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**COMMUNITY
ASSET TRANSFER POLICY
2014-2017**



CONTENTS

1. Introduction.
2. The Strategic Context.
3. The Commitment.
4. Understanding the Opportunities and Challenges.
5. Measuring Success.
6. Conclusion.

DRAFT

1. Introduction

West Dunbartonshire Council is committed to improving outcomes for local people.

How the Council manages its property assets and how it delivers its services from these assets, can help fundamentally shape communities and can also have a direct impact on neighbourhoods.

In 2013, West Dunbartonshire Council approved its Property and Land Asset Disposal Strategy for the period 2013-18. The Strategy endorsed the view that all assets must contribute to the Council's strategic aims and ambitions, and highlighted the particular contribution that they can make in terms of:-

- Optimising asset portfolios to meet changing service needs;
- Stimulating the economic and physical regeneration of West Dunbartonshire through the release of key development sites onto the market;
- Reaping financial benefits from savings in running costs and enhancing capital receipts;
- Implementing corporate plans and strategies in areas such as carbon reduction and sustainability;
- Acting as a catalyst for partnership working together with other public service providers.

Significantly, the Strategy also recognised that assets can make a specific contribution in terms of supporting the development and role of community organisations to provide key services within West Dunbartonshire.

However, since the process for transferring assets to community groups will now follow an alternative route to existing surplus property disposal procedures, and because the strategic context for having a specific community asset transfer process in place is gathering momentum, the time is right to now set out the Council's policy position.

It is therefore against this backdrop of both emerging national best practice and legislation that this Community Asset Transfer Policy has been conceived.

2. The Strategic Context

The transfer of local authority assets to community groups across the UK has been gathering momentum since the Quirk Review was published in 2007.

However, in Scotland more recently, there have been two significant influences that have shaped attitudes towards the community ownership of public sector assets.

Firstly the findings contained within the report by the Christie Commission on the Future of Public Services (2011) were unambiguous and significant in nature.

The Christie Commission reported that due to the global economic downturn the pressure on public service budgets would remain severe for a significant period of time and that the manner in which public services are delivered would need to be radically overhauled.

Significantly however, the Commission noted that a radical change in the design and delivery of public services would be necessary irrespective of the major economic challenges to be faced.

The Commission argued that the public sector would need to undergo a drastic transformation to address key social and economic inequalities that have persisted in communities across Scotland.

At the heart of this argument is the acknowledgement that while public services play a crucial role in shaping society and the economy, it is the contribution that public services make to the wellbeing and resilience of communities that, in turn, will lead ultimately to a more vibrant economy and greater social cohesion.

The second significant influence is the ambitious Community Empowerment Bill. The final stage of public consultation on this emerging piece of legislation has been completed and it is anticipated that the Bill will become enacted in 2015.

The Scottish Government has placed community empowerment and public sector reform at the heart of its agenda and believes that ownership of land and buildings is a central factor in empowering communities.

The proposals contained in the Bill will make it easier for communities to take ownership or make more efficient use of land and buildings. It is also envisaged that the Bill will seek to increase transparency and provide an opportunity for communities to have a greater say in how common good assets are used and how services might be delivered in the future.

The recurring powerful central themes and messages flowing from the Christie Commission and the Community Empowerment Bill resonate strongly with West Dunbartonshire Council.

The Council has already taken steps to adjust to the challenges and opportunities identified by these two important and converging pieces of work, especially in its ongoing commitment to Equality.

In West Dunbartonshire, the Community Planning Partnership has been strengthened and now this more outcome-focused vehicle will be at the forefront delivering the aims of the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) for the period 2014-17.

3. The Commitment

West Dunbartonshire Council will follow a fair and transparent process to give community groups an opportunity to consider fully all aspects of a potential asset transfer, including the suitability and viability of the asset to meet their aspirations.

Support will be given to community groups to help them evaluate their strengths, their capabilities and weaknesses and the Council will signpost groups to various organisations that can provide a wide range of support and advice throughout each stage of the process.

A transfer solution will be sought that meets both the aspirations of the group involved, and the requirement for due diligence on the part of the Council.

4. Understanding the opportunities and challenges

West Dunbartonshire Council has a long record of successful community asset transfers. The Council is fully aware of the unique and diverse nature of community organisations and for this reason appreciates that asset ownership and the management of property may, or may not, be the right solution for every community group.

As part of the process to explore a potential asset transfer Council staff will work with community groups to make sure that:-

- They are prepared;
- They know what they are doing;
- They have a clear vision and a business plan;
- They have the right skills in terms of governance and financial matters;
- They know where to go for advice and help;
- They know the right questions to ask.

West Dunbartonshire Council wants community groups to fully appreciate that operating a community asset will be a long-term business requiring long-term finance. The Council does not want to discourage community groups from being passionate and entrepreneurial in their ambition to take on an asset, just realistic.

This is why it will ensure that all relevant information on an asset is made available at the outset, to include:-

- Information on the current condition of the asset;
- Electrical and Gas Safety Certification;
- Absestos and Legionella Information;
- Energy Performance Certification;
- Details of the running costs and utilities;
- Details of any income streams from building occupants;
- Details of any potential planning considerations.

5. Measuring success

West Dunbartonshire Council will measure the ongoing success of an asset transfer against the following desired outcomes:-

- The community group is operating on a sound financial footing and has a business plan process to ensure that a sustainable funding stream is in place;
- The business plan is regularly reviewed to mitigate risk and is based on informed, prudent assumptions and an accurate assessments of costs;
- The condition of the asset and its energy efficiency is known at all times and an investment programme is in place to meet both future planned maintenance and capital improvement works.
- There is a health and safety plan in place for the asset and its occupants. There is a clearly identified individual with the responsibility for all compliance matters including, for example, legionella testing and boiler maintenance;
- The community group has the ongoing skills, capacity and leadership in place to manage the asset and deliver its business plan;
- The community group has a plan in place to deal with succession planning;

- The community group has effective governance arrangements in place to ensure clarification around roles, responsibilities and functions;
- The community group has completely adopted the Council's position as set out in its Equality Statement 2013-17;
- The community group is regularly demonstrating that the core outcomes from its business plan match, or contribute, to the overall objectives contained within the Councils Strategic Plan 2012-17 plus the West Dunbartonshire Single Outcome Agreement 2014-17;
- The community group has an ongoing commitment to carbon reduction and a programme in place to ensure that sustainability issues are embedded in all community activities and initiatives.
- The community group has a good track record of fostering productive working relationships with external bodies and community partners.
- The community group is good at external communication and sharing good practice.
- The community group is able and prepared to lobby and seek to influence policy.
- The community group continually looks to secure wider community benefits and to strengthen links to other initiatives.

6. Conclusion

Community empowerment is only the first step. Strengthening communities, or building community resilience, will be the greater challenge.

A resilient community is one where the people living in a particular geographical area have identified the social, economic and environmental issues that affect them and have adapted themselves to adjust to the problems they face.

By acquiring new skills, strengthening social bonds and developing new physical resources – perhaps through an asset transfer process – the community have used their inherent strengths, resources and ideas to become stronger over time and create a more inspiring, sustainable and social environment in which to live and work.

West Dunbartonshire Council acknowledges that building community resilience can be a complex process but is fully focused on making this happen.

The Council has, together with its partner organisations, now set ambitious targets contained within the West Dunbartonshire Single Outcome Agreement for 2014-2017 to enable this key objective to be achieved.

The Council understands that local leadership needs to be supported and nurtured. This, it is believed in turn, will enable and encourage groups to collectively take charge of developing or enhancing community resources themselves.

With this move into a new era of public policy, there will be opportunities for local communities to take greater control of their own destiny.

West Dunbartonshire Council believes that every community is a rich source of potential, energy and creativity and is fully committed to helping to unlock this potential.

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