered to have been a positive step, although we found clear support for further legislative mechanisms, including a general disposal consent, duties on public bodies to register assets, and a community right to buy.
- DTNI's support and facilitation of asset acquisitions. DTNI is seen as playing a key role in simplifying the process and assisting rural communities to secure funding. Research participants felt that DTNI should be further resourced and have a key statutory role in asset transfers.
- Education and knowledge-sharing across communities, regions and nations was seen as vital for enabling best practice for rural communities. There is support for the production of community toolkits and asset registers, but the development of such tools was felt to be restricted by the absence of clear and standard approaches from local and national government.

The impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities:

Our evidence showed that asset acquisition processes **empowered** rural communities through:

- Driving community action to tackle local socio-economic challenges;
- Community members coming together for a 'galvanising' common purpose;
- Taking ownership over local development;
- Transforming negative assets into something positive.

However, rural communities felt **dis-empowered** by:

- The length and complexity of asset acquisition processes;
- The motivations of public bodies to dispose of assets for financial gain over social benefit;
- A lack of support and encouragement from public authorities for communities to take ownership of assets.

Rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted positively on their **resilience** by:

- Bringing communities together and members sharing skills and knowledge;
- Allowing communities to acquire assets to tackle issues that threaten local resilience (e.g. youth outmigration).

However, rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes **decreased their resilience** through:

- Volunteer burn-out and fatigue caused by the complexity of processes and smaller volunteer pools;
- A continued over-reliance on community groups whose capacity had already been stretched by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes impacted on their **wellbeing** through:

- Increased empowerment and resilience from gaining community ownership;
- Support for the community and a boost to local morale.

However, rural communities felt that asset acquisition processes **impacted negatively on their wellbeing** through:

- Processes leading to increased exhaustion and fatigue in local volunteers;
- Tension and stress within and across communities over ownership and management of assets.

Recommendations

Considering the presented evidence, we provide the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in tackling youth migration by acquiring and running facilities such as digital hubs, as shown by the rural case study Grow the Glens. To do this communities require policy support that considers the rural context, and facilitates access to funding, as well as upskilling and capacity building within local community groups to allow them to pursue public assets. DTNI is well placed to play an expanded role with additional resourcing.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes at both a local and national government level. This could be assisted by the introduction of formal legislative mechanisms, such as duties on public authorities, public asset registers, and community rights to buy.
- Rural communities would be supported by the introduction of strategic capital funding specific to community asset acquisition.
- The introduction of measurement tools for social value would be beneficial to both communities and public authorities, to enable the recognition of community benefit when assessing the financial value of assets.

Funding for this research was provided by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation. This report was produced in collaboration with Development Trusts Northern Ireland (DTNI).

A photograph of a person in a blue jacket walking away from the camera on a cobblestone street in a historic town. The street is lined with old buildings, and a mural is visible on the right. A large white circle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the word "Introduction".

Introduction

2. Introduction

Rural communities face long-standing challenges, such as outmigration of young people and geographic isolation, that affect local socioeconomic development and threaten community resilience and wellbeing. These issues are potentially exacerbated by contemporary events such as Brexit, COVID and climate change, making rural communities more vulnerable to spatial injustices and inequalities. Across all jurisdictions of the UK, the acquisition of local assets, such as land and buildings, is promoted at a policy and public authority level as a valued means of strengthening local networks and the sense of community empowerment that contributes to resilience and wellbeing. While research has established that community assets can enhance wellbeing in rural contexts, less is known about the conditions under which processes of asset acquisition lead (or do not lead) to increased empowerment, wellbeing, and resilience.

Our novel comparative study draws upon co-produced knowledge of policy, processes and implementation of asset acquisition. Through a comprehensive policy analysis, the collection of primary data from rural community case studies, and an approach that co-produces outcomes with communities, we sought to identify the people, systems, and structures involved, highlighting the barriers and facilitators emerging in the narrative accounts of pathways to community asset acquisition across the different UK jurisdictions. While a UK wide study was undertaken, this report specifically outlines key findings from Northern Ireland.

Principal Investigator

Dani Hutcheon, Glasgow Caledonian University

Research Team

Sarah Nason, Bangor University

Bobby Macaulay, University of the Highlands & Islands Perth College

Margaret Currie, James Hutton Institute

Davide Natalini, Anglia Ruskin University

John Hallett, Communitythinking.org

Kieran Sinclair, Glasgow Caledonian University

Richard Osterhus, Derry & Strabane District Council

2.1 Aims and Objectives

The Rural Assets study aimed *to understand the impacts of the processes of community asset acquisition upon the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities*.

Through comparatively identifying the people, processes and structures involved in community asset acquisition in Northern Ireland, we sought to elicit what is and is not working at each key stage of the process. To achieve this, the project had the following objectives:

- 1 *To identify existing policy and practice level structures and processes for community asset acquisition and their application in rural contexts;*
- 2 *To understand and communicate the lived experience of rural communities who engaged with asset acquisition processes and the impacts on their community;*
- 3 *To promote shared learning and create solutions with communities, policy makers and practitioners on how to enable empowerment, resilience and wellbeing in rural communities through asset acquisition processes.*

2.2 The policy context for community asset acquisition in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has no specific legislation providing communities with rights to acquire assets, but transfers do occur under the general powers of public bodies. Policy frameworks seek to encourage and facilitate transfers, assisted by DTNI¹, which has a formal role in the asset transfer process.

The Community Asset Transfer Framework, issued by the Northern Ireland Executive Department for Social Development in 2014 set out how government can support community ownership and management of public sector assets and empower communities.² The framework is directed towards facilitating community ownership or management of surplus public sector assets and encouraging this to become a mainstream option within normal disposal processes. When published, the framework was presented as supporting the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to *"invest in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability*

in the broad community sector”,³ and as contributing to delivery of its Economic Strategy. The Ministerial Foreword also states: “*Community Asset Transfer can be a real catalyst to stimulate regeneration and greater community cohesion across Northern Ireland*” as well as “*empowering communities*”.⁴ In terms of community organisations and processes, the framework indicates that voluntary and community sector groups, faith-based organisations, community enterprises and social enterprises can all seek asset transfers provided they are incorporated, constituted for social benefit, and demonstrate an “asset lock” such that the asset is retained for community benefit.

Other legislation and guidance explain the powers of local government and central government departments to dispose of land and other assets, including at less than market value. The Stormont Regulation and Government Property Act (Northern Ireland) 1933 provides for the sale of assets by Northern Ireland central government departments at less than best consideration to a body that does not trade for profit, subject to the consent of the Northern Ireland Department of Finance.

The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 allows local councils in Northern Ireland to acquire and dispose of land for the purposes of carrying out their statutory functions⁵. However, the power of disposal at less than best consideration requires ministerial consent.⁶ In 2018, the Northern Ireland Department for Communities published guidance for asset owners on *Community Asset Transfer Process in respect of Transfer of Central Government Surplus Assets*⁷, and this forms the basis for much of the process outlined below.

DTNI has produced a *Routemap to Community Asset Transfer*⁸. The formal disposal process is usually started by public bodies as and when they have assets deemed surplus to requirements, and the Central Advisory Unit (CAU) in Land and Property Services (LPS) issues a formal notification (known as a D1 form) on an asset that is deemed surplus to government requirements (taking account the 2018 Guidance noted above). This is issued to all public bodies who then have 15 days to notify the CAU of their potential interest; community interest can be noted during this time,

but interested community bodies must have a “*sponsor body*” (these are public bodies that have a direct interest and stake in the work of local communities and the proposed social business intended as a part of the future use of an asset).

¹ DTNI is a member-led organisation working with community and voluntary organisations to facilitate transfers.

² Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group, Department for Social Development, Community

Asset Transfer in Northern Ireland: Enabling and Supporting Community Ownership and Management of Public Assets (Department for Social Development 2014) (Community Asset Transfer Framework NI).

³ Community Asset Transfer Framework NI (p1).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sections 95 and 96.

⁶ Department for Communities, Local Government & Housing Regulation Division, Guidance for District Councils: Local Government Disposal of Land at Less Than Best Price (2021), online at: <https://www.dtni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DfC-Guidance-on-Less-than-Best-for-District-Councils.pdf> The Northern Ireland Department for Communities has also published Guidance stating that section 96(5) of the 1972 Act, requiring Ministerial approval for disposal, provides the basis for district councils to justify the disposal as being for the wellbeing of the district <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/community-asset-transfer-guidance-asset-owners>

⁷ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/community-asset-transfer-guidance-asset-owners>


⁸ <https://dtascommunityownership.org.uk/resources/getting-started/asset-transfer-route-map>

In effect, through this process surplus assets are first offered for market sale (where relevant), then to the public sector, and finally to communities with the support of public sector sponsoring bodies. Where there is potential for an asset to be of interest or use to local communities, it is expected that the asset will be marketed to community groups primarily through the DTNI. If no competing public sector interest is declared, or where the community and public sector can collaborate, DTNI then remains involved to review the capacity of the community group and identify support needs. This is followed by the need to develop a full business plan including community consultation, operating plan, governance structures and financial forecasts. A social case is also needed which should explain the positive social, economic, and environmental benefits of the proposed transfer, including reference to sustainability and wider non-monetary benefits. The application is assessed, accepted or declined, and there is potential for review by independent officer/department not involved in the original decision-making panel.⁹

DTNI is a key actor in these processes. It is a membership organisation, whose vision includes a future *“where community assets are owned by and provide benefit to the community, eventually reducing demands on the public purse and developing a real and sustainable partnership with a range of service providers”*¹⁰.

⁹ This is not the only means through which interests in assets can be obtained. Other procedures include that some public bodies can transfer assets to a community or voluntary organisations whose social business fits within its statutory remit; and public bodies can engage communities on a *“lease and manage”* basis, where a local community development trust can manage and deliver agreed services through use of the public body’s assets (a common example is lease of leisure centres).

¹⁰ <https://www.dtni.org.uk/who-we-are/>

The background of the image is a low-angle photograph of a forest, looking up at tall, slender tree trunks that reach towards a canopy of green leaves. The image has a dark green color overlay. A large, white, thick-lined circle is centered on the page, framing the text.

The Northern Ireland Study

3. The Northern Ireland Study

Primary data collection and analysis took place to better understand the key facilitators and barriers to rural communities engaging in processes of community asset acquisition, and to explore how engaging in these processes may impact on their empowerment, resilience and wellbeing. Data was collected using three specific approaches:

- (1) In-depth interviews and fieldwork with a rural community case study who had been through an asset transfer process from a public authority;
- (2) In-depth interviews with public authorities from across NI, and key national stakeholders;
- (3) Data collected at a NI Knowledge Exchange event that brought together rural communities, practitioners and policymakers.

3.1 The rural case study

Cushendall, meaning 'foot of the River Dall', is a coastal village and townhead in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. The village is located in the historic barony of Glenarm Lowery and the civil parish of Layd, and part of the Causeway Coast and Glens district. With a population of 1,200, Cushendall is considered a rural small town. Cushendall is shadowed by the table topped Lurigethan Mountain at the meeting point of the three of the Glens of Antrim: Glenaar, Glenballyemon and Glencorp. This part of the Northern Irish coastline is separated from Scotland by the North Channel, with the Mull of Kintyre approximately 16 miles away. Historically, residents of Cushendall have had a strong connection with the west coast of Scotland, as it was easier to reach via sea than Belfast was by road. Cushendall is approximately 47 miles from Belfast, and can be reached by car or bus.

Traditional industries in Cushendall are farming and tourism, however a large proportion of residents commute to larger towns (e.g. Ballymena and Larne) or to the city of Belfast for work. Cushendall has faced the closure of many local services and facilities, including the bank, petrol station, main village hotel and many local shops. This was felt by case study participants to have impacted on population dynamics, most notably driving the

outmigration of young people and families. Further, due to the natural beauty of Cushendall there has been an increase in second home owners who only visit at weekends or during holiday periods. This has led to a depletion of economic opportunity and local investment in skills and knowledge in the village, while local house prices have been driven up. A further challenge for residents of Cushendall is transport, with routes in and out of the village, especially in wintertime, unreliable due to its coastal and mountain location, and a lack of public transport.

Grow the Glens is a community interest company that was set up in 2016 to create economic opportunity in Cushendall, with a focus on employment opportunities for young people. While the Cushendall Community Development Group is also in existence, it was felt that the village needed a dedicated group focused on driving local economic development through IT, technology and digital access. The group is made up of a committee of seven local residents with a range of professional skills and knowledge, including a senior accountant, a funding expert, an ex-managing director of a construction engineering company, an ex-senior executive in the electricity industry, a business owner, and a Cushendall-born national hurling champion.

The group initially started providing coding classes for local school children, as well as management training with the local Gaelic Athletic Association. Then in 2017 the local police barracks came on the market and the group had the opportunity to express an interest in the building and submit a request for information. The Police Service of Northern Ireland were keen to sell the building as it had been disused for a number of years, and they were still accountable for insurance, heating and lighting costs. Initially the tender for the barracks went to a housing association, but when that purchase did not proceed Grow the Glens were offered the building for £80,000.

Grow the Glens were keen to transform the building into something positive, given that the police barracks had a negative historical legacy related to the troubles in Northern Ireland. The building was also in bad condition and was seen as an eyesore in the community, with high fencing, barbed wire and

security cameras, so the group were also keen to bring it back into normal working use. They undertook a range of community consultations about the potential use of the building, including distributing surveys and holding open days at the building. The group also received invaluable support from DTNI to build their case, navigate the process, source funding and communicate with local and national government departments.

The group faced numerous challenges throughout the acquisition process, which meant that the asset transfer took years, rather than months, to complete. Initially the group faced challenges with finding out who to contact from the Policing Board and managing communication with various government departments. Further delays were faced with negotiating the price, completing the necessary legal work, and finally getting ministerial sign-off. Grow the Glens applied for numerous sources of funding to pay for the purchase of the building and subsequent renovations. They were successful in obtaining £300,000 from the UK Community Ownership Fund, which was matched by the Department of Communities. A further £50,000 was awarded by the local council. However, a further challenge was the time-bound nature of some of the funding which came with specific deadlines of when it could be used—causing further complications due to the lengthy nature of the process itself.

The group finally received the title deeds and keys to the building in 2022 and have since turned the police barracks into the Cushendall Innovation Centre, which opened late 2023. The building is now a hybrid working space for local professionals and people wishing to work remotely in the area of Cushendall. The building comprises several working spaces, including board rooms, smaller offices, and a kitchen facility. Grow the Glens are exploring the potential for a diversity of uses, such as writing retreats for academics and creative writers.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 5 community members who were directly or indirectly involved in the community asset acquisition, including members of Grow the Glens, members of the local community development trust and a local enterprise development organisation.

3.2 Interviews with public authorities and key stakeholders

Public authorities in Northern Ireland include local councils, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Health and Social Care Trusts and Education Authorities. There are 11 council districts in Northern Ireland.

DTNI are the key national organisation that supports communities with asset acquisition, and they have a formal role in enacting the existing policy framework. Other key national support organisations for community asset acquisition and rural community development more widely include Rural Community Network (RCN), Groundwork and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from two local authorities and two national support organisations, and a representative of the Department of Infrastructure at the NI Assembly. These allowed us to gain a national picture of community asset acquisition processes and to what extent rural communities are engaged and supported.

3.3 The national Knowledge Exchange (KE) event

For the final phase of our NI study we designed and co-hosted a 'Rural Community Ownership Symposium' in collaboration with DTNI, RCN and RAPID NI, which took place in October 2023 at the community-owned venue, The Junction, in Dungannon.

The event had four specific aims:

- 1 To support cross-nation knowledge exchange by bringing the example of Scottish policy, UK-wide research and UK case studies to local policy, organisations and rural communities;*
- 2 To support local rural communities with information about the transfer process and testimonials from NI rural communities that have successfully completed it;*
- 3 To galvanise local rural communities to see 'what is possible';*
- 4 To support NI policy and community organisations by building momentum, and support the development of a community asset transfer policy agenda for Northern Ireland.*

Speakers at the event included the Scottish Government, the Scottish Community Ownership Support Service, Plunkett Foundation, Community Land Trust Network and rural communities from across Northern Ireland.

The event was attended by 46 participants, broken down by sector and organisation type below:

Sector/ organisation	Number of participants
National or local community support agencies	18
Rural community development trusts, councils or groups (or individual community members)	17
Public authority representatives	8
Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) - NI Assembly	2
Department for Communities- NI Assembly	1

Throughout the event participants were asked to reflect on our key research questions and data was collected using a short survey, note taking and post-it notes.



Findings

4. Findings

Findings from interviews with our rural case study, local authorities and key stakeholders, and our Knowledge Exchange (KE) event, have been combined and are outlined below. First, we discuss the motivations for asset transfer, on the part of both the community group and the public authority. The perceived barriers and facilitators to the process will then be presented, before we discuss the impacts of the process on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities.

4.1 Motivations for rural communities in NI to take on public assets

To tackle youth outmigration and create economic opportunity for young people

A key motivation for rural communities to take on public authority assets was to create more opportunity for young people, and to keep them from leaving rural areas and migrating to larger towns and cities for employment. In our case study site, opportunities for employment were scarce and many young people moved to Belfast for work. The closure of local services, including shops, schools and petrol stations, was felt to further exacerbate the situation of people leaving the village.

"We had been thinking about the drop off in numbers in the primary school, and there was a worry that the post office was going to close because there wasn't enough business for it. At one stage the local petrol filling station closed and if you needed petrol you had to drive about a minimum of 12 or 13 miles to get petrol...the worry was that it was going to become a village of elderly folk...the majority of young people who are qualified and who live in the village work in Belfast"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

This was a key driver in setting up their community organisation 'Grow the Glens' and creating a digital hub for remote working, especially around the time of COVID.

"...our timing was good because the remote working, the working close to home, the idea that you didn't have to travel, because [before COVID] a lot of people here would travel to Belfast which is 50 miles each way. It's a hundred-mile commute"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

Participants at the national KE event also placed importance on *"the creation of assets to keep young people in rural communities"* to ensure the future social and economic survival of rural areas. In particular, participants highlighted a need to prioritise housing for young people and families, assets that create local employment opportunities, and digital hubs and remote workspaces for local community members so they do not need to commute to larger towns and cities. Participants also highlighted the need to attract and support younger volunteers in rural areas to ensure the future-proofing of community assets.

For local economic regeneration and rural service provision

As well as providing employment opportunities for young people, interviewees stated that the main driver for rural communities acquiring assets is to drive local economic regeneration and to fill gaps in service provision.

"There are issues around service provision, challenges for public services or in terms of trying to deliver health education and other services to sort of dispersed rural communities"

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

"...within rural areas there are challenges in relation to access to services, there are challenges in relation to their remoteness. There's a set of unique issues within rural areas that doesn't necessarily exist within urban and vice-versa"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

The depletion of local services and a decline in markets and employment opportunities has led to a loss of socio-economic prosperity in many rural areas. Taking on local assets was seen to offer a chance to drive new economic activity, create employment, and secure the sustainability of the local area.

"...it's about seeing spaces revitalised and used and making a contribution to the local economy. And when you've got a community organisation coming in, they're very passionate about their area the resilience and determination is there to make it work. To make it a completely sustainable social enterprise"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

"...there's an aspiration and opportunity within the community to get external investment or to develop that asset... I think it provides an opportunity for localised regeneration and for communities to be empowered in terms of utilising assets to be able to deliver. I think it has local economic returns in relation to what they can deliver as well, things like the job market"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

To change perceptions of local assets and their history

One of the drivers for acquiring our rural community case study asset was to transform a building with negative historical associations into something positive. .

"It's a different connotation to maybe a police station will have in other parts of the world, this is Northern Ireland after all. We just felt such an opportunity to put in place something which we saw as really positive rather than something which was less positive... That's where the idea came from...we felt it was quite important [for the community]"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

Further, the building was seen as a constant visual reminder of negative times in the centre of the village and was not aesthetically pleasing to look at.

"It's a hurt and an eye sore for the community...the building was an oppressive thing for a lot of people. To see it losing that cloak and being transformed into something that was refreshing...there would be a lot of people who would detest the sight of the building. There are others who just didn't want to see it lie and rot, not being used...It's an ugly building"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Both Grow the Glens and national support organisations felt strongly that the conversion of local un-used or derelict police barracks into digital hubs and community spaces could be used as a successful model of positive transformation that could be rolled out across the country.

Key stakeholder interviewees and participants in our KE event also recognised the potential benefits to communities of transforming assets entwined with negative historical legacy and the need to *"enable local communities to grow positive narratives"* around such assets.

4.2 Motivations for public authorities to transfer assets to communities

It is part of the required government process to dispose of surplus assets

Local authority and government interviewees saw themselves as having an obligation to dispose of surplus assets as a key part of their remit.

"Going along with the disposal guidelines for government land, we can't sit on surplus land, we have to try and sell it, so...it's just what we have to do"

(Department of Infrastructure interviewee)

The main drivers for this were financial, but they also recognised the social and economic value to communities and were keen to transfer assets to them where possible: *"I don't think we should be looking at asset transfers completely through an efficiency lens or from a financial perspective"* (Local authority interviewee 1). However, the ability of public authorities to transfer assets to communities was felt to be constrained by the requirement to give first refusal to buyers who can pay full market value.

"...we'll go to the open market and market that land to the general public...the community could bid on it if they've got money, but say that land is unsellable and nobody has any interest in buying the land through the open market, well then we can actually say, 'Right, well we'll revisit this [community] group to possibly transfer it once we've tested the market'"

(Local authority interviewee 2)

Generally, land and other assets transferred to communities were reported to have comparatively low financial value, and communities were often required to spend money on repairs or other measures to bring their condition up to standard.

4.3 Key barriers for rural community engagement in asset acquisition processes

Youth outmigration and ageing populations in rural areas

Rural community members identified the typically older demographic of rural areas as a key barrier to engaging in asset acquisition processes.

"...rural populations tend to be of an older profile... one of our difficulties is there's not much economic activity, there's not many of those budding entrepreneurs and any have moved away. So, you do end up with guys like me in their 60s trying to do these things and it would be really good if we had a lot more younger people involved"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

Volunteer burn-out due to smaller volunteer pools was also a key theme of discussion at the KE event. Participants expressed the view that volunteer fatigue is worse in rural areas, and *"the burden on a smaller population is something that agencies and funders don't necessarily appreciate"*.

Capacity and skills within rural communities

Multiple stakeholders identified that the time and complexity involved in the asset transfer process could often be beyond the capacity and skills of community organisations.

"It does often come down to capacity with community, and them having the skillset and resilience, and getting boards together that are prepared to commit to making it happen...It's about having access to the capital to make it happen... And being able to pitch that to funders, it is very hard. And funders are very reluctant to support community organisations for that reason. They don't have the governance, they don't have the structure. They don't have the track record"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

At the KE event, many participants noted that communities often lack people with skills in financial development, delivery and strategic planning, all of which were seen as required for engaging in community asset acquisition processes. Having the capacity and skills to secure funding in an environment where it is becoming increasingly difficult to come by, and being able to demonstrate sustainability to secure funding, were also highlighted as presenting particular challenges for rural communities.

Nonetheless, the community case study emphasised the importance of supporting rural communities to acquire and develop local assets as this is key to local capacity and skills building, which can then lead to wide socio-economic impacts. In the case of Grow the Glens, in taking on the local police barracks they felt that they had built their capacity to then create local jobs, improve local digital access, and offer support to other communities going through an acquisition process.

Public authority processes

The complexity and length of asset transfer processes, and the significant work required, were considered by case study respondents to be the main barrier to engagement for many groups.

"It really was a difficult process...the whole structure we had to work our way through, the whole unnecessary bureaucracy"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

The length of processes was seen as a particular barrier, especially the time taken to address legal issues including around land titles, and the requirements put on community groups. Such formalities were generally understood by rural community members to be necessary for protecting all parties, but it was felt by many that expectations could be managed better around the length of processes.

Participants reported a *"lack of urgency"* and a *"lack of compromise"* on the part of public authorities. The complexity of public administration in NI was also viewed as an issue for communities navigating the process. Generally, as one support organisation interviewee put it: *"...we can point to some successes, we can point to many, many more failures"*.

In Cushendall, case study interviewees reported encountering delays at every stage of the process. In particular, delays were faced with identifying contacts within the public authority, negotiating the price, and completing the necessary legal work. While some delays were attributed to upheaval surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, others were felt to be simply due to excessive bureaucracy at the public authority level.

These feelings were also reflected in the KE event, with participants describing public authority processes as *"unclear"*, with a lack of information available on how to even engage. Clear guidance was felt to be missing around both how to start the process and what was required during the process. This was felt to be exacerbated by difficulties in identifying the right person to speak to within local and national government departments and differing/ inconsistent approaches across authorities.

For their part, local authority representatives felt that they were obstructed by having *"no staff time to dedicate to the process"* and *"no support for them to support communities"*.

While DTNI was identified as being a vital national organisation supporting communities and guiding them through process of asset acquisition, both interviewees and KE participants recognised that DTNI are *"not well enough resourced"* to deal with the demand from communities across NI and provide the level of support required to navigate public authority processes. Therefore, there were strong calls for DTNI to be better supported by government.

A lack of public authority and government support for full ownership of assets

Interviewees felt that local authorities were sometimes reluctant to transfer assets to communities. Local authority interviewees reported that this can often be due to a lack of trust that the community organisations had the governance, structure or capacity to successfully run the asset, leading to a preference to sell to a private company which they may consider better qualified for this role.

The community case study felt that the development of the police barracks into the Cushendall Innovation Centre served as a key example of the potential of rural communities to take ownership and control over their own local community development. Further, that rural communities should not be overlooked in terms of their capacity to deliver high quality, modern and innovative services and facilities that directly meet the needs of local populations.

Interviewees stated that assets are often transferred to communities on a leasehold rather than freehold (ownership) basis. As a one national support organisation interviewee put it, public authorities *"...don't encourage necessarily organisations to pursue the title of something, even when something is surplus..."*. One local authority interviewee highlighted other protective arrangements that are sometimes made:

"...we will put in a clawback agreement or restrictive covenants so that if they go belly-up in a couple of years, well then the land isn't just sold and they get the profit, it then goes back into the [public authority] ownership"

The importance of being flexible and creative with ownership options for communities was emphasised by one local authority interviewee: *"...it's trying to navigate that and come up with creative solutions that'll work for both ourselves to get it through and for them"*. However, interviewees generally felt that this was lacking in most authorities.

Our community case study interviewees expressed the view that authorities should be more open to ownership as a viable option that can give communities a greater sense of legitimacy, responsibility and pride.

"I think from a village perspective, to be seen to own the building is a much bigger thing than just leasing the building. I think we've got more credibility in the area by the fact that we took the risk and we went out and we bought this building"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

Lack of available policy support and guidance for asset acquisition

Governance in Northern Ireland was seen to be a challenge for realising asset transfer policy at a range of levels. During our research period the Northern Ireland Assembly was not sitting and there was no functioning Executive in place, which was seen by interviewees as making it difficult to get things done, limiting accountability, and affecting public body working relationships.

"We have a government in Northern Ireland that can't govern, and so to try and get officials and departments to sign off anything without a ministerial go-ahead was always going to be difficult, so it probably took much longer than it should have done"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

However, it was noted that accountability was also a challenge due to the nature of the political system, even when functioning.

"...our political system, it doesn't really work in terms of holding those central government bodies to account. On multiple occasions, we've been with and without an Executive...but even when we have been with an Executive, getting the ministers to work their departments and hold their departments to account proves difficult as well"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

This was reiterated by KE participants who felt that *"Ministers change too often"* and policy approaches were *"unclear"* and *"inconsistent"* due to this political uncertainty, which meant there was often a lack of government decision making more generally.

The number of public bodies itself was seen as making it challenging to know who has responsibility for specific assets, and national support organisations estimated there to be more than 100 differing approaches to the process. It was also noted that, whereas services such as social care, education, and social housing are largely the responsibility of local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland, in Northern Ireland many more functions are delivered by non-departmental public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland Executive Departments.

"The way it works is each of those independent organisations has their own budget, has their own resources, and so therefore has their own means of thinking about the relevance the agenda around community ownership... Whilst the policy framework from the Executive office theoretically applies to all parts of the public sector, getting all parts of the public sector to adhere to its principles and apply that in a consistent manner is another thing completely"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

In addition to differences of departmental and authority culture, different legal, policy and practice constraints were found to affect various bodies. As an interviewee from the Department of Infrastructure put it: *"...the policy belongs to the Department for Communities and we follow that but we're constrained with our own powers in terms of our functions of our department"*. These constraints were found to affect both the type of legal proprietary interests that can be transferred to communities and the authority's approach to transfer at less than market value. In light of this, our community case study interviewees considered that there would be benefit to more *"joined-up thinking"* in policy and delivery.

Community members perceived that government departments and public authorities themselves don't always know their own responsibilities in regard to asset transfer, which caused further delays for community organisations.

"...the sheer bureaucracy, the sheer amount of government departments passing from one to the other. To be honest it took us about five months to discover who the right people to talk to were because everybody went 'no, I don't think that's us'"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

External stakeholders and local authorities themselves expressed uncertainty as to how different public authorities are interpreting and implementing asset transfers amid limited budgets, recently reconfigured infrastructure, little guidance from central government, and a lack of coordination between departments. It was said to even be difficult to identify which government departments have responsibility over rural community development and funding support more generally.

"The Department for Communities will fund the urban areas, but they then turn round and go, 'Yeah, but sure, the rural's nothing to do with us.' 'Yeah, but we're talking about community stuff.' 'No, but that's a rural community. We only do urban, and it's the Department for Agriculture that does rural...'. And you have a different culture in DAERA. If it's for a farmer, they'll go, 'Yeah, no worries.' If it's for a community, they're not interested. They'll go, 'That's Department for Communities. It's got the word community in it'"

(Local authority interviewee 2)

For their part, local authorities and government representatives stated that they were keen to facilitate asset transfers where possible, but lacked the policy direction and guidance they needed to do so.

"It's in the spirit of the Executive to try and facilitate this where we can and that's what we do, but, you know, our role isn't as policy drivers, it's just really to facilitate a transfer...Because you're kind of just left on your own to try and make this work without proper guidance"

(Department of Infrastructure interviewee)

This was also highlighted by KE participants, one of whom stated that *"local authorities are not provided with support from government to process asset transfers"*.

There was clear support for different types of change, including a general disposal consent (such as in both England and Wales) so that authorities do not need to seek ministerial approval for all disposals at less than market value. Our community case study interviewees also recommended a presumption in favour of the community:

"If a building is no longer serviceable by a government department or a public organisation there should be a presumption that the community should be given the opportunity to use it at least"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Most notably, interviewees felt that Northern Ireland was *"lagging behind"* other nations of the UK in terms of policy support, guidance and legislation. Across the board interviewees called for the introduction of community rights and community empowerment legislation to include, for example, duties on public bodies to register assets, a right to bid, or even a right to buy. As stated by a community case interviewee 3 *"...in Northern Ireland asset transfer is not seen as important and is not as straightforward as in other parts of the UK, we urgently need a transfer policy supported by legislation"*.

Lack of clarity over who owns assets in rural areas

While a public authority may be willing to transfer assets and *"the public sector still has a substantial footprint in terms of ownership of land and property assets in rural spaces"* (National support organisation interviewee 2), research participants observed that there seemed to be no comprehensive understanding, even within public authorities, of what land and assets they own.

"There'll be little pockets of land we're unaware that we own just because it hasn't been registered or it hasn't just come under our noses...it's not all registered or collated into one spreadsheet... We are a big landowner and there are pockets of land that sometimes we don't even know we own because it's not required to be maintained"

(Department of Infrastructure interviewee)

While there is an ongoing programme to map all publicly-owned land in Northern Ireland and make it available in an accessible online format, participants were uncertain about how this is progressing or when it may be completed.

“Department of Finance here in Northern Ireland for years now has apparently been working on a public asset register project now...to come up with an online searchable public asset register, and to our knowledge it hasn't emerged yet. I think that's a barrier for starters, because if there's an organisation there that is pushing either community led housing or community asset transfer, the baseline is you got to know where the assets are, what they are, who owns them”

(Community case study interviewee 4)

KE participants also highlighted that the land ownership system in rural NI was seen to be “too complex”. In particular, historic legislation requiring that surplus rural land be sold back to its previous owner was seen to complicate the asset transfer process, as legal advice needs to be sought on any such instance.

The price of assets and the lack of funding for rural communities for acquisition

A key issue for communities was the inability to even consider taking on an asset without access to adequate funding for purchase or lease, and for any renovations or construction required post acquisition. As identified previously, public authorities are restricted in their ability to sell land and buildings for anything less than market value. Further, many public authorities do not have processes in place to measure and evaluate social value or impact as the basis for offering discounts.

“...there is nervousness around looking at the social value as we have no mechanism measuring the social value and comparing that to the financial value”

(Local authority interviewee 1)

“...within Northern Ireland currently we as a local authority do not have the legislative permission to transfer an asset at less than market value unless we seek permission from the minister”

(Local authority interviewee 2).

The rural case study community felt strongly that they should not have had to pay the market value price of £80,000 for the building, given that it was being transferred to a community interest company. Most notably as they had provided a solid business plan, and had outlined the substantial social and economic impacts that the asset transfer would bring to the local community. However, this was felt to be undermined by local and national government process where mechanisms were missing to recognise such contribution and social value.

The difficulty of accessing government funding was also identified as a key issue for both interviewees and KE participants. In particular, as stated by one local authority interviewee, funding for the development of community assets tends to sit under specific government departments that tended to have an urban remit.

“The problem is –we have put things in place to try and balance out the support that's available to the urban areas for those in the rural, but the departments that fund them, that have the lion's share of the money, they're still catching up”

(Local authority interviewee 2)

Interviewees explained that while there are pots of funding available to support asset transfers, including initial preparation, and to some (lesser) extent to support post-acquisition maintenance and development, they are not well joined-up or co-ordinated, and there is no specific dedicated fund for asset transfers.

“...there isn't any dedicated central funding pot for [asset transfer]. So that's also been a major difficulty. The Department for Communities who have the policy oversight on behalf of the executive will receive a request for capital funding on a case-by-case basis from third sector organisations”

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

Our case study community had received funding from the UK Community Ownership Fund as well as the Department of Communities. While they were aware that they could access funding relating to peace and prosperity, language, culture and sport, they felt that there was a lack of specific funding to help communities develop get through the acquisition process itself.

"[there is a lack of] small pots of money so you can look at planning, so you can look at feasibility studies and green book appraisals, that's what's really difficult for small groups"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

This was also emphasised by KE participants who felt that funding for "pump-priming" activity would be very useful.

A lack of coordinated communication between funders was also noted by the community case study interviewees as a big issue.

"We have funders from the levelling up stuff, we have funders coming from Stormont, we've some EU funding because Northern Ireland is in a unique position. We've funding coming from the council, none of them even talk to each other"

(Community case study interviewee 2)

Interviewees and KE participants also highlighted the limited availability of post-acquisition funding and other support (other than that provided by the DTNI), particularly from public bodies. In particular, there were calls for targeted funding to be made available for post-acquisition renovations, and funding support for paid staff, so that assets are not entirely ran by volunteer pools who may already be "burned out" from the process itself.

"It is important that voluntary not-for-profit groups such as ours have appropriate support after the building is brought back into community use... funding for a Centre such as ours should make provision for the appointment of a Manager with suitable capabilities"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Again, although it was reported that there are pots of funding that could in practice be used to support maintenance and development of the asset post-acquisition, there was seen to be no dedicated funding source specifically for this purpose.

The withdrawal of funding from the EU, such as the 'Rural Development Programme' (which was delivered by local authorities and ended in 2020),¹¹ was felt to have exacerbated the funding challenge.

"...it was the councils that delivered the Rural Development Programme, which obviously was an EU thing. That's disappeared. What we did with that is we used that as a vehicle for community development in the rural areas. But now we have no dedicated rural stuff"

(Local authority interviewee 2)

The UK Community Ownership Fund was viewed as the only source of substantial funding available to fill the "significant gaps" left by the withdrawal of EU funds. Nonetheless, limitations were recognised by key support agencies in terms of its longevity and whether the fund could actually meet the substantial demand and needs of communities in NI.

"...the Community Ownership Fund is a dedicated fund for the agenda around community ownership...In the grand scheme of things, that's small beans...you've got really significant capital available for organisations in Scotland. The Community Ownership Fund was a welcome addition to that funding... it's £10 millions' worth of investment and capital over 42 projects. But we can guarantee that most of those projects are at least £1 million minimum for development"

(National support organisation interviewee 2)

The case study interviewees viewed the support they had received from the Community Ownership Fund as vital.

"I don't think we would have even started out to raise the funds to buy it... we knew there's no point in us getting everybody to chip in and raising £80,000 and then being left with a building that was just going to deteriorate. So, the Community Ownership Fund was essential"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

However, the requirement to obtain match funding (of 50%) for the Community Ownership Fund was seen as a significant barrier to many community groups without access to any other large funding pots.

¹¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/2014-2020-rural-development-programme>

"...the email came in about the Community Ownership Fund and I was like, "Right, okay, projects up to 500 grand and with half of that being match funded, that means half a million-match funding," within five minutes, I'd written to them and said, 'Right, this is great. Obviously, Northern Ireland always welcomes all funding, but who have you spoken to in respect to the community and voluntary sector being able to get match funding?'"

(Local authority interviewee 2)

KE participants emphasised that it is not only difficult to find match funding but also that the funds that are available are "small" and "piecemeal".

General lack of policy support for rural community development

In addition to a lack of policy support in specific areas (e.g. funding, asset transfer guidance), interviewees and KE participants identified a general lack of policy support in NI for rural community development.

"...policymakers are very Belfast centric ... And trying to get them to think about the importance of that contribution that rural communities make to the region as a whole in terms of economic development and public assets... to think that things need to be done slightly differently in rural communities in terms of public service planning and delivery, I think that's one of the challenges"

(National support organisation interviewee 1)

KE participants described the majority of policy around community development as "too urban centric" and emphasised their frustration at "rural being overlooked", especially in terms of the differing needs for assets to replace the withdrawal or depletion of services and facilities. With this came a call to government departments to recognise the value of place-based approaches and understand that rurality brings its own unique challenges. KE participants also reported that it can be difficult, within an already complex set of public administrative bodies, to determine where specific rural policy actually sits.

Inequality between sectarian communities

Community asset transfers were seen by some research participants to present problems within the context of Northern Ireland's religious divisions. Some interviewees noted that many rural communities are still divided down sectarian lines, meaning that assets would tend to be transferred to one or the other affiliation. Although policies seek to ensure that both sides receive equal support and investment, the feasibility of implementing this was questioned, as there could be cases in which two groups seek to purchase the same asset, and some assets are transferred based on the needs of a particular community which may not have an equivalent.

"...the sectarian and the religious divide that still exists here can and will be problematic in relation to asset transfers. Whilst we have moved a considerable way in relation to where we were from the Troubles to where we are now, there is still, particularly within the political realm, if one side gets something the other side has to be matched with something, and that doesn't necessarily work in the context of asset transfer because it needs to be based on need as opposed to you're getting this because somebody else got something"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

The potential for this to cause tension within the community, especially in those places with more a marked history of conflict, was seen by some interviewees as deterring groups from even seeking to pursue asset transfers.

4.4 Key facilitators for engagement in asset acquisition processes

When asked about key facilitators for rural community asset acquisition, interviewees and KE participants spoke both about what already existed and also what they felt was required.

Political and public authority support

The perception of local and national government as a barrier to rural community asset acquisition mostly related to a lack of guidance, practical support and funding. In contrast, local authorities and key stakeholders agreed that there was general political support, including cross-community political support, for the idea of community asset transfer across government departments, including the Departments for Communities, Finance and Infrastructure.

"...in Northern Ireland there's great political support for these transfers, so you'll be lobbied constantly by all parties...I know we're divided here but you'll get cross-political support for certain community groups that are serving a community... there's a lot of community support - local councillors, local political parties, you've your Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), any transfers you're getting a tidal wave of letters in lobbying the Perm Sec or the minister to transfer it"

(Department of Infrastructure interviewee)

Some stakeholder and local authority interviewees reported that they felt government was willing to draft policy and guidance for both community organisations and public authorities around Community Asset Transfer and Community Wealth Building, commission research and fund the support organisation, DTNI. However, as described in the previous section, progress was felt to be held back by political stalemate within the Executive, and while politicians were publicly supporting community efforts, they were seen by respondents as not doing much legislatively.

Our interviewees did feel that the introduction of a policy framework and related guidance had been an improvement. One national support organisation interviewee noted that this framework *"shares the aspirations around community ownership, both urban and rural"*, while another said: *"in a nutshell it's a set of guidelines that all government departments must follow when they're selling public land or property"*. Support organisation and local authority interviewees considered that the development of the framework and process guidance had led to *"tighter guidance for those who are trying to facilitate the Community Asset Transfer"*, particularly those helping develop a business case. National organisations and authorities also noted that there is now *"stricter guidance and more helpful guidance for...asset owners to complete our business case"* (Local authority interviewee 2). Another local authority interviewee stated:

"It's a bit more structured now in terms of there's less parameters for us to go it alone, so we have to go through more of a stringent process, but I think that's only a better thing because it protects [the authority] as well as the other organisation"

It was noted by multiple participants, however, that the existence of the specific framework prevented public authorities from being able to be flexible and responsive to communities outside of formal process. The Department of Infrastructure interviewee did emphasise their commitment to making these processes easier by offering assets to community organisations before putting them on the open market:

"There's land there that can be used and the Department's definitely willing to facilitate that transfer...it's a great process and the fact that it's circulated internally to the community groups before it goes to open market shows the commitment of the Executive to try and facilitate this as much as they possibly can"

However, the interviewee did not provide information about whether the assets offered to communities before being put on the open market would be 'surplus' with little market value to private buyers.

Local authority interviewees referred to examples where more than one group had been interested in taking over an asset and they had sought to mediate between them and try to find a solution where all interested parties could benefit. One local authority interviewee also mentioned an ongoing project to proactively consider whether disposals of public assets could be matched with the needs of community organisations:

"We're looking at all of the assets that are currently within public ownership and how those assets are used and whether we are maximising the benefit from them. We're also then in parallel engaging with the range of community voluntary sector organisations within that area, and we want to try and understand what their aspirations are and what their needs are for the communities and to see if the two match up"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

Finally, the ability to have face-to-face meetings (following restrictions imposed during the coronavirus pandemic) was considered by community interviewees as vital for developing the relationship between the community organisation and public authority, and driving momentum towards completing the asset transfer.

Having the necessary skills within a community

Having the necessary skills and capacity within the community organisation was seen as a strong pre-requisite for effectively engaging in acquisition processes, especially in terms of having the necessary confidence and resilience. This was a key theme of the KE event, where participants reported that communities tend to be successful if they have a strong history of local action and community development, proactive and creative community members, and good communication across the community.

The case study organisation had started with a small group of motivated individuals driving forward ideas but grown to comprise a range of well-respected local people on the board, helping to root the organisation and its work in the community. The professional skillset of the organisation's board was viewed as an important facilitator, especially when they were experiencing delays and setbacks. Having the confidence and ability to speak to senior civil servants, and having other contacts in the public and private sectors, was seen as having helped drive forward the process.

"...all of us have had a fairly successful track record in the business world. We know an awful lot of people. Not just in Northern Ireland but in Ireland and indeed across the water and in the United States and Europe as well...So that was one aspect of it that was really tremendous"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

Further, the fact that board members had skills and knowledge in construction, architecture, accountancy, business development, voluntary services, local sports and funding applications was felt to have led to financial success and effective management. This skillset and professionalism had in turn reassured the public authority that the group had the capacity to successfully manage the asset, further facilitating the process and helping them attract funding.

"Almost everywhere we went, from the first politician we met, they made the comment 'you are a very professional group, you're very focused on what you're doing and you know what to do'. Indeed, I think that gives them confidence that if they give us their money we would make it work... You need people who have some experience in the business world...if you want it done I think that's what you've got to do"

(Community case study interviewee 4)

The group also reported having used their contacts and connections outside of the community to support additional strands of work and one-off requests, thereby even further expanding the skillset available to the organisation.

The role of DTNI

Research participants viewed DTNI as playing a key role in facilitating asset transfers. Interviewees all stated that DTNI's support with simplifying the process, overcoming barriers and identifying how and where funding can be best secured and allocated meant that organisations were in a good position to receive such funding in order to meet community or political objectives.

"I think that a lot of rural communities need an independent rural community development officer that can do what DTNI did for us. We're all quite experienced in dealing with public departments and that, but we just felt that we weren't approaching this in the right way, and we just didn't know how to approach it, and DTNI just simplified things"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

There were calls by some of the interviewees for funding for DTNI to provide dedicated community development officers within each region (or locality) to specifically to help facilitate asset transfers. Further, some interviewees stated that DTNI should have a statutory role and should be further resourced to support and encourage asset transfers nationally.

Education and knowledge sharing

KE participants highlighted the importance of education and knowledge sharing between communities, across sectors and also across nations, in facilitating engagement and success with rural community asset acquisition. They reported that it is very useful for *"communities to share inspiration and best practice"* and for experiences to be shared to *"avoid bad practice"*. Suggestions for knowledge sharing included the production of an asset acquisition toolkit based on community knowledge and experience. This was seen to be especially helpful for knowing what to expect when entering an asset acquisition process. For example, importance was placed on sharing details of contracts and leases, and sharing how communities have interacted or worked with public authorities both successfully and unsuccessfully.

4.5 Impacts of asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities

Empowerment

Empowerment was conceptualised in a number of different ways by interviewees and KE participants, with different views on how, for whom and to what extent asset acquisition processes were empowering. Rurality in itself was seen as an empowering concept to rural community members, especially in terms of rural communities having a history and culture of continuous self-empowerment through community action.

"I think what empowers us, and it's partly being rural, is that we've had to do so much self-help in the past. We've grown up in a culture of self-help, and a lot of it is about going round and tapping people on the shoulder, and saying, 'Would you be available on Saturday? Would you be able to do this? Would you be able to do that?' We just want to get things done"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

The establishment of our rural case study organisation, Grow the Glens, was as an example of realising empowerment through community action, the organisation was established when it was felt that there was a great need for a focus on local economic development.

KE participants also saw *"building something for future generations"* through taking on community assets as a source of rural community empowerment. Participants also reported that community asset acquisition processes can potentially empower and *"galvanise"* communities through upskilling and building capacity to take on further assets, as well as by bringing the community together for a common purpose. together for a common purpose.

A range of interviewees reported that empowerment could also follow post-acquisition through communities having ownership over local development.

"I think it provides an opportunity for localised regeneration. I think it provides an opportunity for communities to be empowered in terms of utilising assets to be able to deliver. I think it has local economic returns in relation to what they can deliver as well, things like the job market dependent on what it is that the asset is being used for"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

Nonetheless, it was recognised that such empowerment may only be felt by those directly involved in the process and most active in local community organisations, such as older retired volunteers who were seen by many as being more likely to have the time, inclination and skills to engage in community development activity.

In the specific case of the police barracks which became the Cushendall Innovation Centre, transforming a building with a negative history into something positive was felt to have empowered those involved in the acquisition process.

Community asset acquisition processes were also seen by interviewees and KE participants to be disempowering in many ways. The length of time it takes to navigate an acquisition process, a lack of help or clear guidance, and potential failure were all felt to undermine the potential for asset acquisition to actually empower communities. Further, the very notion that assets were genuinely transferred to communities for reasons of community empowerment was met with cynicism by various community respondents, who believed the main motivating factor for local and national government to be cost-saving, and saw power as firmly in the hands of the public bodies.

"Normally a government department trying to get rid of something it didn't want in the first place. I'm cynical about that. I'm afraid that I've seen far too many examples where people talk about empowerment...but I think empowerment has got to be on the community's terms not on a council, or a government's, or a public organisation's"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

Research participants also felt that the asset transfer process could be disempowering due to public authority culture, a lack of support for community ownership, and issues relating to the party-political context in NI. Examples were provided where very capable groups who had the ability to take on an asset could struggle if dealing with an authority or individual hostile to the idea of that particular group being empowered. Equally, it was noted that the pursuit of equality between sectarian communities ran the risk of assets being transferred to groups lacking the capacity to successfully run them and therefore being disempowered as a result.

Resilience

Resilience was generally understood by research participants as referring to the ongoing strength and sustainability that rural communities have. Most notably, rural communities were considered to have high levels of resilience due to a culture of self-reliance.

"I think, as a community, and it's back to this having to do things for ourselves, rural communities tend to be resilient... That's how people live. You depend on each other... there is that sense of people will help each other out because you never know when you'll need the help yourself"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

Community asset acquisition processes were seen by some to further develop the resilience of the community group and the individuals involved, especially due to the challenging nature of the process and the need to work together.

"...if you set goals and you manage to see progress, I think it does build your own resilience. As a group of people, I think we're more confident working with each other now because we've had to work through all the different hurdles ... you say to yourself, 'Yeah, I managed to do that, so if I'm facing another challenge next year, I'll draw on the resilience or whatever I needed to get through the last time.' So, that helps you"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

In the case study, the asset acquisition had been motivated by a desire to tackle issues which were perceived to be undermining the resilience of the community, such as outmigration of younger people, a perceived lack of attention to economic renewal in the area, and the decrease in key community services. In this respect, future-proofing rural assets was perceived to increase socio-economic prosperity and thereby increase the community's resilience.

The difficult aspects of the process of asset acquisition were seen by many interviewees to test the resilience of both the individuals and community organisations involved. In particular, the precarious nature of relying on small volunteer pools in rural areas, and the risk of volunteer burn-out, which could then in turn impact on the success of the acquisition.

"There's a real danger, people like me who are involved in this, how long can we keep this going for? Our particular ability to not burn out is difficult. I've been involved in far too many organisations... I've burnt out of two or three of them and stepped down from them probably about three years later than I should. So, resilience is also about succession planning. I think you need support with those things"

(Community case study interviewee 1)

The link between resilience and the need to rely on volunteers was especially noticed during particularly difficult or demanding times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I think a lot of people got to burnout stage because of the action taken by the community voluntary sector during the COVID period... there is a train of thought that if we transfer public assets to the community voluntary sector, they can then underpin the management of that asset with volunteers, and that isn't necessarily a sustainable model because they have been providing that input for a long, long time, and get to that burnout stage"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

Research participants also emphasised that the process of building resilience should not stop at the point of the asset being acquired, and that rural community organisations should receive continued supported for years afterwards.

"If you want to have genuine resilience you've got to support that community not simply to build the thing or put something in place but to enable it to get through the first two or three years"

(Community case study interviewee 1).

Specifically, it was emphasised that funding to purchase an asset is only the beginning of realising resilience, and ongoing external financial support needs to be available to support the community to develop the project and actually 'realise' resilience.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing was understood as something that could be pursued at individual, community and organisational levels. Positive impacts on wellbeing were perceived to be delivered not directly through the asset transfer process itself, but rather through the feeling of empowerment that came from community ownership and an increase in community resilience due to the ability to impact on local development.

"I think if done right it [the asset acquisition process] should improve the wellbeing of communities. It should give communities that sense of ownership, and it should give communities the opportunity to deliver solutions to address the needs that they've identified"

(Local authority interviewee 1)

At an individual level, community case study interviewees reported that their wellbeing had been increased through being able to help their community.

"I've been involved in this type of thing for all of my adult life, and I grew up with my father being involved in it and knew that his father before him had been involved. So, it's sort of part of what I am and it would be a gap in my life if I didn't have involvement at community level. So, from that point of view, it's good for my wellbeing"

(Community case study interviewee 3)

At a community level, it was also felt that taking ownership of the asset had boosted local morale in a context of declining assets and population.

In terms of negative impacts on individual and community wellbeing, interviewees and KE participants reported that the lengthy and difficult process of acquisition, as well as the ongoing responsibility of managing an asset, could have negative impacts on the wellbeing of local volunteers, leading some to rule out any getting involved in further efforts and projects.

“I think you can burn out because the amount of time that’s consumed in projects like this, I think people really, really underestimate that”

(Community case study interviewee 1)

As regards other negative effects on community wellbeing, it was recognised by interviewees that tensions could arise both across and within communities depending on which community members acquired and managed a particular asset.

“...if you bring a sectoral organisation in to manage [an asset], unless that organisation has a cohesive view in terms of who the community are, that potentially then could be divisive. If it’s divisive, then wellbeing is not going to flourish and develop the way that it should do”

(Local authority interviewee 1)

The background is a photograph of a residential street with white houses and a street lamp. A semi-transparent green overlay covers the entire image. A large white circle is centered on the page, containing the text.

Conclusion and recommendations

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to understand the impacts of processes of asset acquisition on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities in Northern Ireland. We sought to explore the key barriers and facilitators to rural community asset acquisition at a community, practitioner and policy level, and what support was required to enable best practice.

In summary, our findings showed a number of barriers related to the rural context, most notably the inability of rural communities to successfully engage in asset acquisition processes due to smaller volunteer pools and a lack of individuals with the specific skills and knowledge required. This was mostly related to the outmigration of youth in rural areas, which had led to a loss of professional skills relevant to rural community development and sustainability. Nonetheless, our rural case study exemplified the importance of supporting and encouraging initiatives such as Grow the Glens in tackling youth outmigration, and driving rural socio-economic development and capacity building through the acquisition of local disused assets. Further, the importance of transforming assets with a negative history, such as the police barracks, into something positive, modern and innovative for the whole community.

Our findings showed that public authority processes felt to be overly complex and lengthy, with a lack of clear and consistent practice across public bodies. Public authorities themselves felt restricted by a lack of resources available to be able to support communities through these processes.

While we did find general political support for community asset acquisition, both communities and public authorities felt that national level approaches to asset acquisition were currently confusing, inconsistent and disjointed. While the introduction of a policy framework and guidance was considered to have been a positive step, there was clear support for further legislative mechanisms including a general disposal consent, duties on public bodies to register assets, and a community right to buy.

A further key barrier to rural communities pursuing assets was a lack of strategic funding options. This was exacerbated by the inability of public authorities to sell land and buildings for anything less than market value or to formally recognise social value. Available funding was reported to be small scale and poorly joined up, with a lack of direct capital funding available for rural communities to acquire assets and to develop them post acquisition.

Our research highlighted the key role that DTNI play in supporting and facilitating asset acquisitions by simplifying the process and assisting rural communities to secure funding. Our research participants felt that, given the increasing demand for community support with asset acquisitions, DTNI should be further resourced and given a statutory role in asset transfers.

Education and knowledge sharing across communities, regions and nations was also seen as vital for enabling best practice for rural communities. There is support for the production of community toolkits and asset registers, but the development of such tools was felt to be restricted by the absence of clear and standard approaches from local and national government.

Considering the presented evidence, we provide the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in tackling youth migration by acquiring and running facilities such as digital hubs, but to do this they require policy support that considers the rural context, and facilitates access to funding, as well as upskilling and capacity building within local community groups to allow them to pursue public assets. DTNI is well placed to play an expanded role with additional resourcing.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes at both a local and national government level. This could be assisted by the introduction of formal legislative mechanisms, such as duties on public authorities, public asset registers, and community rights to buy.

- Rural communities would be supported by the introduction of strategic capital funding specific to community asset acquisition.
- The introduction of measurement tools for social value would be beneficial to both communities and public authorities, to enable the recognition of community benefit when assessing the financial value of assets.
- Increased facilitation of knowledge sharing across communities, regions and nations. This should include the facilitation of shared knowledge and experience between communities who have been through asset acquisition processes, and a consideration of wider regional and national approaches that could be effectively adopted.

While this evidence contributes to an important development area for policy and practice in Northern Ireland, we acknowledge that the research had a specific focus on rural communities, and that the views of all interviewees and KE participants may not be representative of all community populations. With this in mind, further research exploring both urban and rural contexts, and focusing on minority or marginalised groups who may be excluded from asset acquisition processes, would be beneficial.





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