

Save our  
Spaces



# The Great British Sell Off

How we're losing our vital  
publicly owned buildings  
and spaces. Forever.

June 2018



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# Executive Summary

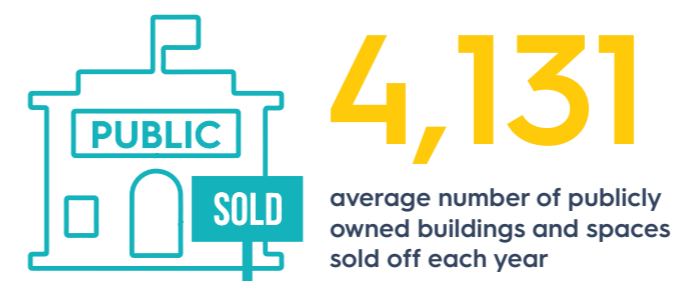
Locality, the national membership charity of community organisations, is launching Save our Spaces, a campaign to save our much-loved publicly owned buildings and spaces from being sold off for private use.

In January this year Locality submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all councils in England to try and get a better sense of the problem.

We were shocked to learn that on average more than 4,000 publicly owned buildings and spaces in England are being sold off every year. That's more than four times the number of Starbucks in the UK. This is a sell off on a massive scale.

example of community ownership. Opening hours have doubled, the number of children taught to swim every week has jumped from 950 to 1700, and young people can access a lifeguard training programme to develop job opportunities.

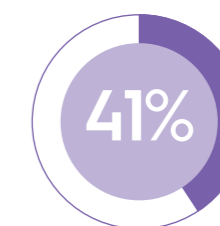
Yet, our FOI request found that less than half of all councils have a policy, known as a Community Asset Transfer policy, in place to support community ownership.



These buildings and spaces have potential to provide vital services and support to local people, but they are being lost to the community forever, through private sale to the highest bidder.

Community ownership is a solution that puts these buildings and spaces back at the heart of the community and protects them for local people for generations to come. Community owned spaces are where people can come together, meet their neighbours and access vital support and services.

Spaces like Bramley Baths, a Grade II listed Edwardian bath-house in Leeds, which was saved by a community group in 2013 when cuts to the Council's leisure budget meant they had to consider closure. It is now a shining



Our FOI shows that **less than half (41%)** of councils have a strategy or policy in place for community ownership, yet 95% of local authorities surveyed expect the sell off of publicly owned buildings and spaces to play an increasingly important role in the next five years.

That's why we want to see community ownership prioritised, with a range of measures, including a Community Ownership Fund of £200m a year for five years.

**At Locality we see the passion of inspiring local people, like those behind the success of Bramley Baths, in our member organisations day in, day out. And we know it is through the power of community that many more spaces like this can be saved. For all of us. Forever.**

# Our publicly owned buildings and spaces under threat

“ I used to come here and meet my friends and it was like a second home, where we could feel safe and chill, giving us a place to keep us out of trouble.”

Ian<sup>1</sup>, 18, who used the services at the Grove



## The threat

England's vital publicly owned buildings and spaces are being sold off on a massive scale for private use and short-term profit.

These buildings and spaces are ours, owned by councils on behalf of citizens. In many cases these places have been at the heart of our communities for decades or even centuries, and in some cases were originally paid for by us through public subscription. They are our libraries, youth centres, allotments and public swimming pools. These are the everyday places where extraordinary things happen, where local people come together, access vital services and support each other. Once sold off to private developers and short-term speculators they are lost to us. **Forever.**

## No official data

There are no official figures published that reveal the speed and scale of this very real threat. Although we are aware of many examples from our members, there is no central source of information available about the number of public buildings and spaces that local authorities own, or the rate that they are being sold off into private hands.

## Freedom of Information request

That's why we submitted a Freedom of Information request to all 353 councils in England in January 2018 to try and gain a clearer picture of what we know is happening in many of our communities. With rising demand for services at the same time as budgets are being squeezed, the short-term gain of a commercial sale will likely remain an understandable pull for Councils.

## Why does this matter?

This isn't about buildings of historical or architectural value, although many of them are, and it isn't about protecting green space for the sake of it. This is about people - all of us - and our local communities. These buildings and spaces are often at the heart of the community, where local people meet, access services and find support.

They are where we can connect with our neighbours, give help and be supported by others, and where we can come together to shape our own areas. They are spaces where everyone belongs and where lives are transformed.

Importantly it is often the poorest places that are most reliant on these types of spaces. Losing them can have a devastating impact on local people and communities. Years of austerity and lack of investment have decimated local services and left many of the places people rely on shuttered up, under threat or falling into disrepair.

## Private sales

Selling these buildings and spaces on the open-market to the highest bidder means they are often lost to the community forever, and that the deeper value to local people will never be realised. In these circumstances the community have no real influence over what the space will be used for and so-called 'fire sales' of public assets to remote private owners can mean empty, boarded-up properties, which can lead to social, economic and environmental decline.

Of course there are times when a private sale may be the most viable or appropriate option, but this should not come at the cost of the community or ignore credible community-led alternatives.

## UNDER THREAT: Braunstone Grove Youth and Community Centre, Leicester

Locality member, B-Inspired, are currently fighting to save Braunstone Grove, a youth and community centre in Braunstone, Leicester. In an area where people die up to 10 years younger than other cities and low incomes and unemployment are an ongoing challenge it is an important space with huge potential for local people.

B-Inspired have worked hard to submit a tender for the Centre to be transferred into community ownership and have consulted more than 500 local people to find out what is really needed in the area.

The vision is a community hub, with a wide range of activities and services for the local community, with fitness and social opportunities for everyone in the community and learning and work placements for young people.

“The impact of losing this vibrant, respected and well used youth centre has been huge for local young people. That's why we are working hard to get community ownership of this space and create a community hub to provide activities and opportunities for local young people.”

“We know there is competition from private and other investors to get the building, as the potential for commercial use of the football pitches is obvious. But we have the support of local people, community groups, football clubs, local councillors and our MP.”

“We're now just waiting for a final decision and are hopeful we will become a community ownership success story!”

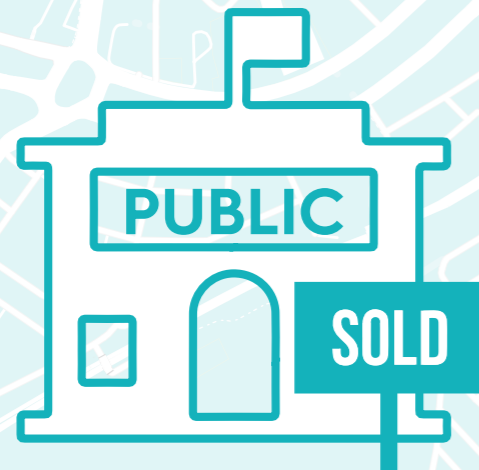
Angie Wright, B-Inspired

“I used to come here and meet my friends and it was like a second home, where we could feel safe and chill, giving us a place to keep us out of trouble. If I had no one to turn to I could always talk to our youth workers we have known since we were little. Without them here we wouldn't have anyone to talk to if we can't or don't want to talk to our family or friends.”

Ian<sup>1</sup>, 18, who used the services at the Grove

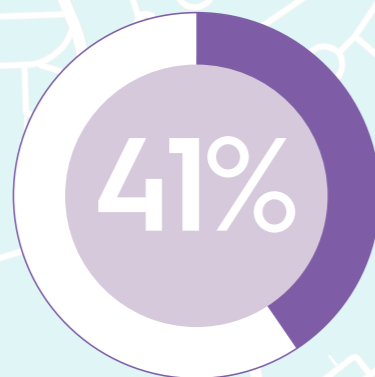
<sup>1</sup>Name has been changed for protection of privacy

# Freedom of Information request<sup>2</sup> - national results



# 4,131

average number of publicly owned buildings and spaces sold off each year

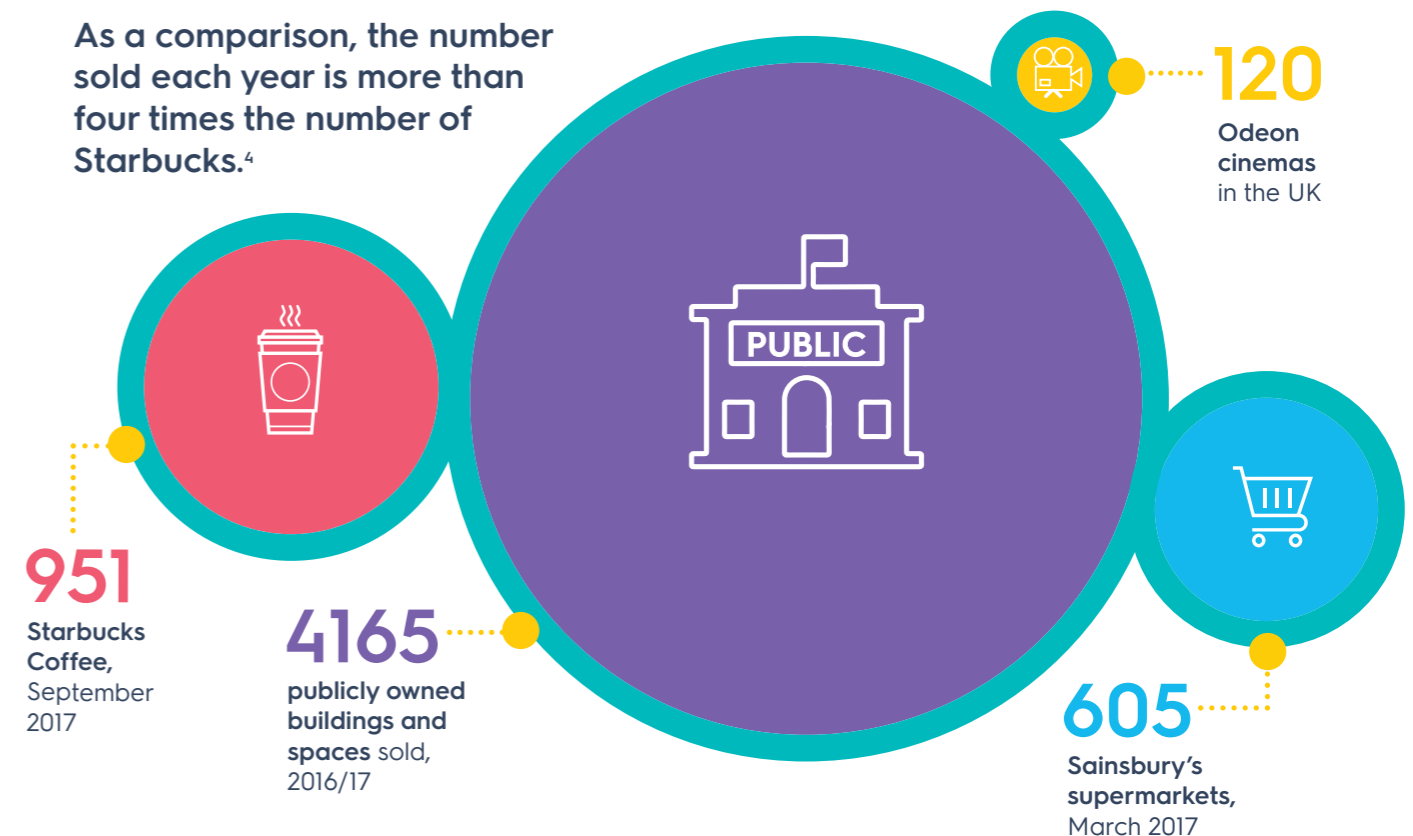


Our FOI shows that **less than half (41%)** of councils have a strategy or policy in place for community ownership, yet 95% of local authorities surveyed expect the sell off of publicly owned buildings and spaces to play an increasingly important role in the next five years.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The FOI request was submitted to all 353 councils in England on 31st January 2018 and, as of the 1st May, we received 233 responses with useable data. The level of data provided by each council to each question varied, leading to different sample sizes for each question. The questions asked covered three areas: Does the council have a CAT policy? How many assets have been disposed of in the since 2012/13? How many council assets are currently considered surplus to requirement?

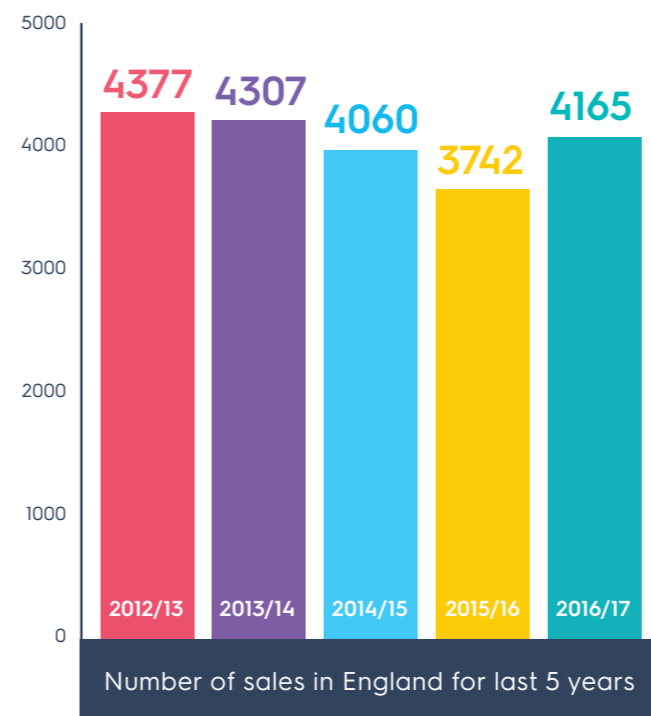
<sup>3</sup>A Schultz, 2016. 'Community Asset Transfer: A review of progress and practice in post-recession England.' Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/j6ev5f3>

As a comparison, the number sold each year is more than four times the number of Starbucks.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Figures taken from: <https://www.b.co.uk/company-profile/?odeon-cinemas-group-limited-101823>  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/386475/sainsburys-store-numbers-by-convenience-and-supermarket-united-kingdom-uk/>  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/218388/number-of-starbucks-stores-in-the-uk/>

The rate of sales has been consistently high for the last 5 years<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup>These figures were extrapolated from responses from 55 councils who reported their asset sales year on year over these five years. If the average rate of sale in our sample applied to all councils, this chart demonstrates how this looks nationally.

## UNDER THREAT: Victoria Park Lodge, Bristol

Now under threat of being sold by Bristol City Council, this lodge house in Victoria Park, Bristol, was built in 1870s for the park keeper.

"Selling it to make flats would be such a waste. We strongly believe that the lodge should be a community space."

"Without our intervention the building would either be abandoned or sold to a developer rather than kept in public ownership and community use. This is still a real risk but we believe that so much more could be done with it."

"We've got some great creative ideas that would bring significant community benefit - far more than a residential block."

Sean Hennessy, chair of the Victoria Park Action Group, who are part of the campaign to take the lodge into community ownership

# Freedom of Information request - regional results

## Annual average sales in each region with examples

### SAVED

**Byrne Avenue Baths**, Wirral, Merseyside  
A 1930s Grade II listed swimming pool complex, saved to become a thriving community space providing jobs, sports and a volunteering time bank

### SAVED

**The Linskill Centre**, North Shields, Tyne & Wear  
A 1930s school building, saved to offer classes, events, a nursery and a café, with over 120,000 visits every year

### UNDER THREAT

**Dewsbury Park Mansion**, West Yorkshire  
Campaign to save a former mill owners mansion set in 72 acres of parkland, and use it to offer horticultural and creative therapies, training and volunteering and to support local start-ups

### SAVED

**Mosely Road Baths**, Birmingham  
The oldest Grade II listed baths still open for public swimming in the UK, saved by the local community

### UNDER THREAT

**Braunstone Grove**, Leicestershire  
A campaign to save a youth and community centre from private development

### SAVED

**Shotley Pier**, Shotley Gate, Suffolk  
A 650-foot Victorian pier, saved to become a community space that will offer events, a visitor centre and a food market

### UNDER THREAT

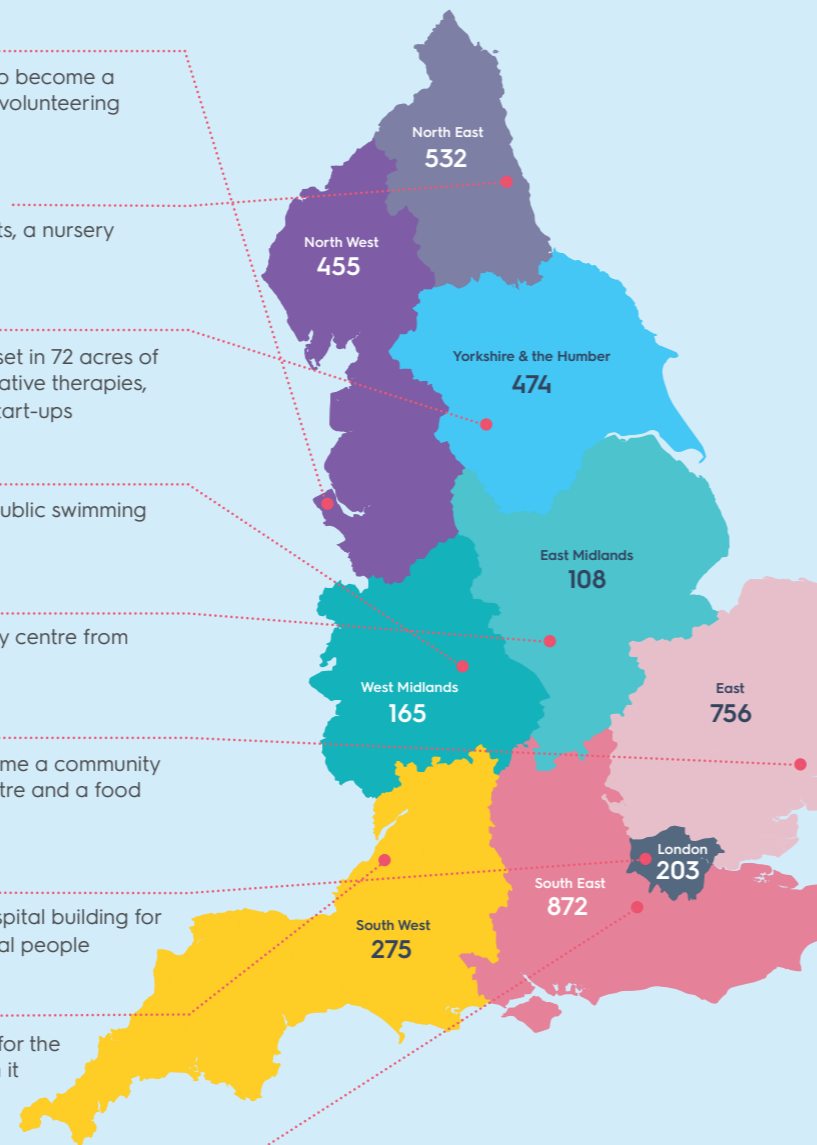
**StART**, Harringey, London  
A campaign to use part of an old hospital building for genuinely affordable housing for local people

### UNDER THREAT

**Victoria Park Lodge**, Bristol  
A campaign to save a house built for the park keeper in 1870 and transform it into an outdoor learning centre, community space and cafe

### UNDER THREAT

**Horton Chapel**, Epsom, Surrey  
A Grade II listed Chapel being transformed as a not-for-profit arts centre



## Summary of Save Our Spaces Freedom of Information request results

Due to varying sample sizes at regional level, these figures cannot be used to compare relative performance between regions, and are indicative only of the scale of the sell-off.

| Area                   | % that do have a Community Asset Transfer policy (1) | Number of annual sales (2) | Number identified as surplus in next 5 years (3) |
|------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
| England                | 41%  | 4,131                      | 7280   |
| North West             | 35%  | 455                        | 610  |
| North East             | 60%  | 532                        | 518  |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 56%  | 474                        | 1,602  |
| West Midlands          | 47%  | 165                        | 755  |
| East Midlands          | 26%  | 108                        | 548  |
| East                   | 50%  | 756                        | 898  |
| London                 | 17%  | 203                        | 358  |
| South West             | 40%  | 275                        | 763  |
| South East             | 48%  | 872                        | 592  |

(1) Based on 233 councils who answered the question of whether they have a Community Asset Transfer policy.

(2) Extrapolated from an England wide average and regional averages from the sample of 55 councils who specifically gave information about the number of sales of publicly owned buildings and spaces from 2012/2013 - 2016/17.

(3) Extrapolated from 127 councils who were able to identify how many publicly owned buildings and spaces they have identified as surplus over the next 5 years. NB: This is likely to be significantly lower than the number of sales that will take place.

# Community ownership to save our spaces



**Locality believes community ownership is the answer to saving publicly owned buildings and spaces under threat.**

All over the country thousands of local people are coming together in community organisations to step in, step up and fight to save these buildings through community ownership.

Local people are transforming empty or underused buildings; taking control of the things that matter most to them and building community from within, based on existing strengths and skills.

Many of these community groups are Locality members. This is the power of community.

These are local heroes working tirelessly to safeguard these vital places and ensure they continue to offer valuable services and remain available to everyone for many more generations.

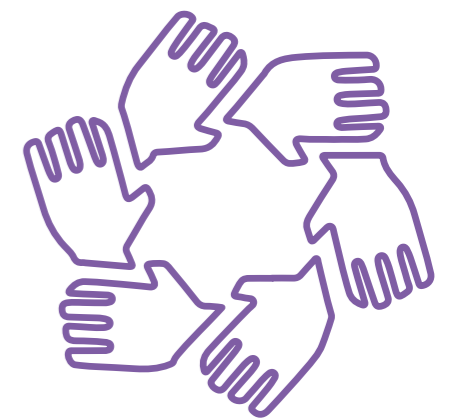
“Fundamentally, it’s about giving local people a bigger stake in the future of their area.”

The Quirk Review,  
Quirk B, 2007, Making assets work

## Locality’s campaign to Save Our Spaces

Save Our Spaces is Locality’s campaign for community ownership, to protect publicly owned buildings and spaces. For all of us. Forever.

We want to increase the number of buildings and spaces taken into community ownership, and reduce the number sold into private hands or that are left stagnating and empty, falling into disrepair.



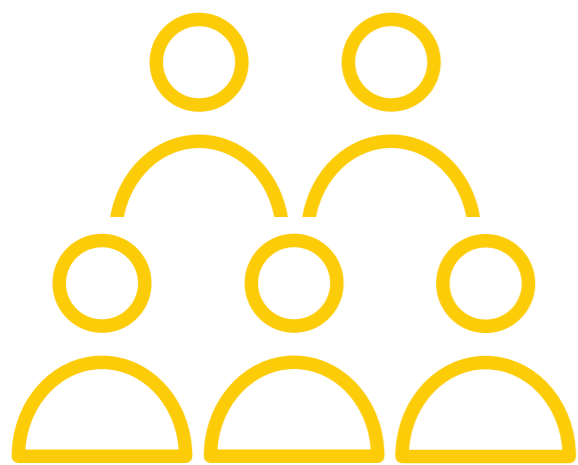
## What is community ownership?

**Community ownership is an alternative to private or public ownership and allows community organisations to take on a building or space to create a place that benefits local people.**

Community ownership guarantees that a building or space will be available for the whole community and will not be for private use or private commercial gain.

The organisation that takes ownership must be set up legally for public benefit and involve local people in its decision making. There are a range of not-for-profit organisation options and they are often charities.

The terms of community ownership vary. A freehold, 99+ year lease, or long leases of at least 25 years on unrestricted terms are the most secure. These terms provide genuine community control and allow community organisations to take decisions over the use of the building or space for community benefit, as well as for potential leverage for additional borrowing.



## Benefits of community ownership

Although community ownership isn't new, now more than ever it is a vital solution to the thousands of public buildings and spaces being sold off for private use to the highest bidder.

But it is much more than protecting valued local spaces. It can unlock the power of community to enable community action and support resident-led solutions. When properly supported, it is a genuine route for devolving power and resources to neighbourhoods, giving people a stake in shaping the area where they live.

Community ownership can reinvigorate local economies, help bring additional funding that councils can't access and create services for local people that are rooted in local knowledge and passion for the issues facing a community. It can also support local community organisations to create a sustainable income and financial stability. There's a relationship between community organisations who have taken on community ownership and those that have been successful in adapting to financial uncertainty and funding cuts.

Community owned spaces can play a crucial role in creating good jobs, good health and good housing. They offer training opportunities and enable people to find work. They offer affordable housing designed for the local community. They support health and wellbeing through sports facilities, allotments to grow vegetables or by combating isolation and loneliness.



### SAVED: The Linskill Centre, North Shields

The Linskill Centre, built in the 1930s as a school and used as a community centre from 1984, was saved in 2006 thanks to a campaign by local community organisation Linskill and North Tyneside Community Development Trust.

Thanks to the support of local people and the cooperation of the Council, who put it in the community ownership of the Trust, it is now a thriving hub and financially sustainable thanks to 120,000 visits from the local community every year.

The Centre's strapline is 'The Heart of the Community', and it hosts 54 groups using it for weekly classes from digital skills and maths to tai chi and Spanish, as well as 20 permanent tenants who hire the affordable spaces within the centre. Linskill delivers a programme of community events including Easter Fair, Linskill Halloween Chase and the ever popular Winter Wonderland, and the venue is also licensed for civil partnerships and wedding ceremonies.

The Centre is home to the Ofsted registered Linskill Nursery and a community café. These proved to be vital and transformational resources for a local single mother, Joanne Hunter, who, having experienced severe post-natal depression volunteered at Café 32. Now she has a paid job at the café for three and half days a week.

"Being able to leave my baby in the Linskill nursery gave me a break to focus fully on work," says Joanne. "Bit by bit I've regained my confidence."

"I feel so lucky to be working in this centre. It's a fantastic place and is definitely a big asset to the community."



“I've been here just over two years now and I'm a totally different person.”

Joanne

“Community ownership can bring people from different backgrounds together. It can foster a sense of belonging. It can play a role in enhancing the local environment, alleviating poverty and raising people's aspirations.”

The Quirk Review, Quirk B, 2007, Making assets work



# Policy context

## Austerity

With councils facing ongoing financial challenges following years of austerity, many are resorting to cutting non-statutory services and selling associated buildings and spaces in neighbourhoods across the country.

Since April 2016, councils have also been able to spend the receipts from the sale of their surplus land on the revenue costs of service transformation, adding a further temptation to cash strapped councils to sell now and think later.<sup>6</sup>

## Central government

Recent governments have introduced key new policies in support of community ownership of public buildings and spaces. The Labour government introduced the 'Disposal of assets at less than best consideration' in 2003, which accelerated the concept of Community Asset Transfer. And an important part of the Coalition Government's Localism Act in 2011 was the launch of the Community Rights, including Assets of Community Value (ACV) and the Community Right to Bid, pausing the sale of ACVs for six months in order that communities might prepare bids to buy buildings and spaces of community value on the open market.

Now we need government to lead a substantial programme of funding and support for community ownership, including a new Community Ownership Fund to enable communities to ensure that valued public land, buildings and services are retained for community benefit.

<sup>6</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/508307/160316\\_Land\\_disposal\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508307/160316_Land_disposal_guidance.pdf)

## Community ownership policy framework

There are two main policy frameworks that support community ownership of public buildings and spaces – Community Asset Transfer and the Community Right to Bid. These are two different policies, with different implications and drivers.

### What is Community Asset Transfer?

Community Asset Transfer is the transfer of management and/or ownership of public land and buildings from its owner (usually a local authority) to a community organisation for less than market value, in return for social, economic or environmental benefit locally.

The existence of a clear Community Asset Transfer policy means the council is more likely to be strategic about how its buildings and spaces can benefit the community if they become surplus to requirements. And communities can clearly understand the processes and decision-making criteria they need to address to achieve community ownership through asset transfer.

The FOI results show that less than half of councils have a Community Asset Transfer policy.

### What is Community Right to Bid?

Communities can nominate any public or private land or buildings in their community as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) with their local authority. If it meets the criteria for listing as an ACV, and if it ever comes up for sale in the future, the Community Right to Bid can be invoked. This puts a six month pause, or moratorium, on the sale to allow the community to raise funds to buy it. At the end of the six month period, the owner does not have to sell to the community and they can sell at whatever price they choose.

This can be an important right if a public building or space is put up for sale on the open market and the council has not considered community ownership through Community Asset Transfer.

Buildings and spaces can only be recognised as ACVs if they produce social benefit or wellbeing through their current or 'recent past' use, such as sport, community centres, culture or recreation. Once listed the ACV stays on the local authority register for up to five years, after which point it can be re-nominated.

## Local government – a Council getting it right

Kirklees Council offers tailored support to community organisations as part of their Community Asset Transfer policy. If an initial expression of interest is accepted, the Council offers support in developing a business case and governance, as well as small grants of up to £5,000 to assist groups with prefeasibility and/or legal costs.

Kirklees Council also offers some revenue support for community organisations – typically for building running costs, of up to 15% of the average of the previous two years' running costs. Groups can also apply to the Council for a loan if external capital grant funding (e.g. lottery funding) requires match funding, with loans of up to £100,000 available.

The Council is also open to offering freehold transfers, as well as long leasehold.

**"Asset transfer puts communities directly in control, allowing them to develop their own communities. We see that in the assets we have transferred so far: it builds confidence, capability and local pride. People see the fruits of community action, and they want to do more."**

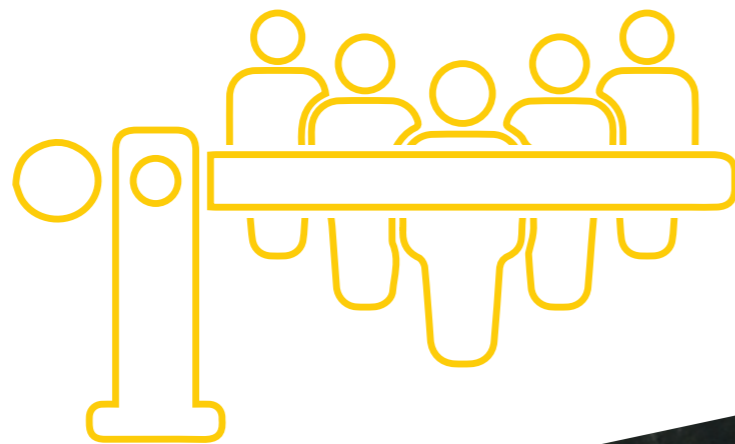
**Councillor Graham Turner,**  
**Cabinet Member – Corporate (Place, Environment and Customer Contact Services)**





# Barriers to community ownership

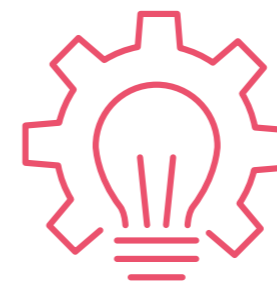
Whilst community ownership is a powerful alternative to losing our buildings and spaces to private use, with many other benefits for the community, it is not a straightforward option for a local community organisation.



## Funding

Private developers will have money at the ready, so community organisations need help to:

- Pay specialists such as legal, architects and surveyors to check out and advise on technical issues to do with the acquisition or the physical building itself
- Hire expertise to help with setting up a new organisation, write a business plan and undertake community consultation
- Access capital funding to make the purchase and pay for development and working capital
- Make refurbishments or changes to the building .

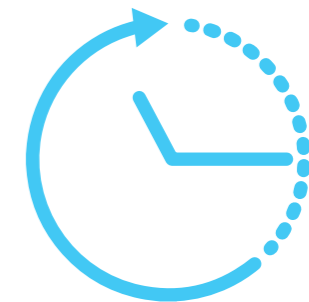


## Expertise

Taking ownership of a public building or space can be complicated, and community groups may not immediately have this expertise. Competing with the private sector through the Community Right to Bid for example, can be particularly tough as they are often going up against large organisations with significant expertise and ready-available capital.

## Time

Community organisations using the Community Right to Bid to take on ownership are only given six months to prepare everything necessary to make a credible offer to the owner. Often this will be the first time they have ever had to complete the process.



## Clear process

Most councils do not have a Community Asset Transfer policy, which means there is no clear process for a community organisation or the council itself to follow.



# Save Our Spaces calls for change



## Locality is calling for:

01

Central government to kickstart a **Community Ownership Fund** with £25m a year, and coordinate other funders to build a pot of £200m a year for five years. This should include using £500million from Dormant Assets funds (unclaimed pensions, insurance, stocks and shares).

02

A change to the **Right to Bid** legislation to give community organisations one year, rather than the current six months, to prepare a bid to purchase.

03

The Right to Bid to become a **Right to Buy** so local community groups have a first right of refusal ahead of private competition.

04

Every local authority to establish a **Community Asset Transfer policy** strategically embedded with a cabinet member responsible for community assets.

05

Every local authority to offer **low cost or zero interest loans** for community groups to purchase public buildings and spaces.



# locality

the power of community

## About Locality

Behind the scenes in our communities, driven and dynamic local community organisations are working tirelessly to create a fairer society.

They step in when other people look away. To fill a need that's not being met. They create spaces at the heart of our communities where everyone belongs and where local people can shape their own future.

They know the place, the people, the needs and they care. Their work is nimble, cost effective and responsive. And their solutions work better.

Every week over 400,000 people walk through their doors, and ultimately lives are transformed.

## That's the power of local community.

Locality is the national membership network supporting community organisations to be strong and successful.

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