

CA 35

Ymgynghoriad ar asedau cymunedol

Consultation on community assets

Ymateb gan: FOR Cardiff

Response from: FOR Cardiff



OFFICIAL FOR CARDIFF RESPONSE TO THE SENEDD CYMRU INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY ASSETS

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FOR Cardiff is the business improvement district (BID) for Cardiff city centre. BIDs are organisations funded by businesses within a defined geographical boundary, they deliver a set business plan on behalf of the businesses that fund them – this business plan is generally related to improving the town/city centre environment they operate in and supporting the High Street and local economies at large.

In 2021 in advance of the Senedd elections FOR Cardiff published *A Recovery Manifesto for Cities and High Streets*¹ in which we called on the next Welsh Government to, '[e]mpower communities to take charge of neglected or mismanaged spaces and prevent the destruction of historic and socially relevant structures' as we believe that the ability for communities to obtain and protect local assets is a vital tool in creating thriving, vibrant, and sustainable urban places.

Responses to Committee Questions

Whether the current statutory and policy framework empowers communities in Wales to develop community assets;

Community asset issues which impact on town and city centres tend to relate to privately run businesses that are driven from their location by pure market forces. In these instances, the community, business, residential, or otherwise is unable to retain and develop their assets within the current policy context. In addition to the immediate negative community impacts, this process also has a long-term impact on the vitality and viability of our urban centres as 'interesting' community led uses of spaces (particularly cultural and arts venues) are forced out by the market in favour of uses with a more immediate financial return. This is leading to a hollowing out of town and city centre, which in turn results in declining footfall and interest for visitors, resulting in the eventual decline of more traditional business interests – an unsustainable boom and bust model.

¹FOR Cardiff *A Recovery Manifesto for Cities and High Streets* (2021) <https://www.forcardiff.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A-Recovery-Manifesto-for-Cities-and-High-Streets.pdf>

Another recurring issue with town and city centre assets is absentee landlords – again a private sector issue that the current framework cannot address, other than through very specific compulsory purchase order interventions which must be driven by the local authority. In particular in this instance we would draw the committee’s attention to the specific Scottish intervention, focussing on ‘abandoned, neglected, or detrimental land’. The presence of neglected and ‘damaging’ empty properties in town and city centres has a negative impact on perception of urban areas, no doubt contributing to the fact that only 3% of people in Wales describe their local town centre as ‘thriving’²

CASE STUDY: The Roath Park Pub, Cardiff

In 2021 there was outcry from the Cardiff community around the planned demolition of the Roath Park Pub on City Road³. Members of the public were disappointed to learn that the building would be demolished, a permitted development under current planning legislation as the property is not listed.

The area’s councillors and MP became involved in the campaign to save the pub and a meeting between council officers and the current landlord suggested that the landlord could be willing to sell the property to a new pub occupier, but this was on good faith only and has so far not led to progress. There is a lack of legislative framework and the associated support bodies/funding to allow the community to effectively act on this suggested opportunity. With no legal power behind their claim, it is difficult to galvanise a community to fundraise and attempt to purchase a property when the current owner could simply back out at any time.

To explore barriers and challenges faced by communities in taking ownership of public or privately owned assets, including finance and support services

The lack of a Community Right to Buy or any similar power is a major barrier faced by the communities of Wales who have the weakest powers in this area of any nation of the UK⁴

Within FOR Cardiff’s specific jurisdiction of Cardiff city centre, a major barrier to communities taking ownership of assets, even once legally empowered, will be access to capital – with high property prices a major factor in driving community assets away from urban centres.

Skills and relevant local expertise are also a key consideration. Once any community purchase powers have been enacted, there is clearly a need for community assets to be maintained both physically and in terms of corporate governance, the capacity of the time and skills required to provide this upkeep will vary between communities in what Power to Change refer to as ‘the capacity gap’⁵. As economic deprivation and skills shortages

² FSB Cymru *A Vision for Welsh Towns* (2022) <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/a-vision-for-welsh-towns.html>

³ <https://nation.cymru/news/disgrace-plans-approved-to-knock-down-historic-victorian-cardiff-pub-to-build-flats/>

⁴ IWA, *Our Land: Communities and Land Use* (2022) https://www.iwa.wales/wp-content/media/IWA_Our-Land-Communities-and-land-use_v5.pdf

⁵ Power To Change https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PCT_3619_High_Street_Pamphlet_FINAL_LR.pdf

maintain a strong geographic correlation, it is likely that some of the communities that stand to benefit the most from increased community powers, currently lack the tools to make the most use of such powers. This should not stand as a barrier to the extension of such powers, but rather be seen as an opportunity to provide upskilling opportunities.

Local authorities are (often for good reason) slow, complex, and impenetrable organisations which communities often don't know how to access. A lack of legally enshrined community rights places the community at the mercy of local authority decision making. These decisions can be negatively influenced by strained relationships with specific council officers or, for communities which lack strong political representation, a lack of understanding of their wants and needs by the authority (or a flat out disagreement with their principles). There is little impetus for local authorities to advertise the possibility of community asset transfers. This means the process relies on knowledge and skills already present in communities, likely to disadvantage already marginalised groups. More direct community powers could and should be coupled with accessible communications around what can be achieved with these powers.

The complex and bureaucratic nature of local authorities can also often discourage the very entrepreneurial spirit which could allow community owned assets to flourish. The direct opportunity for organisations such as Community Interest Companies and Community Benefit Societies to leverage community rights to buy, can allow the entrepreneurialism usually reserved for benefiting business interests to also benefit communities directly.

Additional Commentary

The potential strengthening of community powers in Wales also provides a key opportunity for a second recommendation of *A Recovery Manifesto for Cities and High Streets* which is to, '[a]llow city [and town] centre partnerships to participate more fully in the development of cities through increased powers coupled with stronger regulation'. A strengthened array of community powers could provide a sensible framework for more formalized community involvement in place management issues. BIDs are a successful intervention (with in excess of 300 operating across the UK) partly because they generate guaranteed funding and provide a coherent point for business involvement in place management to coalesce around, currently similar systems for wider proactive communities are lacking. Providing stable community funding avenues for high street regeneration could be a key consideration of the development of stronger community powers in Wales.