

# Rural Assets

Policy and Practice Insights from Wales



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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 project 'Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations' 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 the UK. This report will specifically outline key findings from the Welsh study. Findings from across the UK, and details of wider activities related to the Rural Assets project, such as the community co-production element, can be found in our Main Public Output.*

## Summary of key findings

The key driver for rural communities in Wales to pursue asset acquisition was to meet the needs of the community that were not being met by council services, for control and ownership of local socio-economic development, and to protect Welsh language speaking communities. The key drivers for public authorities to transfer assets to communities was for financial/ cost related savings.

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

- A lack of capacity in rural areas due to smaller population sizes, a lack of skills and knowledge, and limited numbers of volunteers available;
- Ensuring that community asset projects are representative of the needs and wants of entire communities, not just those most active in community development;
- A lack of clear and coherent process for community asset acquisition at a local authority level, including varying practice amongst different local governments, and unnecessary levels of bureaucracy;

- Councils being too risk averse or opposed to the concept of community asset transfer and ownership, and having a lack of trust in the capability of rural communities to deliver services and facilities;
- Restricted time and resources of local authorities to effectively engage in asset transfer processes, and a need for specific training within authorities to increase understanding of process;
- A lack of legislation and effective guidance, and the requirement for a strong policy framework on community asset transfer;
- Limited funding options for rural communities to purchase, operate and maintain local assets from local authorities.

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

- Supportive local authorities who are encouraging of community asset transfer;
- The support of local and national support organisations who are invaluable in guiding rural communities through the process;
- The skills and drive of rural communities, in particular, communities with professional skills and knowledge required to navigate processes.



## 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:

- Bringing people together and reinforcing the heritage and identity of rural communities;
- Knowing that communities have the rights and ability to access and own assets;
- Instigating co-production and engagement between community members;
- Giving people a voice and platform from which to engage in local change and development;

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

- The unpredictable or unknown nature of the process itself, which can lead to negative outcomes for communities.

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

- Providing the opportunity to create services and facilities that might have otherwise been closed down by councils;

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

- The overburden of small numbers of volunteers who are leading these processes;
- Processes being challenging and arduous, which requires a great deal of resilience to navigate.

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

- Bringing the community together for a common purpose and strengthening social bonds;
- Re-energising communities and lifting community spirit;

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

- Complex and lengthy processes leading volunteers to exhaustion and burnout;
- The added stress and worry of the future sustainability of assets in contexts where communities take on assets due to threat of closure, rather than choice.

## Recommendations

Considering the presented evidence, we provide the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in delivering key services and facilities that are tailored to the key needs of local populations, and can often be delivered in more efficient ways, as shown by our case study in Welshpool. 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.
- Findings show that there is a need for Welsh Government to strengthen and tighten legislative powers and guidance, most notably, the requirement for an effective national framework for community asset acquisition.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes across all local governments in Wales. This could be assisted by the introduction of duties on public authorities to comply with legislative guidance. Further, resource support and training is required for local authorities to enable them to fully engage with and embed community asset acquisition into their everyday practice.
- Rural communities would be supported by the introduction of strategic capital funding specific to community asset acquisition.

A large white circle is centered on the page, containing the word 'Introduction'. The background is a landscape with hills and a fence, tinted in a deep red color.

# Introduction



## 2. Introduction

Rural communities across the UK 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 project 'Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations' was a novel comparative study that drew 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 Wales.

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### 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 Wales, 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*
2. *To understand the lived experience of rural communities who engaged with asset acquisition processes and the impacts on their empowerment, resilience and wellbeing;*
3. *To identify specific facilitators and barriers for rural communities engaging in processes of asset acquisition;*
4. *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 Wales

Wales has no express legislation giving communities the right to buy, bid for, or seek transfers of land or other assets. The Localism Act 2011 applies to both England and Wales, but its provisions have not yet been brought into force in Wales. Community Asset Transfers, however, do occur in Wales. Under the Local Government Act 1972: General Disposal Consent (Wales) 2003, local authorities in Wales can dispose of land at below market value where the same conditions discussed above in relation to England, around social, economic, and environmental wellbeing, are met, and where the unrestricted value of the land does not exceed £2 million. Welsh Government has developed a "best practice guide" through Ystadau Cymru,<sup>1</sup> established to enable, support, and encourage excellence in public sector collaborative asset management. The Ystadau guide locates asset acquisition in the context

of an austerity driven disposal of assets by public bodies; stating: "Asset Transfers mean that the community can own and manage facilities that might otherwise be closed down if the Local Authority or other Public Authorities are unable to fund them any longer" (Ystadau Cymru, 2019: 3). In 2014 a Welsh Co-operative and Mutuals Commission recommended "Welsh Government considers legislation to enable communities to list their community assets and have right of first refusal to bring assets into community ownership. In any such legislation, consideration should be given to include sports clubs as community assets" (Welsh Co-operative and Mutuals Commission 2014: Recommendation 11). In response, the then Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty concluded that English provisions (under the Localism Act 2011) fell short by not enabling communities to force sale of an asset,<sup>2</sup> yet no legislative action was taken in Wales. In early 2022 the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA) concluded that communities in Wales have fewer statutory rights to acquire land and other assets than those in Scotland or England, despite widespread support for at least the same level of community empowerment measures as in England, and with potential to go further (IWA, 2022). In May 2022, the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament Local Government and Housing Committee launched an inquiry into Community Assets. This Committee reported in October 2022. Its recommendations included that Welsh Government should take action to establish a commission to stimulate innovative thinking on community ownership of land and assets in Wales; that Community Asset Transfer Guidance should be reviewed and updated; and that Welsh Government should make arrangements to consider options for developing Welsh specific legislation, tailored to meet Welsh needs.<sup>3</sup> The Welsh Government accepted the majority of the recommendations in principle, but cited time and budget pressures as a limitation.<sup>4</sup>

Under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFGA) public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development, which includes setting and publishing wellbeing objectives and taking all reasonable steps to meet them. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and

cultural well-being of Wales by taking action in accordance with the sustainable development principle aimed at achieving the well-being goals.<sup>6</sup> The sustainable development principle requires that the body must act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>7</sup> There are seven wellbeing goals, one of which is "A Wales of cohesive communities"<sup>8</sup> which includes "attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities". When carrying out duties under WFGA, public bodies must act in five particular ways, the "five ways of working", one of which is "collaboration" namely, "how acting in collaboration with any other person (or how different parts of the body acting together) could assist the body to meet its well-being objectives, or assist another body to meet its objectives".<sup>9</sup> Although not directed explicitly to asset transfer, several duties under WFGA, and particularly the need for public bodies to act collaboratively, could assist communities seeking public body support for asset transfer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ystadau was formerly known as the National Assets Working Group: <https://gov.wales/ystadau-cymru>

<sup>2</sup> Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty, Written Statement - Assets of Community Value measures contained in the Localism Act 2011 (14 October 2014), online at: <https://gov.wales/writtenstatement-assets-community-value-measures-contained-localism-act-2011>

<sup>3</sup> <https://senedd.wales/media/1w2fvmna/cr-ld15392-e.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://senedd.wales/media/l1tiyu3z/gen-ld15583-e.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> WFGA, section 3.

<sup>6</sup> WFGA, section 3.

<sup>7</sup> WFGA, section 5.

<sup>8</sup> WFGA, section 4.

<sup>9</sup> WFGA, section 5(2)(d).



A photograph of a street in Wales, featuring traditional stone buildings, a car parked on the street, and a string of colorful bunting flags hanging across the top. A large white circle is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the text 'The Wales Study' in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

# The Wales Study

## 3. The Wales Study

As part of the Rural Assets project, 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 were in the process of going through an asset transfer process from a public authority;
- (2) In-depth interviews with a public authority and key national stakeholders from across Wales;
- (3) Data collected at a Wales specific Knowledge Exchange event that brought together rural communities, practitioners and policymakers.

### 3.1 The Welsh rural case study

Welshpool is a market town, with a population of 6,632, situated in the county of Powys, Wales. Its Welsh language name is Y Trallwng, meaning 'the marshy or sinking land'. The town is four miles from the Wales-England border and low lying on the River Severn. Welshpool is accessible via railway and bus. Welshpool is one of the county's main employment centres and a key industrial centre, with much of its population employed in the public sector. Welshpool has the highest uptake of free school meals in the county - a strong indicator of deprivation, further reinforced by a low score on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD, 2019). Health and social care and support is provided through Powys County Council and range of private care facilities and providers, however public consultation has showed that there is a general lack of services in the area. A limited range of support is provided through voluntary organisations, however provision is notably lower than in other towns in Powys.

The Anne Holloway Centre was previously a day centre, primarily providing care services for the elderly. The asset was originally owned by Powys County Council, then transferred to Welshpool Town Council in early 2015. The Anne Holloway

Centre was one of many publicly owned assets across the county to be offered to local community councils or interested groups due to the risk that they might close due to budget cuts. Welshpool Town Council closed the centre on November 30th 2020 due to financial loss faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that time the facility has been used for storage by NHS and other health professionals. While the facility is quite dated and requires some renovation, it includes multiple spaces, such as a hairdressing unit, a kitchen, various social areas, and shower and toilet facilities designed for disabled people.

**Welshpool Community Haven** is a community organisation which is working towards becoming a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). The organisation was set up by a group of local carers who recognised that Welshpool was desperately missing health and social services after the closure of the Ann Holloway Centre. The organisation is made up of four trustees and one part-time paid member of staff, and has a membership made of carers and care recipients who are passionate about supporting people in Welshpool and the surrounding area. The Haven is also supported by CREDU (a support organisation for young and adult carers) and the Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations (PAVO).

The Haven trustees want to build an inclusive centre which would bring different care and support services, including for those who are disabled or have learning difficulties, from across the community into one central accessible location. The centre would also become a social hub for the community. At the time of the research, the Haven were renting space in the centre from Welshpool Town Council for a few hours per week to deliver a small range of activities for the community. They were in the process of trying to negotiate an asset transfer through a long-term lease on the building, which would allow them to house a number of different professional social care services from across the community. While the organisation had developed stronger links with the Town Council, their journey to this point had been full of challenges, including finding the correct council officers to speak to and maintaining direct lines of communication. There was also the continuous threat that the council may offer the building to a



private or public sector buyer. This meant that the outcome of the asset transfer was still very much unpredictable, and the organisation felt helpless, with little control over any part of the process.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six community members who were directly or indirectly involved in the ongoing process of community asset acquisition, including trustees of the Haven, volunteers and local carers/ service users from the local area.

### 3.2 Interviews with public authorities and key stakeholders

There are 22 principal councils in Wales, who are responsible for the provision of local services in their area, including social care, housing and planning. Below the principal councils there are 734 community and town councils, who by law are not required to provide specific services, but are in charge of the upkeep of local spaces, such as parks, footpaths and village halls.

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from one principal council representative and three national support organisations. One of the national support organisations also had the ability to acquire assets on behalf of communities in an asset guardian role and had direct experience of engaging in asset acquisition processes. These interviews 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

On the 26th February 2024 we hosted an online knowledge exchange event titled '*Community Assets: Policy and Practice in Wales- what's next?*', bringing together rural communities, practitioners, local authorities and policymakers. During our research an inquiry into community assets was undertaken by the Welsh Parliament Local Government and Housing Committee. Following this, a series of 16 recommendations were published, and in response the Welsh Government was in the process of setting up a commission to develop an action plan. One of the key recommendations was shared learning from other nations, therefore the purpose of the knowledge exchange event was to:

1. *Share current research, policy and practice from across the UK nations;*
2. *Discuss next steps for community asset acquisition policy and practice in Wales.*

Presenters included individuals involved in the Welsh and English community asset acquisition case studies as well as representatives from the Scottish Government, Development Trusts Northern Ireland and key Welsh national support organisations. The event was attended by 48 participants, broken down by sector and organisation type below:

Sector/ organisation	Number of participants
Rural community members (representing individuals or community groups/ councils)	22
National or local community support agencies	11
Local authority representatives	12
Policymakers	3

Throughout the event participants were asked to reflect on our key research questions, and data was collected using note taking, Miro Boards and mentimeter.



# 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 Wales to take on public assets

#### To meet the needs of the community that are not being met by council services

The community group in our rural case study sought to acquire the asset to provide a central, multi-use, inclusive space that could tackle the community's multiple health and social challenges under one roof, given the lack of adequate services available in the area.

*"...this is a centre, a hub for everybody...the Anne Holloway has a big space; the Anne Holloway has a small space; there's a bathroom, there's toilets, there's a lovely conservatory, there's a massive big kitchen. There're doors that are wide enough to get the biggest wheelchairs in. Because it was a purpose-built building for all-inclusiveness"*

*(Community case study interviewee 2)*

*"I think getting this back open, as a facility to the community, for all the different groups. It'll be hugely beneficial. There are other meeting places in the town, but this is the only one that's fully accessible"*

*(Community case study interviewee 3)*

Community case study participants felt that the council was not providing services that were meeting the varied needs of the community. As stated by one community member: *"they haven't got the passion for it. And therefore, they haven't got the time or commitments...to dedicate to it. Whereas, we are happy to do that"*. It was also noted that a number of groups had disappeared since COVID:

*"So many of our groups folded. There were things like MS groups, or stroke clubs, and so many of them have folded and not started again since Covid. And so, we kept saying, we need that centre. We all knew it was up there doing nothing"*

*(Community case study interviewee 1).*

The community were keen to create a central hub to improve awareness of groups and services, provide opportunities for them link together, and increase the efficiency of service delivery.

*"...nobody knew where to turn to for support, when it mattered. Or, to talk to somebody in similar situations, because nobody was linking"*

*(Community case study interviewee 1)*

#### For local socio- economic benefit

The majority of interviewees and KE participants recognised the importance of rural communities acquiring assets for local socio-economic development; as described by a national support organisation interviewee: *"Rural vitality. It's the social and economic benefits. Those are the two things. Those are their motivations"*. KE participants also discussed the economic benefits for the wider community that could be achieved through reinvestment of funds generated by projects within the acquired assets, such as social enterprises or wind turbines, into local development and regeneration.

## For communities to have ownership of their own development

National support organisation interviewees all concurred that ownership of assets helps local people to feel in control of the development of their communities.

*"...[communities] need to have ownership or if they can't have the ownership at least a very long lease on a building or an asset to enable them to actually feel like they've got a stake in that community, to be part of it, to do what they want to do"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

It was recognised that rural communities in particular can often have a sense of being far removed from central (or urban) decision-making powers, which has led to a culture of "helplessness".

*"...in the Welsh context, you've got post-industrial communities...there's a sort of learned helplessness that no matter what they do decisions are made elsewhere...They absolutely have no control, and so getting some say, a voice in that asset management becomes really important"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*

A similar sentiment was expressed by the local authority interviewee, who stated:

*"...community asset transfer allows assets to be managed more at a local level rather than a central level. So, it's ensuring that the people that utilise and manage those assets know what they want and know how they can get there"*

While some interviewees and KE participants placed importance on having full ownership of land and buildings, others were less concerned with full ownership than with some control over local development.

*"I've been asking groups where they don't have ownership, would you like to have ownership? And the answer is no it's fine. We don't want the hassle of ownership as long as we've got the right to determine management strategy and some economic rights, then it's fine. We'll work in partnership with the [public] body"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*

Some KE participants expressed that having ownership of assets was not only important for control over what happens with them, but also about being a "fair landlord" who can offer space to other community groups to ensure their survival, much like the case study community organisation.

## To protect Welsh language speaking communities

KE participants expressed the view that rural communities are "key custodians of the Welsh language", and this was felt to be especially true in the North but also in some rural areas in Mid and South Wales. Therefore, many placed value on communities acquiring assets to act as a platform for "keeping the Welsh language alive" by providing shared community spaces to engage local people with art, culture and heritage. Some KE participants considered this role especially important because of in-migration, for example of English retirees, and the impact of holiday homes which was perceived to weaken and dilute use of the Welsh language.



## 4.2 Motivations for public authorities to transfer assets to communities

### For financial/ cost saving related reasons

Our local authority interviewee stated that one of the key drivers of councils disposing of assets to communities was cost saving for both the short and long term.

*"One of the drivers for the community asset transfer programme is to make financial savings for the authority, so for every asset we transfer to a community group, such as a football pitch, we make a financial saving of three and a half thousand pounds a year, just on the day-to-day maintenance. For a rugby pitch, I think it's about four and a half thousand pounds, for a bowls green, it's about twelve thousand pounds. So, we're making considerable financial savings on that"*

*(Local authority interviewee)*

This was reiterated by interviewees from national support organisations:

*"...the main reason that they're getting rid of those assets is because they are not financially sustainable for the local authorities. So that's the main reason that they are looking to pass on assets and in some cases liabilities to community groups"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

This was also the experience of the case study community, where due to budget cuts within Powys County Council, the day centre had been transferred to Welshpool Town Council, as well as the associated running costs. Much of the council cost saving described by interviewees and KE participants was related to the upkeep of buildings or renovating those that had fallen into disrepair. However, as stated by KE participants, this was seen by some as a "selfish approach to assets" on the part of councils, with one commenting that "councils want to transfer potential liabilities to get rid of them".

National support organisation interviewees emphasised that councils, in the context of austerity and public sector cuts, simply don't have enough funding or human resources to keep assets operational. Therefore, the threat of losing a service was often what was driving communities to take on assets.

*"...with austerity we've seen more local authorities having to undertake asset transfers because they simply can't afford to keep those assets...that is quite a negative starting point to the whole asset transfer journey. I don't think it should happen out of necessity simply because the local authority can't afford to keep hold of it...in a dream world they would recognise the strengths that community groups have and start the process from there. Make it a more equal process rather than a 'oh my gosh, how do we get these off the books as quickly as possible...', that's overwhelmingly the experience that we see and hear about"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

This was seen to be especially true of 'softer' community services such as libraries and community centres.

*"...cafes, kids centres and library services don't earn enough money to keep these places going...my perception of the history of community asset transfer in Wales is not great and local authorities have used it as a dumping ground...They've got an asset which is a liability and doesn't have a viable income model. Then getting the community to take it on is a great outcome for them"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*

However, our local authority interviewee stated that, in addition to financial savings, their council were also motivated to transfer assets by the idea that communities could actually do a better job and provide more efficient services tailored to local need.

*"So, while we were looking at the budget and reducing budgets, I think the council were made aware of community asset transfer so that they can be managed more effectively and to be given the tender loving care that we've not been able to do in recent years because of those budget cuts and budget pressures really"* (Local authority interviewee)

Further, as stated by KE participants, communities can "often run assets more cheaply than the council" due to discounted rates, especially for community groups who are often registered charities

### 4.3 Key barriers for rural community engagement in asset acquisition processes

#### Lower community capacity in rural areas

Interviewees and KE participants all spoke of the limited capacity of rural communities to engage in asset acquisition processes, most notably due to a lack of skills, knowledge, and available volunteers. KE participants highlighted the key challenges presented by rural depopulation, which further decreased community capacity, with rising house prices and school closures felt to be “driving younger people and families out” of rural areas. A lack of services and facilities in rural areas was also seen to be a major deterrent for new people moving in. The knock-on effects of this included the loss of key professional skills and knowledge, new and fresh ideas, and energy and effort, as well as impacts on succession planning for the future.

*“...what you find with community centres...you may have an active group, a community association that is able to manage an asset. But as those members become older, it’s much harder to recruit the next generation to take over and manage an asset...we have had a couple of instances where community centres, in particular, have been returned to the authority”*

*(Local authority interviewee)*

As stated by KE participants- “developing the skills and knowledge (required for an asset acquisition process) can be a big ask for volunteers”. Therefore, community members were seen often to be at risk of “fatigue” and without a critical mass of people, going through an asset acquisition process could often be an “uphill struggle to self-organise”.

A reliance on a small pool of volunteers in rural areas was also highlighted by national support organisation interviewees, especially in the context of local people commonly volunteering across multiple groups and projects, and having to wear “multiple hats”.

*“...quite often, the Board are also the operational people as well...I would say probably 99% of our organisations that we work with, the Board are also the caretaker, the cleaner, the booking clerk, everything, social media, they do everything”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

Interviewees and KE participants also highlighted that rural community groups often struggle with ensuring that they have individuals on their boards with the skills and knowledge to navigate the substantial legislative and funding requirements in addition to their other commitments. As highlighted by one community case study interviewee, when trying to navigate the legal process of asset acquisition.

*“You are always going to need some form of expertise, and the legal side of things. You’ve got my time, but I’m not a solicitor or a doctor or a CEO” Community case study interviewee 1.*

#### Ensuring representativeness and participation

With smaller populations in rural areas, KE participants stated that a key challenge can be ensuring that community asset projects are representative of the views and opinions of the whole community, and not just of those who run community councils or are most active in local development. Participants observed that rural community development projects can sometimes be entirely segregated based on language spoken.

*“There can tend to be projects led by the “Saes” (the English, monolingual) and those led by the local Cymru Cymraeg. At worst they are antagonistic, but more often it’s just a case that the Saes have their projects and community places and spaces, and the Cymru Cymraeg have theirs, people might openly express support for each if asked, but won’t engage. There is a tribalism still” (KE notes)*

Community consultation and the ability to garner wide community support was also described by some as challenging, given these tensions and sometimes a lack of understanding among incomers to rural areas, such as English holiday home owners and retirees, of the “emotional connections between the history of the land and the language” (KE participant).



## Local authority process

The vast majority of the barriers described by interviewees and KE participants were related to local authority processes. Firstly, interviewees reported that local authorities don't tend to have a clear or standardised process through which communities can pursue an asset transfer request.

*"Most local authorities don't even have a policy on asset transfer that is transparently or publicly available, if they have anything at all" (National support organisation interviewee 2).*

Further, they reported that processes were too variable across local authorities. This included differing levels of local authority support for asset transfer, differing interpretation of national guidance, and differing levels of authority resources available.

*"...it does vary quite dramatically on which geographical area they're in, because every local authority area, even though we have Welsh Government guidance on asset transfer, how that guidance is interpreted sometimes, whether it's led by an Estates Department or whether it's led by regeneration or a community. If the local authority has a Community Officer specifically to help support the process, then the experiences by groups does differ quite drastically in some areas"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

This was also highlighted by the community case study interviewees, who had come across differences between the principal county and town level of local government in terms of legal process.

*"...what I think happens with the local Town Council is, some of them don't know the legalities and formalities...Whereas, obviously at a higher level, like a county council, there is more than one avenue you can go for direction. There is more than one person for legal clarity...It's scrutinised more. At [Town Council level] there was no scrutiny"*

*(Community case study interviewee 1)*

Therefore, interviewees and KE participants felt that community groups often had very different experience depending on where they lived and who owned the asset, which wasn't necessarily fair or helpful. Many felt that processes should be standardised across all local authorities so that everyone was "on a level playing field".

While our local authority interviewee stated that their council was willing to facilitate asset transfers and had a standard process, they reported that due to limited staff resources progress was often very slow, especially when dealing with multiple cases.

*"...limited staff resources internally means that we can't transfer the assets as quickly as we like because things crop up like land title issues, the way assets have been registered...it's not as easy as you would think to do community asset transfer because every one is unique and every one has its issues that need to be resolved...we are constrained with regard to the amount of staff resources we've got"*

*(Local authority interviewee)*

This was reiterated by KE participants, who felt that public authority processes were particularly slow due to a lack of training and resources within councils, with some councils being so busy that communities "can risk being ghosted".

KE participants reported that public authority processes can be "complex", "difficult to manage" and "too bureaucratic" for both communities and council staff alike. National support organisation interviewees also stated that, in their experience, bureaucratic complexity and the requirement for adequate community engagement can often make the asset acquisition process lengthy and resource-intensive. In addition, asset transfer may not be at the top of a council's priority list, so managing the expectations of community organisations is part of the process of supporting them.

*"Community groups need to recognise that local authorities do have a priority of workload and quite often community assets are not as high a priority as the community groups would like it to be"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

Nonetheless, the view was also expressed that "doing your due diligence and taking a longer time over [asset transfer] is actually more beneficial in the longer term" for many community groups as it gives them time to evaluate their capacity and needs (National support organisation interviewee 3).

Support organisation interviewees reported that, due to a lack of publicly available information, communities are often unaware of what assets are owned by public authorities, let alone if they are for sale.

*"...the very first barrier is actually identifying who owns what and whether they have permission to do some of the things. So quite often they'll ring the local authority, the local authority won't have a clue [if they own the asset]"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

Progress on asset acquisitions was often constrained in the first instance by the lack of an open and comprehensive register of available assets. While the Land Registry contains information on all assets owned by the public sector and is in the public domain, it was felt that access to information on 'available' assets could be simplified.

*"...it's really difficult to know who owns what... you can do Land Registry searches etc but if there was an actual national level map or list of things that local authorities were looking to transfer potentially, or on the other hand a list of assets that communities would like to be able to bid for, that would be really useful"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

### Local authority culture

A key challenge described by both community interviewees and KE participants was the perception that local authorities did not want to transfer assets to communities. This was felt to be due to councils being risk averse and "too business minded", wanting to retain control and ownership over estates, and having a lack of trust or knowledge of community group capacity. This was also highlighted by the local authority interviewee who stated *"...not all local authorities have embraced community asset transfer. Not all local authorities have got resources for community asset transfer and some affluent ones may not need to go down that route"*.

Multiple KE participants and interviewees felt that public bodies still had a very "old-fashioned" approach when it came to asset ownership.

*"I don't think we need any policy changes whatsoever...the big barrier that I've faced right through the whole thing has been public sector's fear of change and resistance to change and fear and lack of trust of communities...And I think that that culture is the main reason"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*

It was felt by KE participants that not all councils were "on board" with community asset acquisition, therefore in some cases put multiple bureaucratic barriers in the way of communities, and were quite "indifferent" to engagement. It was also felt that councils were often only open to having a conversation with communities if they had a liability asset to dispose of.

National support organisation interviewees also reported that councils sometimes considered asset transfer risky, in terms of both the viability of community ownership, and the potential political fallout of a decision to reduce the size of the public estate in this way. These interviewees expressed the view that public authorities often prefer to sell assets to private buyers or other areas of the public sector, due to a desire to maximise profits. They felt that, while such profit maximisation is typically the duty of local authorities, they were often short-sighted in their perception of what benefits could derive from community ownership.

KE participants also attributed much of the resistance to transfer assets to community ownership to a lack of trust or knowledge of local communities, and a lack of understanding of the capacity and skills of local groups in strengthening their communities.

Within the case study community, respondents had found the local authority to be unwilling to help, despite the continued pleas of the community. Indeed, it had been difficult for the case study organisation even to make direct contact with councillors, due to a lack of publicly available contact details and the obstruction of one local government individual, and even once established, communications had been difficult to maintain.

*"It took them six months to get into contact with the council. And that was a fight every step of the way. To get to talk to them...It was like, a couple of people driving that...fighting every step of the way to get it...It's just, endlessly trying to fight to use something that has been empty and is fully accessible and needed"*

*(Community case study interviewee 4)*

*"Because I had tried to raise complaints at that time, with the [relevant person] to say, look this is ridiculous, they didn't even answer our calls, they won't answer our emails. There are legal and statutory guidance and timeframes. And it's not being complied with"*

*(Community case study interviewee 1)*

Experiencing this type of obstruction had left the case study community pessimistic about their chances of progressing their applications and feeling generally helpless.

### Lack of legislation and guidance

Many interviewees and KE participants felt that Wales was behind other UK nations in terms of legislative powers and guidance.

*"We would really like to see legislation that could enable [asset transfer] to happen far more easily... we're much further behind both England and Scotland. We don't have any legal mechanism to support communities to take on assets. It's very much up to the public authorities to make that initial step to transfer the asset"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

Further, as stated by the same interviewee, government policy was not joined up in an effective way to enable this:

*"Welsh Government is supposedly putting together a communities policy and strategy, but I don't know what that looks like in reality. They keep saying how it's cross governmental which on the one hand is really positive, but on the other hand there's no one to take accountability for it"*

This interviewee felt that more focus was required on standardising or streamlining local government processes, and that a more effective policy framework was a vital requirement for doing this.

While the Welsh Future Generations Act was viewed by support organisations as a proactive lever for "making progress" on community asset acquisition and "making public bodies have to collaborate properly with communities" (National support organisation interviewee 1), some saw it as "lacking teeth" and facing significant implementation issues.

*"...we've got different legal mechanisms, we've got the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act where public bodies are meant to collaborate and involve communities and that could be geographical communities, it could be communities of interest, it could just be individuals...It lacks in terms of implementation...we have had a lot of very progressive bits of legislation that have happened in the last eight to ten years...but the real change takes time, the culture hasn't quite caught up yet"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*

Support organisation interviewees also stated that Welsh Government community asset transfer guidance required amendments to be more "proportional" and "robust".

*"The guidance that's there is very good from Welsh Government and there are areas that I think could be strengthened, particularly around the process itself, quite often what they do, in their guidance, it goes to Estates right at the very end to look at Land Registry and all those sorts of things [but instead]... the report on title should be done right at the very beginning...there's a lot of things that should be done upfront, so I think the process should be flipped a bit"*

*(National Support organisation interviewee 3)*

Further, one support organisation interviewee felt that legislation could actually be key to clarifying the guidance and promoting better public authority practice:

*"...without legislation [guidance] doesn't really have the teeth that it should have and not all local authorities have adopted it and for some they have interpreted it, perhaps, slightly different to how somebody else would interpret it. And I think legislation would help clarify some of those points"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

Interviewees also stated that Welsh Government policy and guidance needed to be clearer for both communities and local authorities to understand, so that they could effectively engage with processes.

*"If I cannot understand your terminology and your policies...I don't need to be ashamed of that. That I'm any less of a person...surely we should be making policies and procedures that everybody does understand...I really feel the people at the level that are making our policies, they really need to understand who they are processing them for, for a start"*

*(Community case study interviewee 3)*

*"...legislation is only good with education as well... unless you educate the bodies who are transferring and also communities to know what their rights are, then actually the legislation is just going to sit on the shelf and not be used as much as it should be"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*



While not all saw new legislation as immediately necessary, support organisation interviewees felt a vital need for guidance, education and capacity-building to have a significant impact on encouraging both community groups and public authorities to undertake asset transfers.

*“...for the sector it’s that building that capacity, the resources...Wales changing legislation would be useful, yes, but a lot of it is to do with education and having stronger guidance and support out there as well... where we haven’t got the legislation, we need to make sure that the guidance is really as strong and as robust as possible. And that local authorities and other public bodies recognise it and understand the reasoning behind it as well”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

KE participants highlighted particular areas in which government mechanisms were felt to be missing, including “a national framework to register assets that communities are interested in managing”, and a “right of first refusal for communities”. A general theme was that there needs to be a focus on genuine community empowerment, with local authorities fully embedding asset transfer, rather than just “doing it because they have to”.

Both community and support organisation interviewees made the further point that guidance from Welsh Government was generally lacking beyond the point of transfer.

*“...Welsh Government guidance stops at the point of transfer. [But the asset transfer process] doesn’t stop at the point of transfer...it is another easy year or two afterwards to get everything sorted...the post asset transfer support is definitely lacking and we’re seeing a lot of organisations becoming very unstuck because of it”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

## A lack of funding options for rural communities

Funding options for rural communities were seen by interviewees and KE participants as a barrier to trying to acquire assets. Generally, it was felt by most that, while a good range of funding pots are available, it isn’t well joined-up, and there is a lack of targeted capital funding available for purchasing an asset, to cover professional fees (e.g. legal and surveyor fees), and for post-acquisition renovations. KE participants noted that there was a “mosaic of funders” which were often hard to identify, and applications required a huge amount of work which was challenging for rural communities with smaller pools of volunteers. Further, it was perceived that, due to smaller population sizes and often a lack of community “buy-in”, there were few options for raising money through other routes such as community donations or schemes where community members purchase shares in a project.<sup>10</sup>

KE participants also felt that communities were often simply unable to raise the market price for assets sought by local authorities and could not “compete with private sector and cash buyers”.

*“Local authorities are under a duty to get best possible value for those assets, totally forgetting that community groups don’t have ready-made reserves to pull on so that is, again, a problem”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

One national support organisation interviewee reported that rural communities in particular often lose out on funding as they struggle to demonstrate legacy and sustainability to funders.

*“I think a lot of rural areas struggle accessing funding... that’s not necessarily to do with the deprivation statistics, but it does have to do with their ability to become sustainable. I think a lot of the rhetoric around community asset transfers is about sustainability of those assets...but they might not have a strong enough business case because the footfall perhaps isn’t there in some of our more rural and more deprived communities”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

<sup>10</sup> <https://cwmpas.coop/what-we-do/services/community-shares-wales/>

Both support organisations and the local authority interviewee highlighted that rural communities have lost access to European funding as a result of Brexit.

*“[Rural communities] have greater needs and obviously historically they have had additional funding, particularly from the Welsh Government and from European bodies like ESF and ERDF” (Local authority interviewee).*

The Community Ownership Fund was reported by national support organisations to be one of the only funding sources now available to community groups. However, some interviewees considered it to be complex and difficult to access, noting that it requires significant initial outlay of match-funding of 50%, which was often out of reach to most community organisations, and expected within unrealistic timescales. In particular, prospects for match-funding for communities were considered by interviewees to be limited, with only one public fund, the Community Facilities Programme, available in Wales. Nevertheless, national support organisations themselves recounted negative experiences of trying to access this match funding.

*“The process itself was awful from beginning to end...the funding we found out afterwards was retrospective, so we had to fund it ourselves and then claim the money back, which again we were able to do that but most community groups wouldn't...they would only fund 50% of the cost, so we had to secure the rest of it. They wanted the money spent within three months, well, by the time you'd gone out to tender and secured the rest of the funding, obviously that wasn't going to happen...We were approved in October '21 and we received our final payment in March '23. So that just tells you how long it took us to get the money from them”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

As well as funding to purchase assets, interviewees and KE participants also highlighted a gap in pre- and post-acquisition funding. Respondents reported that they required pre-acquisition pump priming and booster funding, and independent advice and guidance on how to raise funds for purchase within communities (e.g. fundraising, community shares). In particular, KE participants noted that existing funding mechanisms need to “run for longer” in line with lengthy asset acquisition processes. Post-acquisition, grant funding for core costs was considered important for ensuring the future viability of transferred assets and, in turn, encouraging both community groups and public authorities to pursue more of them.

## 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 about what they felt was required to better facilitate community asset acquisitions.

### The support of local authorities

Interviewees and KE participants considered the support of the local authority crucial for facilitating an asset transfer. Some support organisation interviewees viewed new legislation as less important than a change in the attitude and culture of local authorities.

*“Fundamentally [what is needed is] a change in culture that actually valued and recognised what communities do...Communities can do some really positive things. They can be trusted, were trusted during the pandemic...it feels a little bit like you can pick up and give to communities a little bit when it suits the public sector but when things are okay and it's back to normal you take it away again. That's not fair fundamentally so revaluing that relationship would be really important...That would be more beneficial than a piece of legislation. That would be where the change happens”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

This was reflected in the experience of the case study community group, who, once they'd had an opportunity to communicate effectively with the council and explain what they were planning and the potential benefits to the council, experienced an increase in the council's support and facilitation of the process.

Interviewees considered that certain public authorities were better than others in this respect, with differences shown particularly in the variability of available financial and organisational support for communities. It was reported that some authorities had actually been proactive in encouraging asset transfers due to the advantages they could see for both the local area and the council itself – indeed this was the picture painted by the local authority interviewee:

*“We've embraced community asset transfer, we can see on top of making financial savings, we're also ensuring those assets are safeguarded for future generations and that's why we provide some form of investment in those assets”*

*(Local authority interviewee)*

Interviewees reported that supportive local authorities also tended to have a formal process for assessing asset transfer requests, which involved considering the viability of both the asset and the organisation seeking to take it on. It was also reported that additional funding and support might be provided if necessary to improve the condition of the asset and/or ensure the sustainability of the organisation. Our local authority interviewee described the steps involved:

*"...we do something called a business diagnostic on that community group to make sure that they are a legal entity that has limited liability. They have the capacity and capabilities to manage an asset...First off is the business diagnostic, then it's the legal entity, so we'll assist them to become a company limited by guarantee or a charitable incorporated organisation or a CIC or other legal entity that gives limited liability [and]...assist them to develop a business case"*

The local authority interviewee said that their council was flexible about the community's type of legal interest and terms of ownership or lease, often leasing first to allow community groups to "take on an asset and see how it goes...we look at an asset, we look at the needs of the community groups concerned, and we try to come up with the best solution".

The local authority interviewee also reported that their council was providing targeted support for rural community development, with asset transfer being part of this broader remit:

*"...now that European funding has gone, I think our drive now is valley communities, which by default would be the majority of those areas previously classed as rural development areas...we've updated our corporate priorities to reflect that...obviously those areas tend to be the most socially deprived. So, they would have limited facilities, they would have limited road network connections, public transport. So, I think as a local authority, we are fully aware that they have got different needs from say, an urban area"*

*(Local authority interviewee)*

## Local and national support organisations

A large proportion of interviewees and KE participants viewed support organisations as key facilitators of asset acquisition, because of the wide range of support they can offer to individual community organisations: "Third-sector organisations can act as catalysts, pull the community together, find assets in communities, support the individuals" (KE participant).

Interviewees working for national support organisations said that they both provided direct support and signposted to other organisations with which they work closely.

*"...it depends on the type of asset, if it's a community pub or shop, then I would be looking at Plunkett UK for support and information. If it's community growing space I'd be looking at Social Farms and Gardens...in terms of our geographical reach ourselves, we know that we can't do everything, and a lot of these asset transfers are actually quite labour intensive. So, what we try and do is signpost and work with others as well"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 3)*

One of the national support organisations interviewed had also acquired assets on behalf of communities as an 'asset guardian' so the interviewee had direct experience of taking on assets from public authorities:

*"...if they align with our strategic objectives we will step in as that asset guardian role...we've stepped in to try and safeguard that facility and to keep that within the community whilst we build up the capacity of the community to take it on themselves"*

National support organisation interviewees also highlighted their role in helping to promote asset transfer as a concept more broadly and encourage shared learning between nations, which was considered to be sorely lacking.

*"There is very little knowledge. There's even very little knowledge at the government level. The government, the main conversations with Welsh government, they haven't got a clue of what's going on in Scotland, I'm better informed about that Scottish Land Reform Act and the Land Commission than very senior civil servants, they haven't got a clue"*

*(National support organisation interviewee 1)*



While support organisations were viewed as being useful in promoting and facilitating asset transfers, KE participants highlighted a range of support that, at least as far as they were aware, was missing. Most commonly, participants reported an unmet need for a step-by-step route map or toolkit on how to navigate the process from start to finish. They also expressed a desire for training for community groups on project management and business planning, and for a central place where communities could access information about support organisations and other relevant professional bodies.

### **The skills and drive of the community**

Many interviewees felt that having the appropriate professional skills within a community organisation could help to overcome some of the difficulties of the asset transfer process. In particular, skills related to acquiring funding, legal matters and business planning/ management were seen as important.

*“If you had a very strong community group with a lot of various skill sets so you might have a lawyer on your board, you might have an accountant on your board, or you just had someone who had a lot of time that they could do all the research without having to do your day to day stuff, whatever your group is doing that would make it a lot easier”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

Many community and support organisation interviewees also considered it important to have a strong dedication and drive to improve the local area, both within the community organisations and among local people more broadly.

*“I think if you’ve got strong community anchor organisations or strong groups of people who feel really passionately about something existing in their community, that can be enough to drive it forward”*

*(Community case study interviewee 5)*

*“Welshpool has a very strong sense of community... if people are willing to put the work in and say ‘this is what we need to do’ and are willing to do it. And willing to fight every step of the way. It can be done. It’s just, if people have the fight for it”*

*(Community case study interviewee 4)*

That sense of local drive and motivation was felt by many to come from a rural culture of “self-help” and a feeling that if communities don’t do things themselves no one else will. Interviewees also felt that, when a community is successful in one project or venture, this tends to breed further support from the wider community and also from local government.

KE participants emphasised that another key to community success in acquiring an asset is careful planning and preparation for every eventuality, and a transparent and realistic view of the journey ahead. Further, that communities should be prepared to be “flexible” and “prepared to swap things around” if something should not work out as planned.

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

There were a range of views on the concept of community empowerment throughout the asset acquisition process. A national support organisation interviewee commented that even at the planning stage, conversations around the importance of an asset can influence the self-perception of a community with regard to its heritage and identity, which can prove empowering in itself:

*“One of the narratives which I really like, which has come from the community, is that transition from a former mining town to a future forest town. We used to be a mining town and that’s how we were defined and actually now we’re defined by our relationship to the forest. Now that is, that is that’s massively empowering, that resonates where in a sense, it’s only just beginning”*

*(National Support Organisation Interviewee 2)*

The knowledge that communities have the right and the ability to access and own assets was also seen as empowering and potentially catalysing action.

*“If they’ve got knowledge of their rights and they’ve got knowledge of the process, then it can empower people to actually take action”*

*(National Support Organisation Interviewee 2)*

Positive asset transfer experiences were considered to be empowering insofar as they could instigate co-production and engagement between community members, although this was felt to be to some extent dependent on the level to which public authorities engaged in this partnership.

*“My experience is that it can be hugely empowering...even the process, this co-production process where you just get your values listened to, it's been a hugely empowering process and people are really positive about it...it's changing that optimism and a belief and the impact that someone is listening to you when for decades nobody has”*

*(National Support Organisation Interviewee 1)*

*“With regards to the asset transfer process, it talks about partnership, it talks about collaboration. There should be that co-productive approach to asset transfers and really learning from the process and adapting...we also mention that there are differences in terms of which local authority you're in and some are more proactive than others so I think that some empower communities slightly better than others”*

*(National Support Organisation Interviewee 3)*

KE participants noted that the work of community organisations can be empowering for its target groups through giving them a voice and a platform through which they can engage. As noted by the community case study interviewees, the fact that action is taken at a community level can lead to a sense of solidarity and “*strength in numbers*”, further bolstering feelings of both individual and community empowerment.

However, one national stakeholder highlighted that, while acquiring an asset might be empowering, various post-acquisition challenges could be quite disempowering for those involved in running and maintaining it:

*“I think the process itself could be incredibly disempowering...there's all the maintenance costs, the ongoing costs...buildings are often in awful conditions and community groups just don't have the reserves...but that wasn't ever anything they knew about in advance of the transfer taking place...I think the actual process of undergoing the asset transfer mechanism or process itself can be quite disempowering in general”*

*(National Support Organisation Interviewee)*

## Resilience

Resilience was understood among research participants as the ability to survive and be sustainable in the face of change. The research indicated that community resilience is both a prerequisite for and an impact of engaging in asset transfer.

The resilience of rural areas in Wales was viewed by interviewees and KE participants as being constrained or threatened by limited facilities and transport connections, with asset acquisition as a way to counter this. Nonetheless, the resilience of rural community organisations to acquire assets was also seen by many to be threatened by their reliance on small groups of volunteers.

Professional stakeholders considered asset ownership as something of a prerequisite for community resilience, as it not only keeps services open and running, but also encourages local people to have a ‘stake’ in their community and achieve outcomes not possible for the public sector.

Case study respondents considered that a community organisation must be resilient in order to take on the challenges of an asset transfer process and see it through to fruition.

*“We often talk here of asset transfers taking two years if not more, that's a long time to be going through quite an arduous process when the hurdles are stacked against you. You need to have a lot of resilience to even countenance taking it on”*

*(National support organisation interviewee)*

Following acquisition, resilience was reported to depend on the flexibility of community organisations to consider how the asset can best serve the ongoing and changing needs of the community. In instances where assets became liabilities, the process was seen as having the potential to erode community resilience.

## Wellbeing

Impacts on wellbeing were reported at different stages of the asset acquisition process, and for different individuals involved. KE participants spoke of the symbolic value of the asset as something that was bringing the community together for a common purpose, and the impact of taking ownership for the “collective” wellbeing of the community. Participants also stated that by taking over local assets communities can be “re-energised”, it can increase “community spirit” and be a “rewarding” endeavour. As stated by one KE participant: “it’s more than a building (or land), it’s what happens within it that is the true local benefit”.

Case study interviewees expressed the view that, while the process had so far led to negative impacts upon the wellbeing of those involved in the governance of the community organisation, including exhaustion and burnout, there was potential for improved wellbeing should the transfer be successful. Therefore, wellbeing was seen as changing and evolving depending on the point of the process.

*“If you get your asset and it’s going quite well that could have a huge impact on your wellbeing. But going through what is a protracted costly legal process, that’s going to have quite a negative impact on your wellbeing. If you get through that and you can get your keys and your ownership that’s obviously going to have a big peak in your positive wellbeing”*

*(Community case study interviewee 2)*

Similar trade-offs were reported by interviewees and KE participants, whereby the “positivity” and “self-satisfaction” of being a part of a community organisation was counterbalanced by the “worry” of managing the ongoing financial difficulties faced by many community organisations when taking on assets.

One major aspect of the process associated with improved wellbeing by a range of stakeholders was social interaction and strengthening of social bonds, which began during the acquisition process itself.

*“We know just the interactions that people have through all manner of bits of community action, it helps. I guess if I was really trying to find a positive, the fact that you might be two years in the process of an asset transfer, if you’ve got quite a strong group who are working together that could create real social bonds, social capital which would improve wellbeing or have an impact anyway”*

*(National support organisation interviewee 2)*

Following acquisition, case study interviewees felt that services provided at the centre for local people, and the opportunities it offered to engage with people and projects, were seen as beneficial for the wellbeing of the local community. One KE event participant described the impact of acquiring a local asset on their own wellbeing, stating: “this place saved my life, it has brought me out and I have made new friends”. Case study interviewees reported that the potential opportunities to volunteer within the organisation post-acquisition, particularly in regard to the provision of health and care services, could lead to further positive benefits for both carers and service users.





# 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 Wales. 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 limited capacity of rural communities to engage in processes of asset acquisition due to smaller population sizes and volunteer pools. Further, rural communities faced challenges in sourcing the skills and knowledge required to undertake an asset acquisition, especially because certain key community members were stretched across multiple projects.

Local authority process was felt by rural community respondents to be inconsistent, with differences across authority areas in terms of both levels of engagement and interpretation of guidance. Further, local authority culture was felt to be problematic, with some authorities being risk averse, not trusting of rural communities and their abilities, and/or not supportive of the idea of community ownership more generally. This meant that rural communities often had very different experiences depending on the location of the asset in question and who owned it. Local authority processes were also found to be complex, difficult to navigate, overly bureaucratic, and very slow, which was partly attributed to a lack of training and resources within councils.

Wales currently has no legislation giving communities the right to buy, bid for or seek transfers of land or other assets. Respondents felt that Wales was particularly 'behind' in comparison to other UK nations in terms of legislative powers and guidance for asset acquisition. In particular, government policy was seen not to be well joined up or coordinated, and while the Future Generations Act was considered a 'proactive lever' it was still felt to be facing significant implementation issues.

Respondents across the board identified a lack of targeted capital funding for community asset acquisition, especially in a context where councils were only offering assets to rural communities for full market value. The UK Community Ownership Fund was believed to be the only funding source available to rural community groups, but requires significant match funding, which was felt to be outside of the capability of rural communities to raise.

Our research highlighted the impact of having supportive and engaged local authorities, who could recognise the role and value of rural community groups in taking on assets. Local and national support organisations also provide invaluable support for rural communities to navigate such complex processes.

Considering the presented evidence, we make the following recommendations:

- Rural communities can play a key role in delivering important services and facilities that are tailored to the key needs of local populations, often in more efficient ways, as shown by our case study in Welshpool. To do this, they require policy support that considers the rural context and facilitates access to funding, as well as building capacity within local community groups to allow them to pursue public assets.
- Findings show that there is a need for Welsh Government to strengthen and tighten legislative powers and guidance, and provide an effective national framework for community asset acquisition.
- Our research strongly emphasises a requirement for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes across all local governments in Wales. This could be assisted by the introduction of duties on public authorities to comply with legislative guidance. Further, resources, support and training for local authorities would enable them to fully engage with and embed community asset acquisition into their everyday practice.

- Rural communities would be supported by the introduction of strategic capital funding specific to community asset acquisition.

While this evidence contributes to an important development area for policy and practice in Wales, 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 Welsh community populations.





