



# Mapping Community Assets in Wales

<b>1. FOREWORD</b> .....	3
<b>2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	4
<b>3. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	7
<b>4. METHODOLOGY</b> .....	8
a. Scope of Project Brief .....	8
b. Defining Financial Sustainability.....	9
c. Exclusions.....	9
d. Research Approach.....	9
e. Map Structure .....	11
f. Case Studies .....	14
<b>5. FINDINGS</b> .....	15
a. Number of Assets Identified .....	15
b. Geographical Variations.....	15
c. Categories of Identified Community Assets.....	17
d. Legal Structure .....	18
e. Tenure.....	19
f. Evolution of the Sector - Examples of What Motivates Communities to Act .....	19
g. Sustainability.....	20
h. Trends .....	21
i. Community Impact .....	24
j. Community Experiences of Community Asset Transfer .....	33
k. Key Challenges Faced by the Sector .....	33
l. Critical Success Factors .....	36
<b>6. CONCLUSION</b> .....	38

This study was commissioned by Building Communities Trust in partnership with WCVA, Wales Cooperative Centre, DTA Wales, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Planed.

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## Diagram Contents

Figure 1: Community assets identified, by local authority area .....	16
Figure 2: Community assets identified, by main category .....	17
Figure 3: Types of service provided by community assets .....	18
Figure 4: Drivers of community action .....	19
Figure 5: Length of time an asset has been in operation .....	20
<i>Figure 6: Asset income levels (where available) .....</i>	<i>20</i>
Figure 7: Breakdown of services .....	27
Figure 8: Erwood Pitstop Case Study .....	28
Figure 9: Case Study from Anglesey Hubs .....	32
Figure 10: The ripple effect of an individual engaging .....	32

# 1. FOREWORD

In the last two years there has been a growing discussion about the importance of social infrastructure. This is the basic services and structures that support the quality of life of a town, community or neighbourhood, making somewhere an appealing place to live.

Social infrastructure ranges from community venues, to libraries, sports clubs and leisure centres, places of worship, parks and playgrounds and cultural venues. These places have often been seen as optional extras, targets for cuts and services which could be centralised at little cost.

However, this is not a perspective shared by people in the communities that the organisations who pulled this report together share. A high value is consistently placed on accessible local social infrastructure by most Welsh communities.

Not only is this shown in local community consultations in initiatives like the Invest Local programme but it's demonstrated amply by the efforts local people make to develop, support and run their own social infrastructure.

This report shows that hundreds of key local community assets covering a huge variety of activities from tourism, to sport and leisure, shops and social centres are run by voluntary organisations across Wales. They make their communities better places to live, provide key informal support for people and enhance social lives, the local economy and often protect local environments. And they are popular; the organisations outlined in this report have proved themselves financially sustainable because local people turn up and pay for services.

And many of these bodies have provided critical local support to their residents during the COVID 19 enforced lockdown.

And these benefits shouldn't be a surprise. Research in England by Oxford University suggests that social infrastructure improves the life chances of people living in otherwise deprived areas over those in areas where the infrastructure is absent.

Nevertheless, government recognition of the importance of social infrastructure is at best patchy, too often assuming it is the unique preserve of local government.

It is true that local government in particular does manage a lot of social infrastructure, community groups and volunteers are responsible for a very large proportion, especially outside our larger cities; this is not likely to be diminishing in the foreseeable future with renewed pressure on both public and personal finances.

So now after a decade of community run social infrastructure growing under the radar it is time for the state to recognise the volume of mutual support provided by Welsh communities for their members, making it easier for members of all communities across Wales to enjoy a higher quality of life.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reflects emerging themes and findings connected to mapping of community assets across Wales and associated case studies.

This work, commissioned by Building Communities Trust (in partnership with the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, Wales Co-operative Centre, Development Trust Association and Coalfields Regeneration Trust) was aimed at ‘painting a picture’ of community owned and led assets in Wales. It uncovers some shared features and traits that can help provide us with a broad understanding of some of the strengths and challenges that the sector is experiencing. The report also draws on learning and insights from leaders of community organisations which are managing local assets, in terms of what they see as some of the critical success factors.

The study was commissioned prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and thus the picture will have changed since the report was written, with many organisations being forced to either close, re-configure or adapt themselves in order to survive. Towards the end of the study we heard how some established community assets quickly adapted to take an active role in supporting communities, e.g. by co-ordinating volunteers to distribute food and other emergency support.

However, it is likely that many of the issues addressed in the report can be seen as fairly constant and are likely to continue as a backdrop to the new context in which community assets will have to operate for the foreseeable future.

438 examples of community led or owned assets across Wales were identified within the definition used for the study, although we know that the figure would be a lot higher if a wider definition of community assets was used – for example if we were to include sports clubs and village halls. There were proportionally higher numbers of assets within some rural areas including Powys, Ceredigion and Gwynedd which might indicate that that community asset development is a more inherent feature of rural communities, although there were variations across Wales in both urban and rural areas.

Key themes and findings that emerged from the research include:

- The existence of many examples of **locally driven community action and communities leading the way in transforming their localities**, from small scale infrastructure to large regeneration projects.
- The prevalence of a diverse range of **community hubs and mixed use community assets**, bringing a range of opportunities and services together within one space, including a range of **pop-up services** such as post-offices, health clinics, credit unions, food banks and surgeries. These kinds of services provide opportunities for more isolated communities, in particular, to access services that may otherwise be unable to operate in the area.
- The **retention and ‘saving’ of heritage buildings** and assets that may otherwise become disused, derelict or sold for private development.
- Contribution to **foundational economies** through the provision of shops, pubs, libraries, cinema/s, theatres, leisure centres and public toilets.
- Significant **contribution to arts, culture and heritage** activity in Wales, through the operation of art centres and galleries, museums and heritage (and industrial heritage) sites.

- **Impact upon tourism.** With the operation of a number of tourist information and visitor centres, tourist attractions, and sites of interest across the country as well as leisure centres, art galleries, museums and green spaces, community assets play a major role in ensuring local tourist facilities and infrastructures remain open and viable.
- Further impact is made by the sector in terms of its **contribution to the Welsh economy**, through high levels of sustainability evidenced within the sector (64% of the assets identified have been in existence for over 10 years, and 22% for over 25 years). 35% of assets identified had income of between £100,000 and £1,000,000 and a further 5% over £1,000,000, showing a **broad range of income levels within the sector** and an ability to contribute to the local economies in which they operate. This contribution extends to the creation of **paid employment and volunteering opportunities**, particularly for people who face **barriers to the labour market**. The role of community led assets within the social economy is likely to be significant as they often play a key role in creating accessible opportunities for traditionally socially excluded individuals, within structures driven by a community or social vision, rather than a profit related agenda.
- **Health and wellbeing** is perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of where community run assets makes a major contribution to wellbeing within their localities. Social Inclusion, diversity, mental health and well-being projects and services, environmental projects, coffee mornings, exercise, diet and education classes and volunteering opportunities all have the potential to reduce social isolation and preserve physical and mental well-being.
- The ability to contribute to **stronger communities** is a vital role of this sector. Safer, more attractive, and more connected communities appear to result from the presence of an active community asset.<sup>i</sup> Having a physical place for people to convene, learn, socialise, and take part can really help to develop a strong sense of community and bring about positive ripple effects for individuals and groups of people.

Some common challenges experienced by the sector are explored in more detail, but key areas included:

- **Sustainability and a lack of revenue funding streams** combined with lack of capacity within community groups to achieve income levels needed.
- **Management difficulties in terms of capacity, skills, knowledge, and recruitment of volunteers** willing to take on responsibility.
- Some **patchiness in access to professional support** to give groups the help they need to develop skills and capacity.
- **Difficulties with the process of Community Asset Transfer (CAT).** Rates of CATs were highly variable across Wales, with only a small number of authority areas appearing to have proactively pursued this policy. Where it has occurred, there were numerous reports of the significant length of time involved and the complexity of the process which often appeared to be beset by lack of capacity and clarity.

Common success factors have been drawn out from the case studies, which could help to inform others who are earlier on their journey of development. As an overview these include:

- Strong leadership.

- Listening actively to the community and taking a bottom-up approach to development.
- Having determination and the ability to recover from knock-backs.
- Being organised and business like.
- Building connections and having a 'seat at the table' of strategic discussions.
- Having a consistent and strong vision.
- Learning from others and never under-estimating anyone's contribution.

As the study was intended very much as an initial scoping of community assets there are many aspects which would merit further study, for example further clarity on the definition of what a community asset is, how you assess sustainability and how to measure the impact and contribution being made to society on different levels.

The study has really only just 'scratched the surface' of this large, diverse and active sector, and there is scope to investigate further and establish more comprehensively the contribution that it makes to the economic, social and cultural life of Wales.

### 3. INTRODUCTION

This report provides a narrative context for a mapping exercise and case study collection of community owned or managed assets in Wales commissioned by Building Communities Trust (BCT) with the support of their partners (WCVA, Wales Cooperative Centre, DTA Wales, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Planed). The work was commissioned primarily to ‘provide a tool which a range of stakeholders can use alongside others to help understand the nature and scale of community-based work in Wales.’

As this is the first such mapping exercise undertaken, all stakeholders were clear from the outset that at this early stage we were aiming to ‘paint a picture’ of currently active assets rather than produce a definitive census. Our primary aim has therefore been to capture the rich variety and depth of assets in Wales and to use the case studies to provide further insight; in some instances, this has helped to build a sense of common experience.

As expected when undertaking early research of this nature, there have been inconsistencies and gaps in the data we collected and some interesting challenges in precisely defining what we were seeking to include and exclude. The data we collected cannot therefore be used to evidence a set of general findings or recommendations; however, where common themes have started to emerge during the work we have made tentative suggestions for possible further research or analysis.

Overall, we found that, despite challenges, the community-led asset sector appears to remain active and our study has identified examples of how the sector is resourceful in terms of finding its own solutions to problems. There are also examples of community-led assets proving to have a good level of resilience to external circumstances.

However, we also found examples of challenges to growth and sustainability that could indicate wider sectoral challenges and we have tried to identify and explore some of these issues through our case study research.

The ‘Findings’ section of the report presents some statistical analysis of the assets identified through the mapping and their characteristics, giving a broad indication of the size of the sector and its geographical variation, as well as the type of assets mapped and the services they provide, their legal structures and tenures. It then looks at some key features that our case study participants told us had motivated their communities to develop an asset and we present some of their personal stories to explore motivations to get involved in more depth.

Key trends are highlighted based upon themes that have emerged and these have been complemented with external data where appropriate.

This is followed by some examples of ‘Community Impact’ our identified assets have had, a section on the experiences of some communities around community asset transfer, challenges faced by communities in developing and maintaining their assets, and some ‘Critical Success Factors’ that our case study participants told us about.

The conclusion offers an overview and further reflection upon the sector as it stands, and provides an indication of emerging key messages.

Lastly, some further suggestions have been made about how this piece of work could potentially be developed or built on further.



## 4. METHODOLOGY

### a. Scope of Project Brief

The aim of the project was to create a map of *“Independent community organisations providing facilities, activities or services in localities across Wales.”*

Additionally, through the collation of 15 case studies from examples across Wales, we were to *“demonstrate the range and scale of community contractors running local assets for community benefit in Wales and secondly to identify some of the key issues behind their success.”*

One of the greatest challenges acknowledged by all partners in carrying out this piece of work was in the exploration of definitions of what a community asset is, and on what criteria things should make the final list. Due to the rich diversity of community models that exist, it is very difficult to neatly categorise or judge what makes an organisation truly ‘community-led’. For example, there are organisations that sprang from the Communities First programme, and have transitioned from a statutory funded, top-down beginning, to establishing themselves as autonomous community-led assets and others that have started from the initiative of a few people in their locality to save or develop an asset they felt was valuable.

Given these challenges, the brief was clear that rather than being a ‘comprehensive study’ of every single community asset in Wales, the intention was to ‘paint a picture’ of the sector, capturing the main community-led assets in each authority area. Nevertheless, it did set out some clear parameters as our starting point:

- BCT identifies ‘community assets’ as land, buildings or other facilities owned and managed by community organisations for the benefit of their locality. This definition implies that their legal status is not for profit (including community interest companies) and that they predominantly exist to serve a local community, including a local community of interest, and are financially sustainable.
- The brief excluded religious and sport organisations and assets in public ownership (for example libraries) or assets such as parks which do not generate income. Organisations that were directly transferred from local authority control such as leisure trusts or housing associations were also ruled out as they didn’t emanate from community initiative, not because they don’t provide important social value.

As the research progressed it was necessary to exercise flexibility and make ‘informed judgements’ in some cases about whether an organisation should be included, and where required, to revisit the initial research parameters with BCT. For example, we found examples of faith-based and sports assets open to the wider community and running a diverse range of services such as food banks, community centres and drug rehabilitation schemes; they have been included with BCT’s agreement.

In initial discussions, partners felt that there may be around 200-300 examples of truly ‘community-led’ assets in Wales, but by the end of the exercise there were nearly 450 on our list, even after excluding types of asset such as sports and social clubs.

More detail on excluded asset types agreed with BCT is provided in sub-section c below.

## b. Defining Financial Sustainability

There was no agreed definition at the start of the project of what was meant by ‘financial sustainability’, but we have based this on the principle of an asset being able to ‘be there’ for its beneficiaries in the long term. It is the opposite of having to cease your activities simply because you have run out of money. One commonly quoted definition of financial sustainability is as follows:

*“An organisation is financially sustainable if its core work will not collapse, even if external donor funding is withdrawn.”<sup>1</sup>*

Examples of financial sustainability may include:

- Developing and maintaining strong stakeholder relationships, including beneficiaries, staff and donors
- Obtaining a range of types of funding, including unrestricted funds
- Building financial reserves
- Assessing and managing risks
- Strategically managing and financing overhead costs

## c. Exclusions

It was agreed with partners that we would not map the following community assets:

- Community hubs or community services which are run by local authorities, health boards, or other state-funded service providers such as housing associations
- Sports clubs where sport is the sole activity.
- Leisure trusts that were previously part of a local authority.
- National and local charities that:
  - do not directly serve their local community in its entirety
  - are largely government or centrally funded.
  - are governed/managed by professional people who are not part of the local community.
- Community enterprises without a track record or which are in their infancy and which are not yet proven to be sustainable.
- Faith-based organisations unless they are open to the wider community and have generic services open to all.

## d. Research Approach

The anticipated research method was to access databases and information from umbrella organisations who are also key project partners (the WCVA, Wales Cooperative Centre, DTA, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Planed) and to link up with county voluntary councils (CVCs) across the country to gain further insight into local data and knowledge which might not be captured elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainability, human welfare, and ecosystem health, Bryan Norton, 1992

All CVCs provided us with a list of community assets known to them, compiled largely from the individual knowledge of development officers. These lists bolstered and acted as a cross-check of lists of assets drawn up from a range of other publicly available lists, including the Social Business Wales Map, Social Firms Wales Directory, recipients of the Community Facility Grant and social enterprises receiving European Union funding. Finally, the partners involved in commissioning this study were also able to provide lists of organisations that they felt fitted within the scope of the work.

The research approach revealed that there is very little public information about community assets in Wales or research that has previously been undertaken to measure their scope, size or impact.

Our research methodology therefore needed to adapt to what was available and included using personal knowledge and contacts as consultants working in the field.

What is clear is that our map of around 440 assets only skims the surface of the scale and diversity of community assets. Our agreed definitions and exclusions mean that we have not included here the thousands of sports clubs, societies, church and village halls across Wales, that in many cases are owned and managed as a community asset and are run by volunteers.

As an example, the Working Men's Club and Institute Association website ([www.WMCIU.org.uk](http://www.WMCIU.org.uk)) lists 90 social clubs in Wales, many of which do not have any public information available but have been operating for decades on a sustainable basis by volunteers.

It is estimated that there are 151,000 sports clubs in the UK, and a UK survey in 2017/18<sup>2</sup> found that 49% of sports clubs own their facility, and each has an average of 42 volunteers. Additionally, clubs welcome, on average, 32 non-members to their facilities, suggesting that their benefit stretches far beyond just members.

Therefore, in order to truly understand the value and impact of community-led assets in Wales, it would be necessary to widen the scope of the research further to include:

- Sports clubs
- Village halls
- Faith-based community centres and halls
- Clubs and institutes

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<sup>2</sup> UK Sports Club Survey 2017/18, Recreation and Sports Alliance

## e. Map Structure

The types of community asset we have focused on for the study include:

- A building, facility, site or service, belonging to a community organisation and which is being run/managed and controlled by that local community, and is independent.
- A community organisation or enterprise that is governed and controlled by local people (even if they do not own the asset - for example it could be on long-term lease or license, or they could be privately renting to run their community asset) and who are independent / not wholly dependent upon statutory support.
- A community asset that has been, or is in the process of being transferred into community ownership from a local authority or statutory body (excluding leisure trusts / housing associations / ex-local authority run services except where they have achieved independence and are community controlled).
- A community / social business that was founded by local people and which is managed by local people, even if they do not own their building or land.
- An amenity that was set up and is run / managed /owned by a community of interest and which is embedded in the local community.
- Although village halls are largely excluded, we have included those which are used more extensively than for infrequent room hire, providing they are community owned or managed and financially sustainable.
- A sample of green spaces which reflect community ownership and management for the benefit of the wider community.

The categories we have drawn up for the purpose of the exercise are as follows:

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
<b>Community Enterprise</b>	<i>A community business that is run/managed by the community. This could be the ownership or management of a building/ space or facility or could be a community owned business which rents or leases its premises. In this case it should be independent and not reliant on public sector subsidy.</i>
<b>Community Green space (could include allotments, orchards, woodlands, lakes etc.)</b>	<i>This incorporates parks, allotments, orchards or leisure amenities which are predominantly outdoor spaces (it may include examples that also incorporate a building as part of the asset) and which are being sustained by the community and may be generating a small income through trade, donations and fundraising.</i>

<b>Community Hub</b>	<i>A community hub could be a community building or network of spaces from where a variety of services (internal and external) are delivered and based. This may include other community facilities / enterprises (such as a café / social enterprise) and community activities in the same manner as a community centre.</i>
<b>Community Hall / Centre</b>	<i>This includes community halls, village halls, and community centres which organise a range of community activities in addition to renting out spaces. We have mapped halls and centres which are just used for renting out spaces were not included.</i>
<b>Community Amenity (pubs, libraries, toilets etc.)</b>	<i>Covers assets which could be regarded as part of the foundational economy such as pubs, libraries, shops and public toilets.</i>
<b>Community Sport / Leisure Facility</b>	<i>Includes swimming pools, sports clubs and bowling greens, where the asset is in the ownership or control of the community, particularly where the facility has additional added community value such as organising community events, training and employment.</i>
<b>Community Housing Scheme</b>	<i>Community housing schemes where the facility is owned or controlled by the community.</i>
<b>Arts and Heritage Community Asset</b>	<i>Includes industrial / social heritage buildings, historical buildings and spaces, museums, art galleries and community arts facilities that are owned and/or managed by the community.</i>

As well as defining the category of the asset we have also identified, as far as possible from the information available to us, the type of service it delivers, as defined below. Many assets deliver more than one type of service.

<b>TYPE</b>
Allotment / growing space
Art gallery /arts centre
Café
Childcare
Community of interest: learning disability, unemployment, probation, women, men etc.
Energy scheme
Farm
Food manufacturer
Housing scheme
Industrial heritage building
Lake
Library
Mixed-use community hub
Museum
Orchard
Park
Product manufacturing
Pub
Public toilet
Recycling
Regeneration
Shop
Social care
Sports club
Swimming pool
Tourist facility
Training and employment
Woodland
Youth facility

## f. Case Studies

The case studies are designed to bring to life the data map, illustrating the journey, challenges, learning and people behind a broad range of community assets up and down the country.

The case studies have been critical in discovering common themes and experiences and identifying common issues and success factors. We tried to use case studies that indicate the diversity of the sector, whilst giving examples from across the whole of Wales. We also wanted to avoid examples which are more widely known within the sector such as Galeri, Caernarfon, Caia Park Partnership in Wrexham, Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog, Action on Caerau and Ely (Cardiff) or Dove Workshop, Neath, all of which are strong examples and have already been featured in case studies within the sector.

We came across more than one example of an organisation which was not high profile, because they simply do not have the time or motivation to court attention and prefer to focus on the work in hand.

Case studies include:

1. Porthcawl Harbour
2. Siop Cletwr, Ceredigion
3. Theatr Soar, Merthyr Tydfil
4. Abergavenny Community Centre, Monmouthshire
5. Plas Madoc Leisure Centre, Wrexham
6. The Market Hall Cinema, Brynmawr
7. The Arts Factory, Ferndale
8. Maindee Unltd, Newport
9. Open Newtown, Powys
10. Anglesey Community Hubs, Anglesey
11. The Old Library, Rumney, Cardiff
12. Gwynfi Hall, Neath Port Talbot
13. Hubberston Community Centre, Pembrokeshire
14. Penllergare Valley Woods, Swansea
15. Penparcau Community Forum, Ceredigion

## 5. FINDINGS

### a. Number of Assets Identified

Our research has identified 438 community-led or owned assets across Wales that meet the definitions used for this study. However, our study reflects just one 'sector within a sector'. In previous sections of the report, we have touched on alternative parameters that might increase or reduce this number and still comfortably define a 'community asset' (for example the inclusion of sports clubs, associations and halls that make an enormous contribution to community life). Further factors that are likely to have impacted on the number of assets we have mapped include:

- Acknowledgement that the availability of data for different areas was dependent on the availability of CVC staff (for much of the time during the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic), and that there is no agreed understanding between CVCs about what a community asset is
- Even using our agreed definition, there are other assets which could have been included. For some type of assets, for example woodlands, our emphasis was on selecting strong examples rather than including every single example.

We would therefore suggest that the map is kept live and open so that it can be regularly revisited and updated.

### b. Geographical Variations

As there was an element, for some types of assets of selecting only a few key assets for inclusion in the mapping (for example woodlands and radio stations), the number of assets in each local authority area should not be seen as a definitive figure. However, given that similar approaches to data collection were used for all areas, the number of cases can be seen to give a broad indication of the extent of community assets in that area and the variation across Wales. While a proportionally large number of assets were identified for a few small rural authorities (Gwynedd, Powys and Ceredigion) this isn't reflected in a general rural / urban pattern and there are some marked differences between rural areas, for example with Pembrokeshire having a relatively small number and there being a large difference between numbers of assets in Swansea compared to Cardiff.

A comparison of numbers of assets across different local authorities should also be mindful of the variations in the type of asset. A large asset such as the regeneration of the Porthcawl Harbour Quarter would have a very different impact on a local community compared with an asset such as a small local heritage museum.



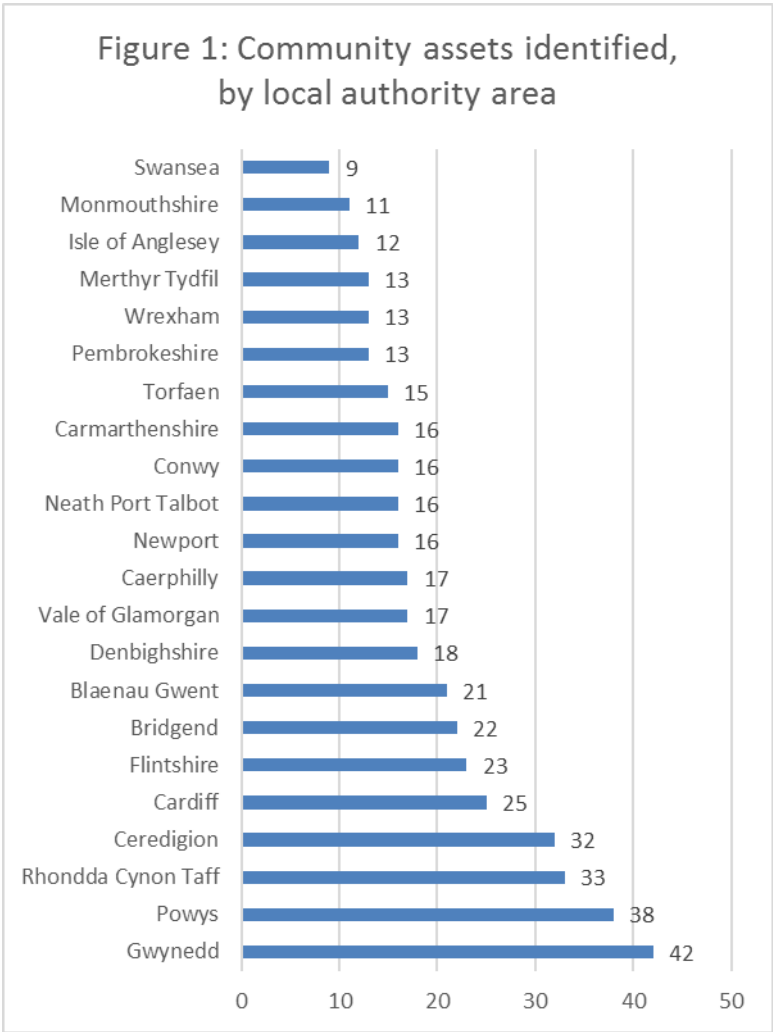


Figure 1: Community assets identified, by local authority area

### c. Categories of Identified Community Assets

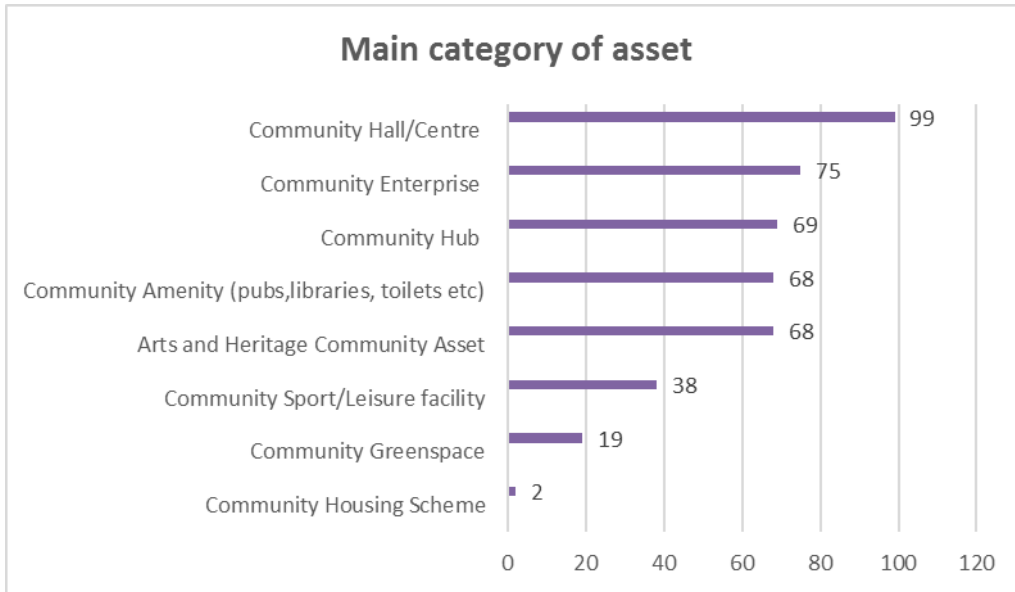


Figure 2: Community assets identified, by main category

Each asset was categorised into one of 8 main headings, as shown in figure 2. Many assets could reasonably be thought of as falling into more than one category - for example, an industrial heritage building would normally be classed as an arts and heritage community asset but could also have mixed community use, so would also fit into the community hub category. Assets were categorised according to what was felt to be their prime purpose based on the information available. However, there is some unavoidable subjectivity in making the choice of category where information is lacking.

There is much cross-over between the categories of community centres, hubs and community enterprises, whose descriptions can often be interchangeable. We have tried to identify an asset as a hub where we have seen a reference to that term, or where it seems an appropriate description: hubs often reflect a range of services being co-located, and are often open on a full-time basis, whereas a community centre may be more limited in its opening times and is more likely to directly deliver its activities. Community enterprises have been described as such where there is a clear trading element, or range of enterprise activities which are central to their sustainability and is their main focus. Renewable energy assets, for example, fall within this category.

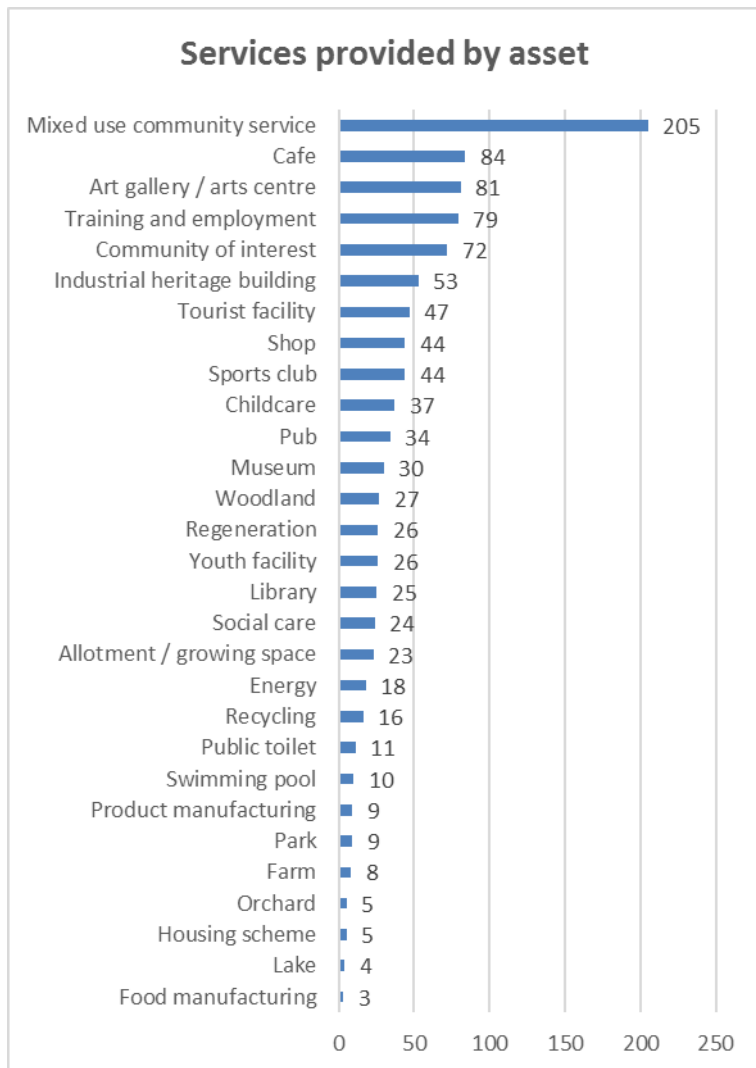


Figure 3: Types of service provided by community assets

The type of service provided from each asset was also recorded (figure 3). This was based on the information available on each, largely drawn from websites. In many cases, assets provided more than one type of service.

Over time it would be possible to adapt data on the category of asset and the services it provided if further information were to be gathered on individual assets.

#### d. Legal Structure

62% (272) of the assets we identified had charity status, many having adapted to become a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) over the last couple of years, taking advantage of the new charitable status which incorporates charity and company status into one entity. Many had dual status of both charity and company 31% (137). Only 5% (21) of the assets had the status of a community interest company (CIC status) and this may be to do with the limitations that puts on the ability to fundraise. It is also a relatively new structure, so is largely seen amongst much more recent assets that have been established. The number of community benefit companies was lower, with only 12 examples found (3%) - these have been mainly where an asset has been purchased by community shares.

## e. Tenure

There were key barriers to establishing tenure of the assets, apart from where this was clearly communicated within accounts, on a website or highlighted elsewhere online or in the press. Through the DTA and Coalfields Support projects we were able to establish tenure for some organisations they had directly supported. A summary of our findings on tenure is as follows:

- We were able to establish 63 community asset transfers (CATs), although some of these may be 'in process' rather than completed.
- A key finding was the significant amount of time it can take for a transfer to go through (this could be as long as 4 years) and there are many CATs in the pipeline.
- We also established that at least 91 of the assets mapped, own their premises either through purchase or historical ownership. A further 48 assets had a long-term lease from the LA.
- We were unable to establish tenure for 259 assets.

## f. Evolution of the Sector - Examples of What Motivates Communities to Act

As one community leader commented, *"There always has to be a trigger for a community to act"*. For them, it was the necessary closure of a community hall and the need to find a new space for community groups to convene. Some common reasons mentioned for motivating community action during our research and conversations were:



Figure 4: Drivers of community action

Talking to some of the people central to driving the development of assets forward gave us a flavour of what makes some people decide to give their personal voluntary time wholeheartedly to a venture that can often be an extremely challenging, time-consuming and stressful journey. The longer-term benefits of role-modelling positive community action for future generations is potentially relevant,

with two examples of community leaders that had grown up in an environment of community involvement.

### g. Sustainability

We were able to establish the inception year in their current manifestation for the majority of the assets (396). 22% of these assets (87) have existed for over 25 years, the highest number of all assets in operation. In fact, 64% (255) of assets we established an inception date for have existed for over 10 years, showing a strong level of sustainability within the sector.

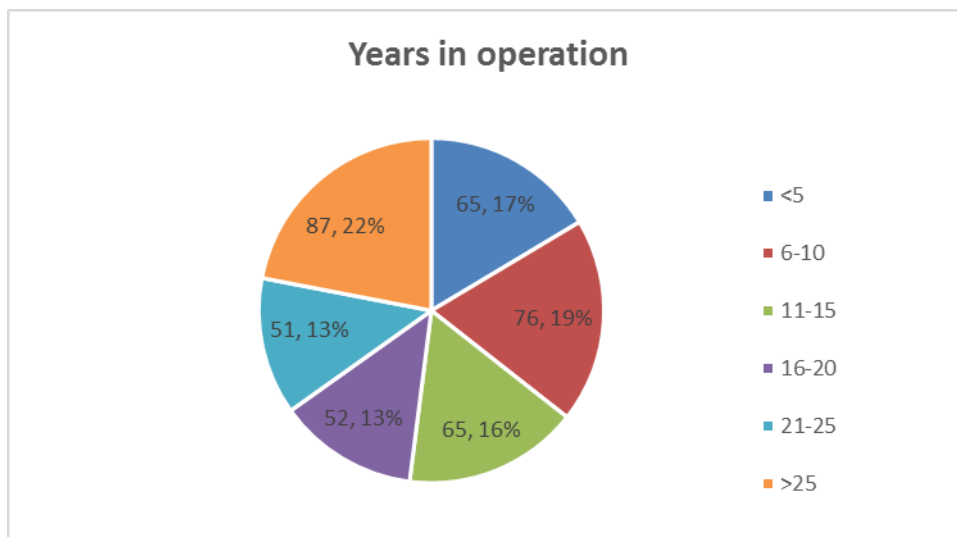


Figure 5: Length of time an asset has been in operation

40% (108) of the 270 assets where information on income was available had an income of over £100,000 a year, 5% (13) had an income between £500,000 and £1,000,000 and the same number had an income over £1,000,000.

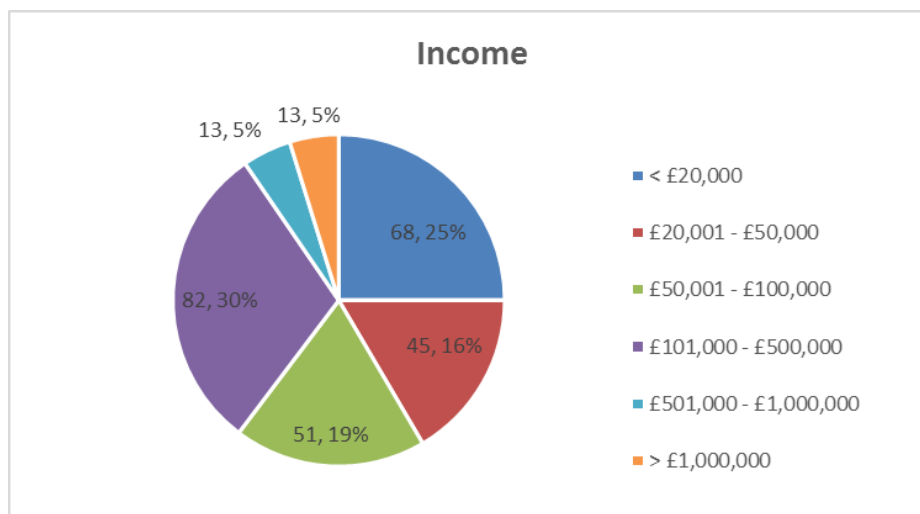


Figure 6: Asset income levels (where available)

Our research demonstrates the ability of the community sector to be resilient and resourceful when it comes to survival. Many of the assets we saw had the 'hearts and minds' of the community and with this came the ability to galvanise local support to ensure assets could continue even in difficult circumstances. In many cases, this local support seemed to provide them with strong qualities which helped them to be particularly resilient to external economic factors through adopting approaches such as slashing running costs (Gwynfi Hall, Neath Port Talbot), organising large crowdfunding campaigns (Market Hall Cinema, Brynmawr), rallying local traders to address vandalism at no cost (Erwood Pitstop, Powys) and community leaders working full-time on a voluntary basis (Maindee Unltd).

Where income levels could be established, our research revealed wide range of assets that had very low-income levels suggesting they are operated on a volunteer basis. 41% of the assets had an income of below £50,000 per annum, and 25% less than £20,000. In most of these cases the assets were entirely volunteer led, which one could argue makes them more sustainable, with no salaries to pay, and most of the maintenance being undertaken by volunteers. This has the potential to make them more resilient to economic uncertainty and minimise destabilisation due to short-term grant funding. However, it is also clear from feedback that many assets would not have been able to get started or continue operating without grant funded posts.

An example of asset taking a deliberate approach of not employing paid staff is Hubberston Community Centre, who are purposely avoiding creating any paid employment roles. Having managed to create a well-functioning and operational community hub, they do not want the complication and pressure of having to generate enough income to pay a wage. Making the building cost-neutral is a key ambition, so that it can keep itself ticking over in the long term. They, along with many other volunteer committees, want to avoid the uncertainties associated with grant applications and revenue funding streams, as well as the work involved in managing staff.

Conversely however, there can also be problems associated with reliance on volunteers, with one of our case studies, 'Cletwr' having found it necessary to have paid staff roles for the operation of their community shop and café, complemented by a rota of volunteer assistants.

## h. Trends

### **Localism and Community Action**

With what some people feel has been the decline of communities through the gradual loss of key social pillars such as banks, post offices, pubs, schools and churches, we heard stories of communities feeling forced to act.

In some cases, action had also been taken to prevent unwanted development, such as in Crickhowell, Powys, where the community came together to buy an old pub, The Corn Exchange, which was earmarked to be turned into a Tesco store. The community were passionately opposed to this development which they felt would have totally changed the feel of their beautiful and historic market town.

Once purchased on a community share basis, the building was developed into three shop units, and the organisation appears to have targeted retailers which reflect the ethos of the town itself. This includes one of the first 'zero waste' shops in the UK, Natural Weigh, which last year won the Powys

‘Start-up of the Year’ award. The initiative has had the effect of influencing the establishment of further new retailers in the town, who have been attracted by the new energy that has been created. In 2018, Crickhowell won ‘British High St. of the Year’ and was commended for its ‘community-led initiatives and strong network of independent businesses’.

Similarly, there has been a growth in the number of communities coming together to take over or re-open failing pubs and shops. We have identified 9 community pubs in Wales, and 88 cafes, 35 public toilets and 16 shops now under community ownership.

### **Community Leading the Way**

Like the example above, there are several scenarios we have seen across Wales, where community action is modelling wider regeneration within an area. This is the case in Merthyr Tydfil, where the development of ‘Canolfan Soar’ (a Welsh Language Centre and Theatre) transformed a run-down listed chapel, into a state-of-the-art facility. This project was driven by the passion of community leader Lisbeth McClean, who raised £1.4 million to fund the project. During our case study interview, Lis described how the Local Authority Regeneration Department had told her that her vision and achievement had inspired them to see what was possible, and had planted the seed of ambition to develop ‘The Red House’, a key redevelopment of an historic building in Merthyr’s town centre.

A further example is ‘Maindee Unltd’ in Newport and their contribution to the re-invigoration of the local shopping district. Through a regeneration project, they created new signage, improved parking, and took the shopping area through a re-branding exercise, with its new description of ‘Maindee Village’. With accompanying bright and colourful shopping maps helping to give the area a new energy, the area has seen an increase in the number of new retailers that have taken over previously empty shop units.

### **The Emergence of ‘Pop-Up’ services Within Community Assets**

Although we’ve not specifically mapped the incidence of temporary or pop-up services we encountered a number of mixed community use buildings where these featured strongly. The buildings were able to provide affordable space and infrastructures needed for services such as sessional post-office services, citizen’s advice bureau sessions, or credit union facilities.

Provision extends to health services such as mental health, drug support and baby clinics. These services are a vital provision within geographically isolated communities where deprivation and traditional barriers to inclusion require easy to access services, close to where people live.

An example of this is The Arts Factory, based in Ferndale, which is a community recognised as being uniquely isolated from other Rhondda settlements and for many who live there, transport to other areas is prohibitively expensive. The Arts Factory hosts additional services such as a Citizen’s Advice Bureau, drop-in and mental health recovery college courses, as well as acting as an outreach centre for a local food bank, holding food parcels and distributing vouchers on their behalf.

### **Development of Mixed-use Community Hubs**

69 (16%) assets were categorised broadly as a ‘Community Hub’ but, nearly 50% (205) included mixed-use provision amongst the services they provided and could quite easily be described as a ‘hub’.

With the Welsh Government investment into community hubs (there are 19 hubs to be opened by 2021 across Wales), there is likely to be some confusion about the status of what it means to be a community hub.

It seems critical that old and new hubs work in partnership to ensure a holistic and joined-up approach to serving the needs of local communities, especially in terms of ensuring the long terms sustainability of both. The Arts Factory in Ferndale is an established community-led hub that has faced recent destabilisation from the creation of a new Welsh Government funded hub within close proximity (their case study provides further insight into this).

### **Transition of Communities First led Projects Being Taken Over by the Community**

Although the impact of the loss of Communities First has been felt by certain community organisations, there is some evidence of organisations adapting to change and finding new ways to operate. In some cases, communities have found solutions through volunteers and applying for alternative grants to keep staff on, even if it is with reduced hours. This is the case with Penparcau Forum (Ceredigion), Abergavenny Community Enterprise (Monmouthshire) and Ty Ebbw Fach (Six Bells, Blaenau Gwent), all of whom have managed to re-incarnate themselves following the loss of their Communities First status.

### **Food Banks**

Several of the community assets we feature in case studies provided a food bank service through either the Trussell Trust or 'Fareshare' scheme, including Rumney Forum, Abergavenny Community Centre, Arts Factory and Penparcau Forum. Fareshare Cymru, the distributor of donated food in Wales, provided food supplies to 319 community groups in Wales last year. But we know from research that there are many more informal food distribution schemes run by a wide range of community organisations across Wales, not registered anywhere, such as 'The Bridge Centre' In Bridgend, and the Bethel Trust in Neath Port Talbot. These are all run by public donations and volunteers. There are 111 Trussell Trust food banks across Wales, many of which are based within community assets.

### **Variation in Sectoral Support**

Some groups commented on what they felt to have been the reduction of capacity and support from CVCs. The loss of support offered by the Communities First had also been felt by one particular case study. They commented on how Communities First staff had helped to make connections between local community groups in a way that doesn't happen so much now.

Some leaders said that without CVC support in the early stages they would not have been able to get things up and running, or that it would have taken much longer. The professional support, advice and help with aspects such as governance, funding and community networking are viewed by many as critically important.

There was some variation however in the perceived effectiveness of CVCs across Wales amongst our case studies, usually being praised by local groups, but there were a small number of cases where support was reported as having been patchy and ineffective.

Local knowledge, experience and connectedness are key CVC characteristics that communities appear to be looking for in support staff, but most importantly the support needs to be 'hands on' and tangible.

Business Support and the support from the Wales Cooperative Centre, Development Trust Association and Coalfields Regeneration Trust had generally been well received where it was mentioned, particularly where they were able to provide early professional advice and support. One person we spoke to told us how *"The Wales Cooperative Centre and DTA Wales were there at the outset, helping*



*us set up the company and through Lottery support. Both were extremely helpful, guiding us through the hoops and offering good experience of other projects, to ensure we made no simple errors”*

Help from national support agencies had been received by organisations that feature in our selection of case studies. For instance, Denise Chadwick, Manager of Plas Madoc Leisure Centre in Wrexham, informed us that they had received *“plenty of help from the Wales Co-op, they have helped with updating policies, contracts, providing specialist support to assist with our business plan, sharing lots of useful information with us and pointing us in the right direction for funding. The Building Communities Trust also supported us with our replacement boilers”*

Another case study respondent referred to the useful learning they had accessed in the early stages of developing their community asset and mentioned how resources available on the websites of the Wales Cooperative Centre and Development Trust Association had been helpful.

## i. Community Impact

### **Saving our Heritage**

The preservation, resurrection and enhancement of assets which were due for closure or dereliction, came across as an important role for the community.

53 (12%) of the community assets we looked at were classed as industrial heritage buildings, and that excludes other examples of historic buildings such as schools, libraries, arts centres, and even community centres, that were built as memorial halls.

Green spaces are also key examples of assets being retained for future generations by community groups.

All buildings have their own life cycles and peaks and troughs of activity over time, and for some there will be a natural lull in their operation as committee members decline or running costs are deemed to be unsustainable. Sometimes there are examples of poor management where buildings have been left to deteriorate and can no longer attract users.

There are many good examples we came across of communities which have breathed new life into an old building, transforming it into an asset relevant to its modern-day audience. This is certainly the case with Market Hall Cinema (Brynmawr), Insole Court (Cardiff), Abergavenny Community Centre and Hubberston Community Centre (Pembrokeshire) to name a few.

Not only have buildings been saved, but in some cases communities have had ambitious vision and passion that they have gone far beyond just saving a building from closure, and transformed them into key focal points of population centres across Wales. This has been the case for the Corn Exchange project in South Powys, and Theatre Soar, Merthyr, which transformed the run down, listed building that was Soar Chapel, bringing in 1.4 million of investment to develop it into a state-of-the-art centre. Schemes like Open Newtown and Porthcawl Harbour Quarter, are both examples of community-led action leading to wider regeneration. Open Newtown for instance have secured £1.5 million to develop a recreational riverside hub that aims to open up new access to cycling and canoeing opportunities in Newtown as well home a new tourist information facility.

This demonstrates that often communities and community leaders can bring creativity, passion and vision to the development of assets, and that ideas often take root at a community rather than statutory level.

We saw examples where the re-purposing, upgrading and modernisation of community assets was made possible through community ownership, with the capacity of community groups, not only to fundraise and bring in large amounts of grant funding, but also to undertake improvements on a financially neutral basis through volunteer time, 'in-kind' and pro-bono' from a variety of sources.

### **Building Skills and Capacity through Volunteering**

Volunteering was found to be the backbone of nearly all the community assets that we investigated, with many being entirely volunteer led. An estimated 28% of the population in Wales undertake some form of volunteering<sup>3</sup>.

We were able to establish volunteer figures from the Charity Commission website for 144 (53%) of the 272 community assets registered as charities, equating to a total of around 4,300 volunteers, an average of 30 volunteers per asset. We were unable to establish figures for the remaining assets and therefore the total number across all assets will be far higher.

The community sector is synonymous with volunteering. Community assets rely heavily on volunteers in nearly all cases to operate and function, but it is a symbiotic relationship. There are many examples of volunteers whose lives have been positively transformed from volunteering.

Beth Watkins, Chair of Market Hall Cinema, describes how, when the cinema opened, it attracted some key volunteers, two of whom had a passionate interest in the technical aspects of projection and sound, and have been key in helping the cinema to run. Both volunteers have now become paid employees, and the cinema continues to attract a range of volunteers, some who have additional learning needs. Additionally, both part-time duty managers started off as volunteers, and this transition from volunteer to employee is a common feature of the sector.

For older or retired people, volunteering offers an opportunity for people to participate and 'give back' to their communities, bringing invaluable years of skill and experience and often utilising them in a new context. This was mentioned by one of our case study participants, Cletwr.

The positive aspects of volunteering should also be balanced, however, with the work involved in volunteer management and the potential risks in relation to difficulties around recruitment and retention of volunteers. It can also be difficult to find volunteers who are willing or able to take on any responsibility, which can then result in the same small handful of people being relied upon, which can be difficult for those individuals. This experience came out in several of the case studies we undertook.

### **The Creation of Paid Employment Opportunities**

We identified delivering training and employment as a key service in 79 (18%) of the assets, and with most of the 205 mixed-use community facilities offering informal training and adult education classes, the sector is a significant provider of alternative, non-mainstream training opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wcva.cymru/the-voluntary-sector-in-wales](http://www.wcva.cymru/the-voluntary-sector-in-wales)

We came across examples where volunteers had developed their skills and confidence within a community asset and moved on to permanent paid employment, such as in the case of the Market Hall Cinema.

Due to their integration into local communities, community assets can be well-positioned to engage people from a variety of backgrounds and may traditionally have faced barriers to training and education (Penllergare Woods as an example, supports over 100 volunteers, including those most likely to be socially excluded, including people with learning difficulties, the homeless, ethnic minorities and some of the most vulnerable in society). This links back to the ‘cross-fertilisation’ aspects previously mentioned, where people may access a community venue for one thing, and whilst there, learn about a volunteering opportunity, class or course that they could access. Two of our case study interviewees mentioned that because people already feel comfortable in the asset space, they are far more likely to engage, than have to deal with the intimidation of accessing a more formal provision.

### **Developing Foundational Economies**

The foundational economy is built from the activities which provide the essential goods and services for everyday life. Examples of the foundational economy are:

- care and health services
- food
- housing
- energy
- construction
- tourism
- retailers on the high street.

As expressed by the Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change’s (CRESC) ‘Manifesto for the Foundational Economy’<sup>4</sup>, in many areas of former heavy industry throughout Europe the foundational economy is ‘all that is left’. It is thus vital for many people in Wales, not only to provide the goods and services they need but also as an employer. With 37.8% of employment in Wales falling within this sector, it is seen as a more resilient part of the economy as it is static and not so affected by external markets (such as in the case of manufacturing).<sup>5</sup>

Our study found that community-led assets often provide local amenities that enhance the economic and social experiences of communities and are cornerstones of the local foundational economy.

With societal and economic changes resulting in the decline in local amenities such as pubs, post offices, banks, and small retailers, there are numerous examples of community-led solutions to the loss of these traditional cornerstones of the social and commercial lives of localities.

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<sup>4</sup> CRESC Research Unit, University of Manchester

<sup>5</sup> [www.seneddresearch.blo](http://www.seneddresearch.blo)

Our study identified 641 services contributing to the foundational economy. It should be noted that the asset map of 438 entries includes many examples which provide more than one type of service. The breakdown of amenities which might be considered part of the foundational economy is as follows:

Housing scheme	5
Swimming pool	10
Public toilet	11
Recycling	16
Energy	18
Social care	24
Library	25
Youth facility	26
Regeneration	26
Museum	30
Pub	34
Childcare	37
Sports club	44
Shop	44
Tourist facility	47
Training and employment	79
Art gallery/ arts centre	81
Café	84

*Figure 7: Breakdown of services*

The Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) reported that the number of small pubs in the UK halved between 2001 and 2018 and, similarly, numbers of post offices have halved over the last 30 years<sup>6</sup>. There are however some successful community-led examples emerging such as the Iorweth Arms (Anglesey) and the Tafarn Sinc (Pembrokeshire), with other groups following the example, such as the White Hart Inn (Pembrokeshire).

Our research found examples of 45 community shops in Wales, the majority of which can be found in rural areas, and which have been a response to local shop closures. Siop Cletwr is an example of a thriving grocery store in Ceredigion and features as one of the case studies selected for the study, and there are many more good examples across Wales.

The Rural Shop Report<sup>7</sup>, 2018, stated that there were 348 community shops in the UK, and that they have a 95% success rate (as compared to a 41% average for small retailers generally). Additionally, 95% of community shops stock local produce and goods, and 59% run a post office provision.

Not only are these assets serving the local community but additionally helping to sustain tourism particularly in the case of maintaining public toilets in areas that are on tourism maps.

<sup>6</sup> The Guardian, Angela Monaghan, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2019

<sup>7</sup> The Rural Shop Report 2018, Association of Community Stores

### **Erwood Pit Stop - community managed public toilets, Powys**

*The video below is a case study that was produced by Powys Association of Voluntary action about 'Erwood Pit Stop' - a community owned and managed public toilet facility that locals didn't want to lose.*

*The community convened to form a committee, and now volunteers clean the toilets three times a week on rotation. They are open permanently and are an important community amenity and key rest point for tourists in the area. Operating on an honesty box system, the committee say that people are very generous as they know the toilets are community run, often contributing bank notes rather than loose change, and sometimes putting in 'thank you' notes too! When the committee had an early setback from the toilets being vandalised, the community quickly rallied with local tradespeople stepping in to repair the damage. The committee said that it is important to 'have a go' and see what happens and they are now proud of the facility that is helping support tourism within the region and serving the local community.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTjEdwCXE2w>

Figure 8: Erwood Pitstop Case Study

### **Tourism**

We identified 47 assets (11%) which could be described as specific tourism facilities. However, there is subjectivity in deciding what assets boost tourism in an area and taking a wider view it could be argued that in total 204 assets (46%) contributed to strengthening tourism in their localities, such as pubs, shops, swimming pools, parks, woodlands and even public toilets within tourism areas.

Some examples we came across include

- The Millennium Bunk House, Lawrenny, Pembrokeshire - a local village converted its disused schoolhouse into a bunkhouse to boost local tourism.
- The Heart of Wales Line - an organisation established to promote the Heart of Wales train line and have also taken over a station house (Llandovery Train Station) that runs a community café.
- The Cliff Top Railway, Aberystwyth- a funicular railway dating from 1896.
- Welsh Mountain Zoo, Conwy, which became a charitable trust in 1983.
- Myddfai Visitor Centre Carmarthenshire - built in 2011 with Big Lottery Village SOS Funding, Myddfai provides an information centre and facilities to help promote local tourism.
- An example of a green space which has become a significant tourist attraction is Penllergare Valley Woods. This is a community managed major tourism, recreational, heritage and wildlife site that welcomes over 120,000 visitors from all over the UK every year. It covers 260 acres of land that provide a vital green lung to the north of Swansea, surrounded as it is by motorway, housing developments and other concrete structures.

### **Leisure**

With 44 sports clubs mapped (included as they have wider community use) and 10 community run pools / leisure centres, this is a sector which is thriving under community ownership.

*Plas Madoc Leisure Centre (Wrexham), is an example of an asset which was deemed by the local authority to be unsustainable but was turned around after it came under the ownership of the*

community. With over 850 local members and employing 44 people, the leisure centre is one of the biggest local employers in the area and attracts thousands of visitors each year.

### **Arts, Culture and Heritage**

With 81 assets within this category (18%), it is one of the major areas supported by the community-led organisations. An increasing number of theatres are transferring into the hands of community groups, and this appears to be one of the sectors which has more traditionally sat within the community sector. Within this group also sit museums, of which we have identified 30 (7%).

There are also a range of community arts provisions, dance centres and art resource centres across the country which are helping to bring high quality arts provisions into community settings which are particularly valuable within rural areas that often are more poorly served in this respect.

The cultural enrichment that the community sector is providing, is filling a gap that once may have been offered by local authority and government initiatives.

Likewise, there are examples of small heritage themed museums such as the Newtown Textile Museum in Powys, which add depth and interest to the tourism industry in Wales and help strengthen the cultural identity of Wales.

### **Contribution to the Welsh Economy and Wellbeing**

While quantifying the contribution community assets make to the Welsh economy was beyond the scope of the project, the findings provide an indication of the range of ways that they contribute to improving the economic circumstances in their area. There are also additional benefits through improving the health and wellbeing among the local population and attracting income through tourism and other visitors.

There is a wide range of levels of benefits which might accrue from the identified assets, depending on the type and size of asset and the level of investment. This would range from potential extra footfall from tourists and visitors through small, single function assets such as public toilets, through to large regeneration projects, such as the development of Porthcawl Harbour. This project has the aim of creating a significant number of new jobs and a marked increase in visitors to the town.

As highlighted earlier, an average of around 30 volunteers work at each asset and this provides good opportunities for local people to develop skills and get engaged in their local community. The importance of volunteers in the Welsh economy is clear with the WCVA estimating, for 2015, that a value of approximately £757 million pounds was generated by volunteers in that year. Throughout the sector we have seen many examples of people starting as volunteers with no experience, confidence or skills, who end up eventually transitioning into paid employment through the volunteer route. In many cases this provided opportunities for those furthest away from the labour market to encourage people who had little self-confidence, low or no educational attainment, and multiple barriers to employment, to access education or training.

We saw cases where funders appeared to like the passion and commitment of community-led endeavours and this can potentially give a competitive advantage to funding applications. Lisbeth Mclean, Director of Canolfan a Theatr Soar (Merthyr Tydfil), talked about how their fundraising campaign to raise £1.4 million had become surprisingly straightforward, with 11 out of 13 funding applications being successful – she attributes this to the strong thread of community-led development that ran through the organisation right from the start.

Community assets have an important role to play in reducing social isolation. Many of the assets created peer support networks within communities, an essential part of enabling those who are elderly, vulnerable, lonely or facing health issues, to maintain better health and well-being. It is notoriously hard to encourage people who have little self-confidence, low or no educational attainment, and multiple barriers to employment, to access education or training. Yet, arguably, the community sector is in a strong position to build relationships in communities to help break down those barriers.

Priority 2 of Welsh Government's 'Connected Communities' Strategy<sup>8</sup>, to tackle loneliness and Isolation, specifically highlights the aim of "Supporting the implementation of place making and the creation of sustainable places that build people's social connections."

Tackling loneliness is an important contribution to the economy. A report by the 'Big Lunch' argues that when people feel connected and happy, they are 12% more productive and that this equates to an £18 million contribution to the economy in the UK.

#### **Economic Impact of Canolfan Soar**

*"The development of Canolfan Soar has had a strong impact on the local economy of Merthyr Tydfil. The Centre generated **£594,100 – £608,537** for the local economy in 2014 while the total economic impact generated by Canolfan Soar within the South Wales economy is estimated to be **£1.29 – £1.3 million**.*

*Canolfan Soar has generated a positive return on revenue and project grant funding investments received. The **£173,000** received by Canolfan Soar in the form of grants generates a gross economic impact of **£323,310 – £331,170** within Merthyr Tydfil and **£707, 470 – £709,810** across south Wales."<sup>9</sup>*

#### **Creating Stronger Communities**

The **Early Action Task Force** is a group of leaders from the private, voluntary, public and academia sectors, working to build a society that prevents problems from occurring, and argues that "strong communities are harder to create without physical places to meet, interact and have fun. Without local facilities, people face travel and cost barriers, and poorly maintained facilities can quickly become unwelcoming."<sup>10</sup>

Many of the assets we identified could be seen to be important in providing that benefit, creating more attractive and safe communities and developing a sense of community pride so that less vandalism and anti-social behaviour occurs around the community asset. As an example, Penllergare Woods had previously been a magnet for joyriders and 30 burnt out cars were found on the site when they first took it over - this has now been hugely reduced as a result of the development. We saw a number of cases which were inspiring future generations of young people to become involved in their community and where natural intergenerational experiences were taking place. Three of the community organisations we worked with to produce the case studies, reported that intergenerational relationships were a natural outcome of the community provision (Anglesey Hubs, Cletwr and Abergavenny Community Centre), helping to tackle mutual stigma on both sides.

<sup>8</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-02/connected-communities-strategy-document.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Evaluation of the Economic and Cultural Impact of Canolfan Soar, Arad Consulting, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Bringing People Together, How community action can tackle loneliness and social isolation, The National Lottery Fund, 2019

## Impact statement - specific case example (Anglesey Community Hubs<sup>11</sup>)

<b>Who was the beneficiary in this example?</b>	<p>Mr G is a socially isolated 57-year-old man, with debilitating health issues.</p>
<b>What was the specific issue/problem you were trying to solve in this case?</b>	<p>Mr G was originally referred to the Local Asset Coordination (LAC) project as he had been identified as socially isolated. Mr G disclosed that he had recently moved to the area to recover from heart surgery. He lived alone and spent most of his day on his own at home. He had no support network. He was medicated for anxiety and depression but refused to engage with any talking therapy offered by the GP.</p>
<b>How did they become part of this project/service?</b>	<p>Mr G was referred to the local asset coordination project by adult social services via Community Link.</p>
<b>How did the project/service make a difference? <i>What were the steps/activities that were undertaken?</i></b>	<p>LAC had a conversation with Mr G in the local hub to identify what mattered to him. He stated that the days were long and that it was having an impact on his mental health. LAC and Mr G identified his interests and discussed community groups in the area. He agreed to join LAC in community groups. During the first contact with a group Mr G sat at the back and did not engage with anybody. LAC encouraged Mr G to keep attending and that LAC would continue to attend with him until he felt confident to attend alone. Over the next few weeks Mr G's confidence increased, and he was engaging more within the groups. Mr G took his motorbike test.</p>
<b>What outcomes/changes were achieved?</b> <i>What was the outcome for the service user? What difference did the interventions make?</i>	<p>To present day Mr G's confidence continues to grow. Being connected to the hub has increased Mr G's social network, he reports that his anxiety levels have dropped considerably, and his overall wellbeing has increased. Mr G is a vital part to the running of the local hub. He opens the hub and prepares the room ready for the groups, cleans and secures the hub at the end of the day. Mr G has taken on the role of a key member in his community around the hub, he keeps in contact with the elderly and disabled members and assures that they are ok and connected. Mr G has made garden benches for members in the estate around the hub, so members can sit outside their homes to interact. Mr G has increased his IT skills and is now connected with family and friends via the internet. Mr G now owns a motorbike and is not reliant on buses to mobilise. Mr G has taken on an allotment with one of the people he met in the hub.</p>
<b>Quotes/Feedback</b> <i>Please provide a direct quote from the service user. What did they say about the service received and the difference this has made to them?</i>	<p>"This project is great, gave me the confidence to join in, which I would never have done". "Being part of the community has made a big difference in my life I am never home now, and I have made lots of new friends".</p>
<b>Next steps – how do you intend to develop this further?</b>	<p>Mr G has stated that he does not require any further LAC intervention but stays in contact with LAC through the community hub.</p>

<sup>11</sup> With permission granted from Medrwn Mon



Figure 9: Case Study from Anglesey Hubs

Although the case study provided involves intervention by funded staff (local asset co-ordinators funded by Isle of Anglesey County Council and employed by Medrwn Mon, the island's CVC) it illustrates the ripple effect on both individuals and communities that connection to a physical community asset can effect. The example given shows how 'Mr. G's' mental and physical health has improved, and how he is no longer socially isolated, whilst also providing support to other vulnerable members of the community. He has used his own skills to improve the area around the asset, by creating wooden benches for people to sit outside and relax, adding appeal to the area and to the hub - it is likely therefore that more people will be attracted to using it. He has set up his own allotment through a connection he made through the hub. He is also providing a vital role in maintaining the hub itself, no doubt making it more inviting and welcoming to its users. He has learnt to use a computer through the hub and has far greater access to information but also another means of communication with the outside world.

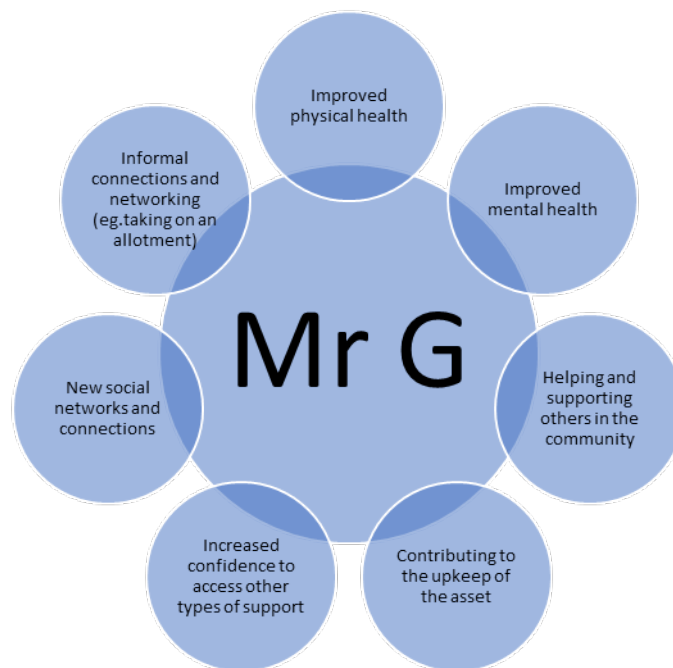


Figure 10: The ripple effect of an individual engaging

## j. Community Experiences of Community Asset Transfer

Although we were unable to establish the tenure of many community assets due to lack of available data, there were indicators of where community asset transfer is more prevalent than elsewhere, with Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot having all pressed forward with transferral of a range of community assets such as halls and sports clubs . However, our only real indicator in relation to the progress made by each authority area came from incidental findings through conversations with CVC staff, and any deeper analysis would require dedicated research.

Case study interviewees identified a number of key barriers to community asset transfers proceeding:

- The market value of the asset
- Lack of capacity within local authorities to deal with the complexities of asset transfer
- Political opposition
- Lack of willingness and trust between a local authority and community groups
- Lack of confidence, skills and availability of community members to take on the running of an asset
- Lack of professional support to help upskill communities to develop business planning and funding applications
- Dependency on external funding needed to support the development of an asset

## k. Key Challenges Faced by the Sector

### **Skills Deficit**

Through the case studies we heard of the importance of those involved in the running and development of community assets having the necessary skills. Often community-led committees lacked the experience, capacity and skills to be able to deal with issues such as professional and legal requirements, funding, governance and asset management, which can cause problems when the realities of building ownership hit. Having the business and fundraising skills to make an asset sustainable in the longer-term is a key success feature yet some organisations say they struggle with making funding applications and do not know if they will still be open in 6 months-time.

In some cases, support agencies have been able to help ‘plug gaps’ in knowledge and this has been welcomed by groups. One explained how the Coalfields Regeneration Trust had helped bring in specialists to assist with essential health and safety surveys.

*“We have received fantastic support from the Coalfields Regeneration who have provided funding support for consultants to carry out detailed reports that have included a very comprehensive Asbestos Survey, Health and Safety Survey and investigation works to find the cause of flooding that damaged our gymnasium”.*

## **Management Challenges**

The case studies also identified challenges in ensuring that assets were effectively managed as follows:

- Within community-led organisations, it is often a small handful or even one person who end up with responsibility. Without the benefit of wider support systems, processes, and procedures that being part of a larger organisation would provide, individuals can become overly relied upon or burdened.
- Succession of community trustees and ageing committees - some report concern about a lack of younger people coming through who want to take on leadership roles and responsibilities.
- It is also sometimes the case that founder members find it hard to hand the reins over, having been at the helm for so long. There are many examples of where communities have successfully engaged with young people and this is particularly so where organisations are running youth activities (such as a youth club).
- A handful of committed individuals who are ubiquitous, in terms of holding multiple trusteeships within a locality - the same people always being relied upon to take responsibility. Additionally, many volunteers want to help but limit their support to practical day-to-day tasks rather than being willing or able to take a more strategic role.

## **Community Asset Transfer**

According to Natalie Sargent, Community Asset Transfer Development Officer at the Coalfields Regeneration Trust Cymru, community asset transfer is often “fraught with difficulties often on both sides”. A clear finding based on her experience of working directly with groups is that if more was done at the outset (such as a memorandum of understanding) to agree between both parties what was expected, with an indication of timescales, then the process would be a lot more positive. It would also help to ensure it is a partnership rather than the transferring body dictating the process and requirements.

Some organisations we spoke to felt that once an asset transfer had occurred, they were left to their own devices and it would have been helpful to have an ongoing dialogue, someone they could speak to, who would listen, support and show an interest. In particular, they highlighted the need for support on aspects such as legal, HR, and health safety, given the complexity of community asset transfer.

The lack of ongoing support from local authorities could partially be attributed to recent cost-cutting exercises. In one instance, we spoke to someone who had been waiting for months for a survey result from the local authority to progress a community asset transfer. This was holding up their ability to apply for a grant that was needed for the transfer to take place. This was apparently due to a staff member who had been dedicated to supporting community asset transfers no longer being in place as the funding for their post had expired after one year.

In some cases, we heard that local authorities have unrealistic expectations of community groups and committees after transferring assets, such as requiring onerous monitoring reports on, for example, numbers of visitors to the building.

## **Sectoral Support**

There were several examples where CVCs were mentioned as offering critical support to community groups at the early stages of their development, such as in the case of Gwynfi Hall in Neath Port Talbot and Hubberston and Hakin Community Centre in Pembrokeshire, amongst others.

That said, the feedback we received indicates that local support from CVCs has reduced in recent times (due to cuts in their staffing) and there is a fear amongst some community members that this will hinder future community asset development. In some cases, the gaps in local support provision for community groups at important stages of their development hindered progress.

One group commented that there always seemed to be 'lots of note-taking' but without any outcome. This is particularly unwelcome for people who are volunteering and whose time is precious. Some volunteer leaders reported that they are now selective about what support they take-up because of bad experiences.

## **Sustainability Issues**

We saw many assets which were old, large and poorly insulated buildings, potentially leading to large ongoing maintenance costs, particularly as most community asset transfers and long-term leases are based on 'full repair', meaning they are liable for any repairs and maintenance. Communities have often inherited antiquated heating systems that are extremely expensive to run and need to consider additional initial costs to put in more cost effective and efficient heating systems in order to reduce costs in the long-term.

We heard of the additional challenges of maintaining and driving forward an asset within an area of multiple deprivation where many local people live on low incomes. This is the case for Arts Factory, Ferndale that runs two Social Enterprises that cannot rely upon the local population for their custom. Similarly, Gwynfi Hall in the Afan Valley, has a very active but small local community in a deprived area. Creating income sources within such economically deprived communities with the associated problems of securing public donations and fundraising is an additional financial pressure that can contribute to the demise of locally run assets.

More deprived areas also reported the additional challenges encountered due to the generally lower levels of education, confidence and aspiration experienced by local people. This can result in a smaller pool of people with the professional skills and motivation to become involved in community leadership roles and is a common problem for committees unable to identify people in their community to act in key roles such as chair, treasurer or secretary.

## I. Critical Success Factors

Our discussions in developing the case studies and mapping identified the following as some of the critical success factors needed for developing and sustaining an asset:

**Leadership** - Having strong leadership is key and having a committee or board with the right skill sets.

**Debate is healthy** – One case study interviewee told us it was important to accept that there will be disagreements amongst committee members but ‘like a marriage’ there will always be ups and downs. Disagreement and debate can often lead to better decisions and outcomes.

**Bottom-up development** - Ensuring a ‘bottom-up’ approach to community development is really important to ensure that the community asset is responding directly to community priorities and needs - vital for ensuring that services will be relevant but also as a process of relationship building.

**Valuing volunteers** - Taking care of volunteers and making sure they are supported, valued and fulfilled.

**Meaningful community engagement** - Knowing how to talk to and work with community members is also vital. Holding conversations where people are truly listened to and are supported to contribute and participate leads to stronger ongoing engagement. Showing the community that you listened and then acted, really helps to build community involvement and strengthen the commitment of the community to the asset.

**Organisational Skills** - Being organised and professional is important.

**Running a Tight Ship** - Making sure that operations are run tightly and efficiently is vital - expenditure should be constantly reviewed to see where savings can be made.

**Taking a Business-like Approach** - the financial model must work in order to carry out the community aim.

**Building Connections and Relationships** - Partnership working and making connections with other groups brings strength, particularly where an asset is dependent on building footfall. Cross-fertilisation of activities in a building brings opportunities and innovations and creates a positive energy as well as strengthening income.

**Having a Strategic Presence** - Having political allies is important and making sure that you have ‘a seat at the table’ to ensure you are part of discussions is extremely advantageous.

**Having a Clear and Coherent Vision** - Having a clear vision and simple message of what you are trying to achieve is important. Sticking to your goal and vision at all times will help it to become a reality.

**Determination** - You need dogged determination and to be able to pick yourself up after knock-backs and remind yourself of your focus and goal.

**Learning from Others** - Learning from others at an early stage is really helpful - it can inspire you and show you what can be achieved.

**Access Available Support Where Appropriate** - Having help from CVCs and other support agencies can be hugely helpful, particularly with aspects such as business planning, as well as making connections with other community organisations and groups.

**Do not Under-estimate What People are Capable of** - Recognise people's strengths as you never know what experiences, backgrounds of contribution some can make, whatever first appearances may indicate.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Generally, the research has uncovered a range of inspiring and innovative community organisations that are helping to lead the way in shaping the communities of the future.

However, we saw that community groups often face many challenges relating to the operation, maintenance and sustainability of assets that can quickly become demanding of time, energy and resource. The community leaders in our case studies often showed a certain kind of resilience and determination to take on the work of developing and maintain an asset.

It certainly seems true that buildings and physical assets can play important roles in bringing people together - they are often the one immovable and unchanging feature in communities across Wales, such as where they may have existed for over 100 years or more, and have been the backdrop to generations of births, weddings, funerals and celebrations.

'Places' that have the ability to bring people together can become the central focal points of communities, and help to improve and enrich the quality of life for those living there. This is reflected within a recent report published by 'Local Trust' a national charity focused on supporting residents in communities to develop their own solutions to local issues and problems. Written and researched by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (a spin-off of Oxford University) the report '*Left Behind? Understanding Communities on the edge*<sup>12</sup>', finds that "multiply deprived areas, when combined with the absence of places to meet, the lack of an engaged community and poor connectivity, fare much worse than other deprived areas."

Historical buildings, in particular, seemed to often have their own unique power to elicit devotion and extraordinary levels of commitment from the people that have grown up around them. The report '*Heritage Works, The use of historic buildings in regeneration*' published by the British Property Foundation, argues that "heritage is what people value. Heritage assets matter to communities and may form part of their identity, whether large or small, urban or rural."<sup>13</sup>

We have come across examples of buildings that the community feel have a special atmosphere or feeling when you walk into them that can make people feel safe, happy, relaxed or inspired. The Market Hall Cinema in Brynmawr (Blaenau Gwent), is a particularly good example of this, being referred to as the 'Grand Old Lady of Brynmawr'. The cinema has drawn a small but essential band of loyal volunteers creating a 'family-like' atmosphere which has contributed to its success.

The ability of a place to make someone feel comfortable and connected can help to reduce loneliness and isolation in our communities. Community buildings and the people that commune around them, can create a sense of familiarity and friendliness that makes individuals feel safe and want to return to. This potentially means they are more likely to join in with things that are going on in their community whether that be social activities, education or volunteering. The prevalence and success of community hubs and other mixed-use community spaces could be a reflection of the cross-fertilisation that occurs within community assets as a result of diverse groups, interests, ideas, partnerships and cultures coming together under one roof.

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<sup>12</sup> *Left Behind? Understanding Communities on the edge*, written by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, published by Local Trust, 2019

<sup>13</sup> *Heritage Works, The use of historic buildings in regeneration*, The British Property Foundation, 2015

Where new initiatives have been sparked, community action has the ability to create new energy and dynamism, such as Open Newtown, which appears to have created a sense of ambition and vitality to Newtown itself.

Although we have not been able to establish the tenure of many of the assets (this is not widely published and further investigation would require more capacity and time than we had available), there are indications that local authorities are at different stages of the journey in terms of their progress towards community asset transfer.

Some contributors to the case studies questioned whether the process should be easy as due process is needed to ensure that an asset transfer is fully thought through.

The length of time that it can take for a community asset transfer to complete has been a problem for some groups, when long delays have jeopardised funding applications for example. A practical suggestion mentioned earlier in this report, to create a memorandum of understanding between the partners of an asset transfer, that could help to set out expectations and time frames, may help to make the process smoother.

This may help to prepare groups from the outset about the type of work that will need to be undertaken such as producing 5-year business plans, community consultations and undertaking ongoing monitoring exercises that can prove to be overwhelming to often inexperienced groups of volunteers.

Organisations that provide specialist business development support like Wales Cooperative Centre, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and DTA seem key in providing the help that groups need to build their capacity and confidence to keep their momentum going through the process, whilst CVCs are well placed to make connections at a local level and provide ongoing support.

### **Ideas for Further Research and Development**

- Creation of an interactive live map of community assets across Wales that could be updated either by staff or by the organisations themselves would help ensure that information is up to date and comprehensive.
- The creation of a member-led community network to help share ideas and resources. This could be an online virtual network to encourage participation and overcome geographical separation. The network could be a place for information sharing and peer support, with the potential for masterclasses, training and small conferences to emerge, or even funding partnerships to develop. It could also act a united voice for the sector.
- There is the potential to drill down further into one or more local authority areas to map the community sector in more depth (covering the assets which we left out of this study). This would create a more scientific approach to measuring the size and impact of the sector and help to put an economic value on its contribution. Using extrapolation, this could potentially be used to estimate the size and value of the sector across the whole of the country. Agreeing a precise definition of what constitutes a 'community asset' for across a wide range of parties would need to be a key part of the work to ensure that it is on a strong basis and of wide use.
- The development of visual case studies and maps to illustrate in a user-friendly way the impact of a community 'intervention' in someone's life would highlight further the important contribution of community assets.