



Making Asset Transfer Work

The Hebden Bridge Town Hall case study





© English Heritage/James O.Davies



Introductions

Asset transfer is a positive way of keeping buildings in community use. Of course, community groups need to be properly constituted and to understand the responsibility that they are taking on. But, done carefully, asset transfer is an important mechanism for local Councils to demonstrate that they are working in partnership with local communities.

Some years back the Council sold off a building that it thought was no longer required. The local community was not given a chance to put forward an alternative and instead the building stood empty in the middle of the town for many years. I vowed that I would not let that happen again if I could stop it.

Even in hard times, Councils have tremendous resources - physical assets (land and buildings) and professional expertise (staff) - whose sole purpose is to provide services for local people. Those services should be provided as near to where people live as possible, to make them both accessible and useful.

Cllr Janet Battye Leader, Calderdale Council

For over 100 years, Hebden Bridge Town Hall has been a focal point of local life. We believe that the asset transfer has secured the future of this landmark local building for many more years to come.

The Town Hall remains a public building in public ownership, albeit no longer in the custodianship of the local authority. We feel that we are exploring a new form of public ownership, one which looks back to nineteenth century models of mutuality and self-help as well as forward to 21st century models. We consider it essential that the Community Association has strong governance in place and is accountable in its work to our community. Our very broad membership base is one way we are seeking to achieve this.

Peter Hirst
Chair, Hebden Bridge Community Association

What do you do with a landmark Victorian civic building which is listed and in a conservation area but which no longer has an obvious role to perform?

This was the dilemma facing Calderdale council in respect to Hebden Bridge's fine Town Hall building. Once the hub of local civic and community life (it had been the offices of the former Urban District Council), it had lost its original functions in the decades after local government reorganisation.

But Calderdale council did not face this dilemma alone. The future of the Town Hall was also something which concerned the local Hebden Bridge community. This Pennine mill-town had seen other important local buildings disappear, often for conversion to apartments. The Town Hall, it was felt by many, was too important to suffer the same fate.

The solution was a partnership approach which led, in April 2010, to an asset transfer of the Town Hall buildings and the adjacent land to a new community-controlled charitable trust established specifically for the purpose. Since then the trust, Hebden Bridge Community Association, has not only managed

and maintained the existing building but has also successfully bid for £3.2m funding for a major capital build development on the site. A nineteenth century building in search of a twenty-first century role has begun to find it - as a fully integrated community hub, offering a one-stop-shop centre for statutory and voluntary agencies, community meeting rooms and facilities, and starter units for emerging local businesses.



The Hebden Bridge Town Hall asset transfer - the key facts

- 125 year leasehold ownership offered by Calderdale council to Hebden Bridge Community Association, at nil cost
- Hebden Bridge Community Association takes on full responsibility for managing and maintaining building
- Calderdale council continues to use building as before, becoming Association's anchor tenant
- Rent designed to be broadly comparable to the previous cost to the council of managing and maintaining the building (calculated at £41,500 pa)
- One-off contribution by Calderdale council (£60,000 grant, £60,000 loan) towards backlog of maintenance work
- Community Association has right to acquire freehold if Calderdale council wishes to dispose of it at any time



The pathway to the asset transfer

2006: Initial community concerns about the long-term future of the Town Hall lead to establishment of working party by town and parish councils, later joined by local 'town team' Hebden Royd Partnership.

2007: Calderdale council and Hebden Royd Partnership sign a Partnership Agreement, agreeing to work together for a sustainable long-term solution for the Town Hall.

2008-2009: Detailed discussion between the parties, working towards an asset transfer. Creation of new charitable trust, HB Community Association. 550 local individuals and organisations sign up as 'Friends of the Town Hall' and members of the Association.

2009: Calderdale council's Cabinet approves a framework strategy for addressing asset transfer requests. The Community Association prepares a detailed business plan.

Dec 2009: Calderdale council's Cabinet agrees to a 40-year leasehold transfer (later extended to 125 years), becoming 'anchor tenants' of the Association.

April 2010: Asset transfer takes place. Hebden Bridge becomes one of the first communities in the UK to have its Town Hall community owned and managed.



Making the asset transfer successful

Detailed discussions took place during the period from 2007 to 2009 between Calderdale officers and key members of the Hebden Royd Partnership and (after its incorporation) Hebden Bridge Community Association.

Calderdale council naturally needed reassurance that the Community Association would be well-managed, and that it would have trustees with appropriate skills. It also needed to satisfy itself that the Association was accountable in a broad sense to its community and that it had adequate governance structures.

The Community Association in turn needed to reassure itself that, in acquiring the responsibility for managing and maintaining the Town Hall, it was taking part in an 'asset transfer' and not a 'liability transfer' arrangement. It had to satisfy itself, by developing a detailed business plan, that it could run the building from its income, without relying on any grant subsidy.

Both parties had a common interest in making sure that the arrangement would work in the long-term: that the Association was not being set up to fail.

The decision by Calderdale council to continue as the building's core tenant, paying in rent the money which it had previously expended directly on the building, was the secret to the successful transfer. The tenancy agreement, initially fixed for ten years, gives the Association a secure income stream. It also ensures that the Town Hall continues to fulfil its original civic role, as the place for local people to go to interact with the council.

Although Calderdale council had undertaken essential maintenance work on the Town Hall there was a backlog of other capital works which had built up at the time of asset transfer, which had been priced at a little over £120,000. The Association was concerned that it would be several years before it had built up sufficient

reserves to fund this work, and it was aware that an unexpected major expense (such as a boiler replacement) could jeopardise its future. Calderdale council agreed to contribute £120,000 to the Association, half as a grant and half as an interest-free loan. This has proved an invaluable buffer for the Association in its initial period of operation. It has also been available to be used as matched funding, almost doubling its value to the Association.

The Community Association has to meet its responsibilities both as a company limited by guarantee and as a registered charity. Its commitment to good governance has been strengthened by the commitment, agreed as part of the asset transfer agreement, that it will work for formal accreditation under the VISIBLE quality standard, developed for community centres and community organisations by Community Matters.



The Town Hall in community hands

The Community Association was concerned, in the period immediately after the April 2010 asset transfer, to bring about immediate changes which led to more community use of the existing building.

A new 'meanwhile' meeting room and hall, the Waterfront, seating about eighty was created from empty offices, and used by a wide range of organisations ranging from the Prince's Trust to the Hebden Bridge Arts Festival. The committee room was redecorated by a volunteer party arranged by a nearby business and renamed the Greenwood Room in honour of a celebrated local cooperative pioneer. This too has been actively used by many local and national groups.

The Association successfully applied for a wedding and civil partnership licence for the fine Council Chamber and several weddings and civil partnerships have since taken place. This is the first time that civil weddings have been possible in Hebden Bridge.

In little ways, too, the Association has tried to make a difference. Newspaper and cardboard recycling has been begun (bringing about some welcome cost savings), for example. Work has been undertaken to reduce energy usage and costs, and urgent repairs (such as the dry rot identified in a gable end) have been undertaken. The building has received a little 'TLC'.

At the same time as the asset transfer was being implemented, the Community Association trustees were also engaged in developing a major capital build project on the vacant land at the side and rear of the Town Hall. The aim was to provide the town with a much needed purpose-built public hall and function room, more meeting space, and enterprise units for very small businesses. The capital development also provided the opportunity to create a new riverside courtyard and to make the existing Town Hall compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.

In early 2011, the Association received confirmation that it had successfully received a £1.2m grant from the European Regional Development Fund and a £2m loan and grant package from Communitybuilders (Social Investment Business), enabling the capital build to be progressed. The necessary business planning

work for this funding had been undertaken by the trustees, and the Communitybuilders fund was not one which a local authority landlord could have taken advantage of.

The contractors are currently on site, and the new buildings are scheduled to open in early 2012.



Architect's impression of the new development.



What's been achieved

Here are ten things which have happened which would not have been possible, without the asset transfer.

- 1 Capital funds of more than £3.2m obtained
- 2 Immediate improvements in the fabric of the building
- 3 Weddings and civil partnerships now taking place in the building
- 4 Facilities used by many more community groups
- 5 Harnessing of voluntary time and effort by local people
- 6 Benefits to local economy from use of local suppliers
- 7 Recycling introduced
- 8 Savings achieved in energy use
- 9 Local school children involved in planning the new buildings
- 10 Great new community and business facilities for the town now being built



For further details

Hebden Bridge Community Association
The Town Hall, St George's Street, Hebden Bridge, HX7 7BY
Tel: 01422 845261
www.hebdenbridgetownhall.org.uk

Calderdale Council
Neighbourhoods and Community Engagement Service
Northgate House, Halifax, HX1 1UN
Tel: 01422 393264
www.calderdale.gov.uk

