



Mapping Community Assets in Wales

A Summary

About the Research

This is a summary of a report commissioned by Building Communities Trust (in partnership with Wales Council for Voluntary Action, Wales Co-operative Centre, DTA Wales and Coalfields Regeneration Trust). It reflects emerging themes and findings connected to mapping of community assets across Wales and associated case studies.

This work was aimed at 'painting a picture' of community-owned and community-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 study was commissioned prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, so 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. 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.

Introduction

In the last few years there has been a growing discussion about the importance of social infrastructure – 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 communities in Wales, who consistently place a high value on accessible local social infrastructure. And this is demonstrated amply by the efforts local people make to develop, support and run their own social infrastructure.

This report shows hundreds of key local community assets are run by voluntary organisations across Wales, covering a huge variety of activities from tourism, to sport and leisure, shops and social centres. 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.

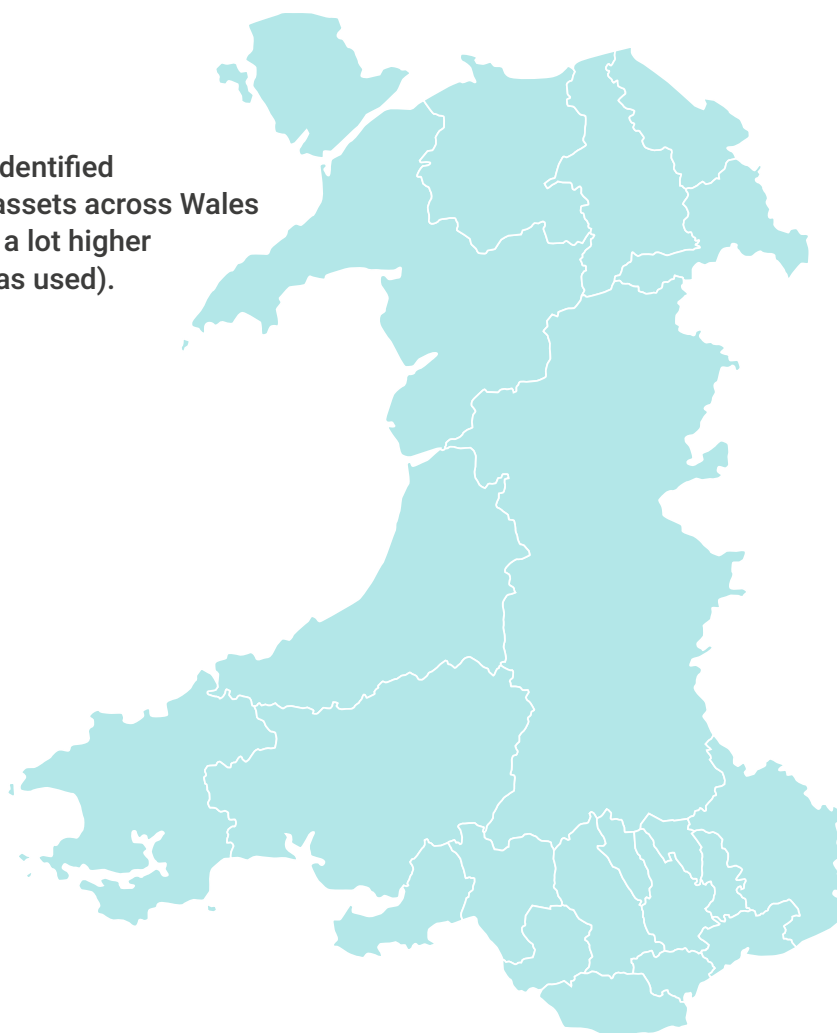
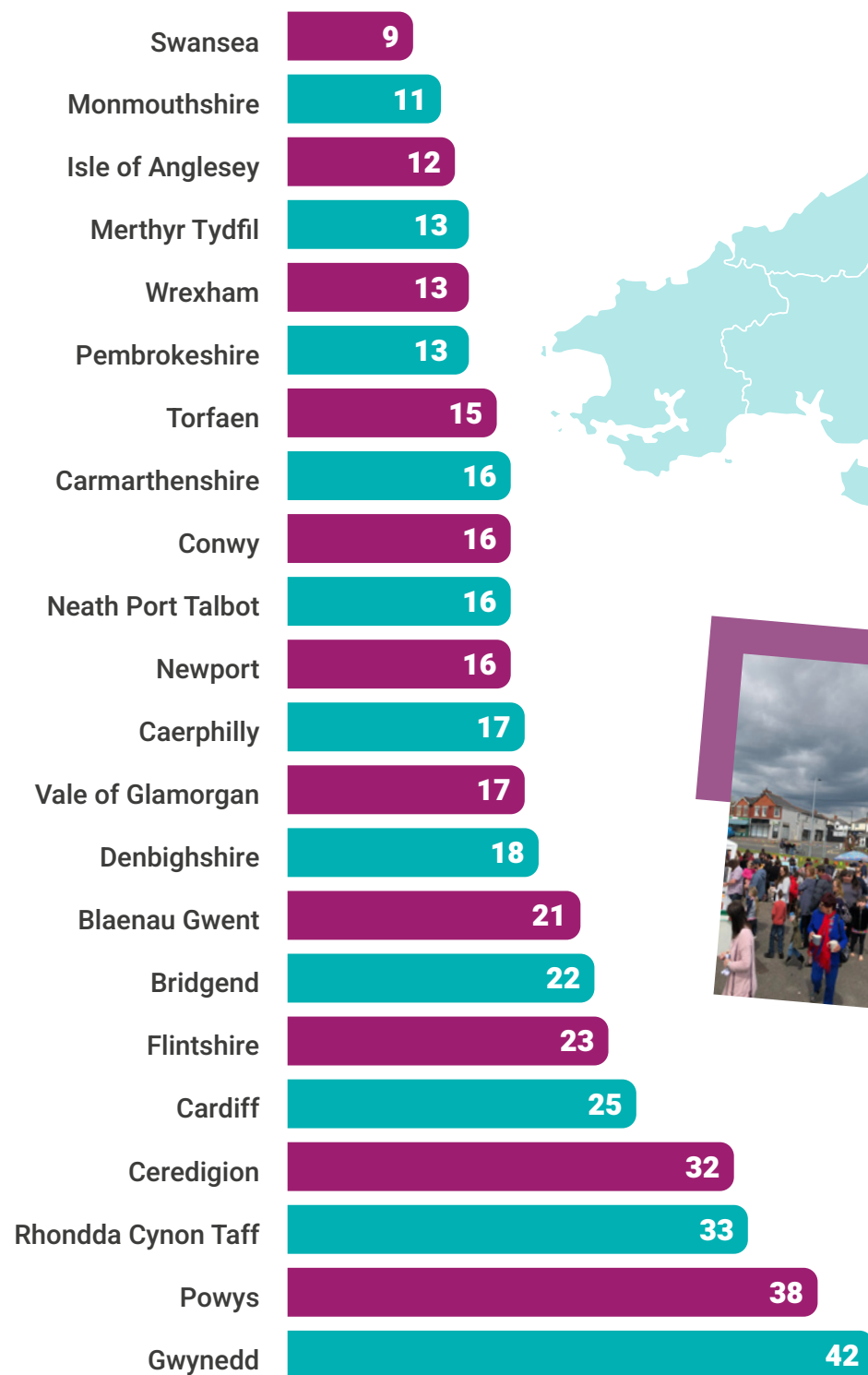
To see a full version of the report, detailed case studies and an interactive map of community assets in Wales visit:
www.bct.wales/mapping-community-assets-in-wales/



What We Identified

Within the definition used for the study we identified 438 examples of community-led or owned assets across Wales (although we know that the figure would be a lot higher if a wider definition of community assets was used).

Where are the community assets?

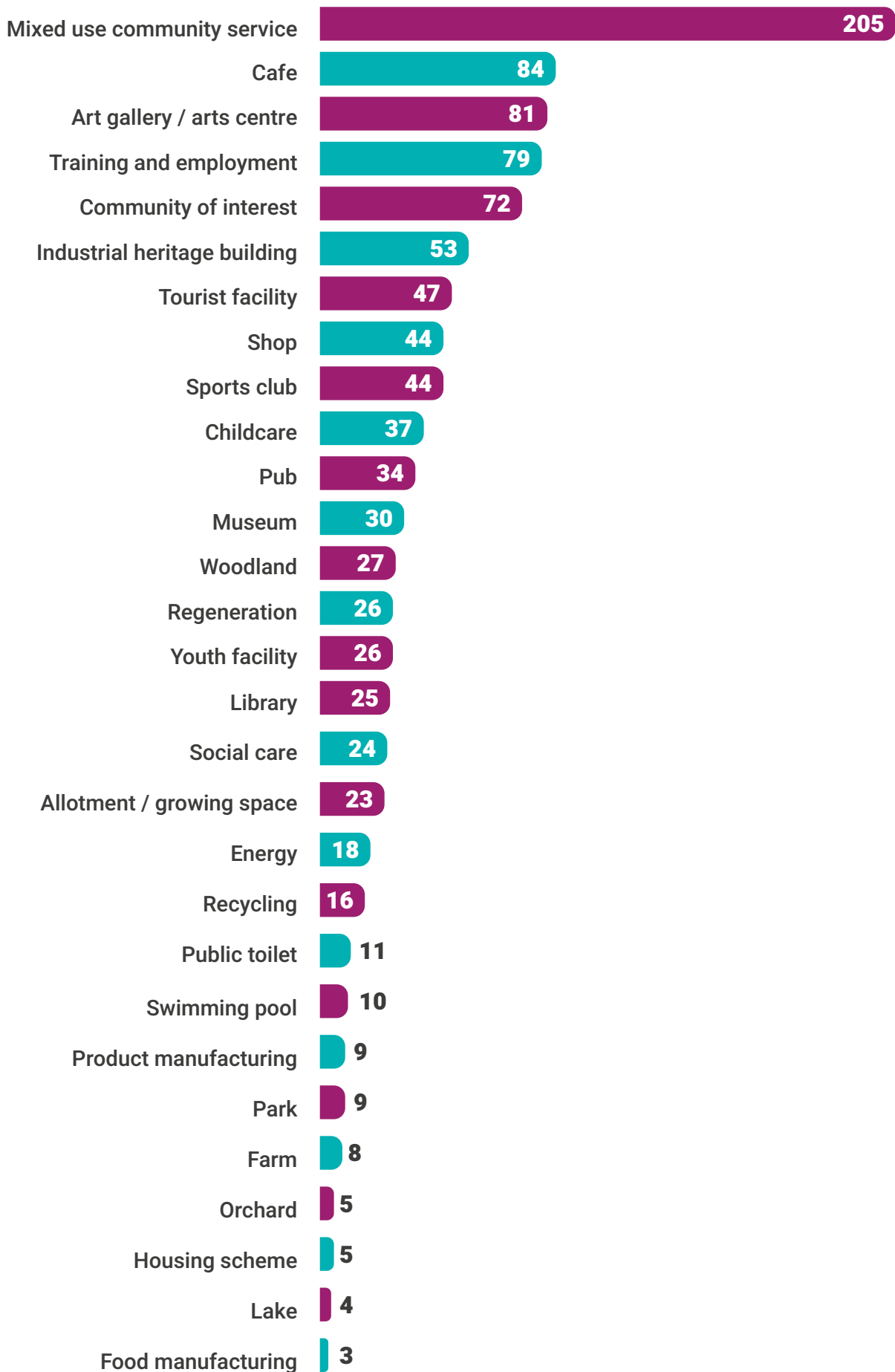




What types of community asset are there?



What services do community assets provide?



Key Themes

Communities are leading the way in transforming their localities

In recent years, local people have been forced to step in and stop the decline of their communities, through the gradual loss of key social pillars such as banks, post offices, pubs, schools and churches. The success of these assets to community ownership often lead to wider transformation in the local area, from small scale infrastructure to large regeneration projects.

Case Study: Maindee Unltd

In Newport, Maindee Unltd have contributed 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.



Wales has a diverse range of mixed-use community hubs

These hubs bring many different 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 geographically isolated communities, in particular, to access services that may otherwise be unable to operate in the area. 69 (16%) assets were categorised broadly as a 'Community Hub' but, nearly 50% (205) included mixed-use provision among the services they provided and could quite easily be described as a 'hub'.

Case Study: The Arts Factory

The Arts Factory is 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.

Communities often 'save' heritage buildings that may otherwise become disused or sold for private development

Our research shows that communities play an important role in the preservation, resurrection and enhancement of assets which were due for closure or dereliction.

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.

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. 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.

Case Study: Market Hall Cinema

Market Hall Cinema is a community operated cinema located in the centre of Brynmawr in Blaenau Gwent. Known by local people as the 'Grand Old Lady' of Brynmawr, it is the oldest cinema in Wales, having continued to operate in some form or another since it opened in 1894. When the cinema was threatened with closure in 2016, the community came together to step in and support the cinema with a successful crowd-funding campaign.

Now managed and operated by a committee of local trustees, with the support of paid staff and volunteers, the cinema prides itself on being more than just somewhere to 'watch a film', offering a range of associated events and opportunities for local people such as outdoor cinema nights, all night seasonal and genre specific film marathons, regular autism friendly sessions, film-making workshops and art exhibitions. The cinema has a unique feel and retains a sense of history.





Communities contribute to foundational economies

Our study identified 641 services contributing to the foundational economy. 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.

Case Study: Siop Cletwr

Cletwr is a community-managed and owned shop, café and community hub. Sited on the former 'Cletwr' roadside services on the A487, where 'South Wales meets North Wales', it is in an excellent position to maximise trade from tourists travelling on the trunk road, as well as serving its own rural communities

When Cletwr Road Services closed in 2009, the owner failed to sell the site, so came up with the idea of developing it into a community shop. The shop opened to the public in 2013, entirely run by local volunteers. Significant demand and footfall led to the group to develop a far more ambitious plan to create a new building which would offer a café, shop and meeting space for the community.

Footfall is now at 200,000 people each year and the enterprise expects to have turned over £600,000 this year, resulting in surpluses which can be re-invested in providing community activities such as IT training, Welsh lessons, a library, and running events such as talks and gigs. With 50 volunteers, Cletwr is playing a key role in bringing the community together, enabling people to connect with their neighbours. It has successfully filled a void in the community that had developed since the closure of the local school, shops and church, through which people were at real risk of becoming isolated.

Communities make a significant contribution to arts, culture and heritage activity in Wales

This is one of the major areas supported by the community-led organisations, with 81 assets within this category (18%), including an increasing number of theatres and museums.

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. 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.

Case Study: Theatr Soar

In Merthyr Tydfil, the development of Canolfan Soar (a Welsh Language Centre and Theatre) has transformed a run-down listed chapel, into a state-of-the-art facility for arts and cultural activities in the area.

Housed within the converted Soar Chapel in Merthyr Tydfil, it is home to Welsh language organisations in Merthyr and the location of Theatr Soar, Siop Llyfrau'r Enfys and Caffi Soar. It also provides office space and meeting rooms for local groups to convene – drama groups, folk music, choirs, art classes and local history groups.

The community-owned venue prides itself on its inclusivity with the aim of encouraging the Welsh language to flourish and be a catalyst to enrich and improve the lives and prospects of local people, through improved health, wellbeing and confidence, linked to creating a sense of rich cultural heritage and identity.



Community assets play a major role in 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.

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.

Case Study: Penllegare Valley Woods

An example of a green space which has become a significant tourist attraction is Penllegare 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.

The sector makes a significant contribution to the Welsh economy

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. One of these is the 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). 53% 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.

Case Study: 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.¹

¹Evaluation of the Economic and Cultural Impact of Canolfan Soar, Arad Consulting, 2015

Community assets have a powerful effect on health and wellbeing

This is perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of where community-run assets make 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.

Case study: Anglesey Hubs

This case study 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), but illustrates the ripple effect on both individuals and communities that connection to a physical community asset can effect.

57-year-old Mr G was recovering from heart surgery, lived alone, had no support network, and was medicated for anxiety and depression. He was referred to the local asset coordination project and linked to the local community hub.

At first, Mr G sat at the back and did not engage with anybody. With support, his confidence gradually increased, and he was engaging more with the groups and activities on offer. Today, he's a vital part of running of the local hub – he opens up, prepares the rooms, cleans and secures the hub at the end of the day. He supports elderly and disabled members of the community, and has made garden benches for people on the estate, so they can sit outside their homes to interact. He has set up his own allotment through a connection he made through the hub.





The sector plays a vital role in contributing to stronger communities

Safer, more attractive, and more connected communities appear to result from the presence of an active community asset. 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.

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.

Challenges

Some common challenges experienced by the sector are:

Sustainability and a lack of revenue funding streams

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.

A lack of volunteers with the right capacity, skills and knowledge

People from community assets across Wales stressed 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.

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. Many assets find that 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.

Inconsistent access to professional support

There were several examples where CVCs were mentioned as offering critical support to community groups at the early stages of their development. 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 among 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.

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.

Factors for Success

Our research and discussions identified some common success factors that are vital for developing and sustaining a community asset.

Strong leadership

Strong leadership is essential, as well as having a committee or board of trustees with the right mix of skills.

Listening to the community

Knowing how to talk to, work with and support community members is vital to building relationships and strengthening the commitment of the community to the asset, as well as ensuring that services will be relevant.

Valuing people

Everyone has different strengths and experiences to contribute – it's important to recognise these and take care of your volunteers, making sure they're supported, valued and fulfilled.

Being professional

Taking a business-like approach is important – things like having a clear vision of what you're trying to achieve, setting goals, being organised, and making sure that operations are run tightly and efficiently.

Building connections

Partnership working and making connections with other groups brings strength, opportunities and innovations. Having political allies is also important.

Learning from others

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

For a copy of the full report, detailed case studies, or to view the map community assets in Wales, visit:

www.bct.wales/mapping-community-assets-in-wales/

This study was commissioned by Building Communities Trust in partnership with WCVA, Wales Cooperative Centre, DTA Wales, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Planed. Written by Rosie Cribb (Funding Assist) in collaboration with Graham Davies, Dr Sam Edwards and Chrissie Nicholls, May 2020

