

Speaking Note: Asset Transfer National Event 5 October 2021

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Introduction

- Good afternoon, I'm delighted to be at today's conference albeit virtually and hopefully it won't be long before we can all meet in person again. I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today as empowering our communities through the acquisition of land and buildings is something I'm passionate about.
- This is our second national asset transfer event. I attended one a few weeks ago with around 100 on-line delegates from across the public sector. But this is the first event held specially for community groups since the legislation came into force in 2017, and I believe that we have made good progress in that time.
- Much of that progress is thanks to the many community organisations in Scotland represented here today – you have given your time, energy, and effort to take on assets in this way. Assets that sometimes have laid dormant have become such vibrant hubs of activity.
- Community shops, sports and recreational facilities, recycling centers, community woodland, nurseries, community cafes, and men's sheds – there is no end to our communities ambitions.
- Since the legislation came into force four years ago almost 300 asset transfers have made, over half of those have been granted and many more are still in progress.
- But we know that it's not always an easy process to navigate, and taking on public land or buildings using asset transfer can sometimes require you to overcome significant challenges.
- Challenges some of you here today may have experienced yourselves – such as who to contact to progress my asset transfer application?; how do I evidence social value and the community benefits of my project?; and what can I do if I don't get a decision on my application in time?
- Through our work over the last four years we have become aware of these challenges, and we have been working closely with the various relevant authorities to support them as they establish their processes, and to encourage good practice.
- We have also been monitoring the annual reporting data they provide, and have been working closely with the **Community Ownership Support Service (COSS)** to act on this data, targeting areas of little or no uptake in asset transfers, and to encourage activity.
- COSS are funded by the Scottish Government, whose adviser led service is free to access and covers the whole of Scotland. For those of you here today who are thinking about submitting an asset transfer application I would encourage you to get in touch with the team at COSS.

Learning to Date

- We are continuing to learn how asset transfers are working from the experiences of community groups engaging with the process, and from our work with the relevant authorities and with COSS.
- You will shortly hear from Professor Artur Steiner from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), whose team conducted a three year evaluation of asset transfer activity in Scotland on our behalf. Artur will talk us through the findings of the community groups his team engaged with during this three year research.
- Published in June 2020, the GCU report (***Asset Transfer Requests: Evaluation of Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015***) showed the legislation was working as intended across Scotland. It also provided recommendations for both Government and the relevant authorities on areas where there could be improvement.
- The report showed that more could be done to support our most marginalised communities engage with asset transfers, and that our processes could be clearer on annual reporting, and relevant authority contacts.
- As part of our response to this report, we established the **National Asset Transfer Action Group** in October 2020 to consider what actions need to be taken more broadly, and by whom, to ensure that asset transfer is achieving its goal to drive change and empower communities.
- The group has taken evidence from relevant authorities and organisations concerned with asset transfer, and has also heard first-hand from the experiences of community groups engaging with the process. These testimonies are helping our response to the GCU report recommendations, including advice on annual reporting.
- Each year, relevant authorities must report on their asset transfer activity, and this group has informed the **Annual Reporting Template** to support authorities to meet their statutory duty to publish asset transfer data by the end of June, including asking questions on what they are doing to promote asset transfer activity locally.
- This information is helping us better understand how asset transfer is working at the local level and we are working closely with the relevant authorities to encourage better reporting compliance.
- We also gained important learning from the findings of the Local Government and Communities Committee from the last parliamentary session who made recommendations relating to asset transfer.
- We have listened to this advice, and working with the National Group and our partners have acted on recommendations, including concerns about calculating social value and how to consider this in the asset transfer setting.
- That is why last month I announced new Guidance "***Asset Transfer Guidance for Considering Social Value***".
- This guidance is aimed at the relevant authorities and sets out some of the approaches used today in Scotland for social value, and includes information on best practice and links to other help available to assist them when they are considering this in the asset transfer context.

- It is designed to help them when they are considering the many social value benefits of community projects so that they understand these better, and should be used by them as one part of their wider decision making process.

Local Examples

- It is vitally important that we all understand community benefits and social value in the asset transfer context are much more than simply a financial calculation.
- Just ask Minginish Community Hall Association who took over the Fairy Pools Car Park in Skye from Forestry and Land Scotland. Their successful asset transfer has now led to improved facilities at the site, and better traffic management and visitor experience for both the local community and visitors.
- Or Crail Community Partnership who took on their community hall as an asset transfer from Fife Council, to run it as a venue for the benefit of the local community. The hall is playing an integral part of local life - hosting the Crail Food Festival; folk club; local sports clubs; and primary school activities.
- Asset transfer is more than simply a means to an end. Taking on an asset this way may seem like the end of a long process – but it can in reality be the start of another for the community groups involved.
- That is why we have asked our public authorities to work closely with their communities not only to help you as community groups take on public assets, but to enable the management of these in the longer term.
- Asset transfer needs to be more than a process to complete – it needs to be an open and transparent relationship and a shared level of trust and understanding.

Community Land Use: Wider Setting

- I now want to take a few moments to speak about other key developments supported by the Scottish Government.
- I am proud to be the first Minister in Scotland to have Community Wealth Building as part of my job title.
- Community wealth building provides national and local government, the third sector, private sector and communities with an opportunity to approach economic development in a new way, creating conditions for the people and communities of Scotland to own a greater stake in local economies and shared wealth.
- Asset transfer plays a significant part in this, and Community Wealth Building provides opportunity to progress it further through a more comprehensive placed focused model of economic development, both at the local and regional levels.
- Whilst Asset Transfer is an important tool in providing opportunities to communities throughout Scotland to acquire assets and take over services, there are other options for acquisition, for example, through the various Right to Buys as contained in the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003 and 2016.

- The Scottish Government also provides £10 million per year to support communities to acquire assets through the Scottish Land Fund (SLF). Over the last five years the Fund has given grants of over £39 million to 232 projects across Scotland.
- In 2020/21, our Programme for Government committed to a new five year SLF commencing in April 2021, which will seek to double the SLF to £20 million by the end of this parliament, enabling many more community groups to engage with public land ownership.

Community Led Regeneration

- Our Place Based Investment Programme, embeds at its core Community Empowerment and Equality, backed with an initial £325 million capital over the next 5 years to support community led regeneration and accelerate our ambitions for place, 20-minute neighbourhoods and town centres.
- The Place Based Investment Programme builds on the successful impact of the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund (RCGF) and Town Centre Action Plan and aims to link and align all place based funding initiatives to ensure we have a coherent approach to build resilient communities, and promote inclusive growth and wellbeing.
- It is complemented by our Empowering Communities Programme, which provides support to develop and build the capacity, resilience and sustainability of our communities, for which community ownership is core part.
- Local government is a key partner in delivering the Place Based Investment Programme and will receive an allocation of £140m capital funding over the next five years.
- As well accelerating our shared ambitions for Place, this funding will also contribute to net zero, wellbeing and inclusive economic development, tackling inequality and disadvantage, and community involvement and ownership.

Democracy

- The fantastic ways our communities across Scotland pulled together during the pandemic showed just how much people can achieve when they are trusted and resourced to take local action.
- Recognising the role democratic renewal must play in shaping better futures for communities as we rebuild after the pandemic, the Deputy First Minister has made completing the Local Governance Review a core feature of our Covid recovery strategy over the course of the next parliament.
- In the first phase of public engagement people overwhelmingly told us they wanted more control over the decisions that affected them most, in their communities.
- We will now work with local government and the community sector to thoroughly explore how best to strengthen democratic participation and governance and improve outcomes for local people, together.
- That's why we work with partners in communities, third sector and local government to support Participatory Budgeting.

- And we know that opening up these decisions helps share power – a fundamentally good thing. Confident, empowered communities, whether through running community assets or deciding on public budgets, are in all of our interests.

Going forward

- The First Minister launched the Programme for Government ***A Fairer, Greener Scotland*** last month which sets out the actions we will take in the coming year and beyond.
- One of those many actions is to **review the Community Empowerment Act** six years on from its inception in 2015. Asset Transfer legislation is one of many parts in the Act and I would ask and encourage you to get involved in the review when it is launched in 2022.

Conclusion

- Today gives us time to reflect on the progress we have made. And it also provides an opportunity to consider how we rebuild following the Covid pandemic. Transferring our public land and buildings into community control plays an important part in this response.
- Giving community groups like the many that are represented here today more control of their land and buildings not only helps our local economies, wellbeing, and environment - it also helps create a sustainable Scotland, helps us play our part in tackling the wider global climate emergency and achieve our environmental goals.
- So let us now match the endless ambitions of our communities by giving them our support, and enable them to realise their goals. Goals that start in our individual communities and contribute to improving Scotland for everyone.
- Unfortunately I won't be able to stay for the whole event today, however I now look forward to hearing from Professor Steiner on the **Glasgow Caledonian University** asset transfer evaluation findings.
- Thank you. I will now hand back to Kathleen.