

The transfer of public leisure facilities to volunteer delivery

Research report
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Summary

A transfer of public leisure facilities towards volunteer delivery, mainly in response to funding cuts, could represent a transformation of leisure services. Benefits of this transfer include: facilities remaining open, they become more responsive to local needs, volunteer management is more innovative and focussed on this particular facility, costs are reduced, and facilities may be eligible for other grant sources. Volunteering itself provides a set of significant rewards for the volunteers. A limitation of this process is that unless volunteer groups in disadvantaged areas are supported the facilities where an asset transfer is practical will be concentrated in areas where local people have high levels of skills, confidence and already feel empowered. However, such support services have themselves been cut. To be sustained transfers will need to be economically viable and continually recruit new volunteers to take on the leading roles in groups. Local government will lose ability to plan strategically. The fast pace of transfers partly reflects a reluctance to grasp the political nettle that public employees are being made redundant, and if facilities are to remain open volunteers will have to take their roles. It means asset transfer can be a short term fix to react to budget cuts while keeping facilities open. It may also have galvanised volunteers to come forward and a re-emergence of the voluntary sector as a provider of local services, reflecting a local sense of ownership and responsibility.

1. Introduction

This is a report of a study of leisure facilities which have experienced, or are planning for, a transfer of service delivery from paid staff to volunteers; known as asset transfer. The findings are structured as outcomes of this process which might be regarded as positive and as a challenge, although this depends on one's perspective and it's possible to view most outcomes both ways. It is impossible to make an overall judgement on the process because outcomes can't be measured, our study is relatively small and longitudinal research is needed to see if these changes are sustainable. However, the consequences of transferring delivery of services to volunteers could represent a transformation of public leisure services. The issues around the transfer of facilities to volunteers are politically sensitive and may also involve negotiations between local authorities and volunteer groups. For these reasons we have not named any of the facilities where we have conducted research to respect confidentiality.

This report complements Sport England's advice on asset transfer (1) The Sport England advice is a valuable 'how to do it' resource for community groups and local authorities. Our report raises broader issues including the implications of; the paces of change, of budget cuts and of a changing balance between local authority and volunteer control of facilities.

2. Methods

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with facility managers, local authority managers, volunteers and support organisations. These were conducted between March and August 2014. They covered 10 facilities; including libraries, museums and sports centres; in 10 different local authorities. The range of interviewees, facilities and local authorities provided different perspectives and showed that while there are a set of common issues there is no common approach. An on-line questionnaire survey was promoted through the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity. This produced too small a response to use in this report but some respondents provided valuable interviews.

3. Findings

3.1 Facilities have stayed open

A major impetus for involving volunteers more in the delivery of leisure services is that this has prevented the service closing, frequently as a consequence of cuts to local government budgets. Local government is adapting to average cuts in expenditure between 2010 and 2015 of £130 per person (2) although these have been significantly higher in the North of England, more socially deprived areas and Labour controlled authorities. Cutting expenditure on leisure services has been a way of saving money on less essential services, although they are politically important. Volunteers may take roles in governance or delivery of services or both. For example, a trust managed by volunteers may take over delivery of a swimming pool, but still employ paid staff to manage the pool on a day-to-day basis and provide life guards and swimming lessons. Alternatively, a library service may retain paid staff at a management level, but increasingly use volunteers to provide the counter service or support users. In other instances volunteers may become trustees to manage a library and staff to deliver the service. In some cases volunteers are working alongside paid employees. Thus there are many different permutations of paid staff and volunteers, but a common thread is that the use of volunteers has saved costs.

3.2 Improving links with the local community.

Another major impetus for involving volunteers has been to make the facility more responsive to the needs of the local community. Some local authorities have had a long-term objective of involving local people more in the delivery of local services to achieve this. As a consequence facilities managed by volunteers may become much more outward looking and innovative. For example, a library might be seen more as a community building which might be adapted to host a range of other functions and thus increase its use, income and sense of ownership by local people. Similarly a swimming pool might diversify to run social functions or run extra sessions for specific groups. A museum might increase school use or offer a venue for weddings.

These innovations have partly been to increase income but where volunteers have taken over management of a facility they have injected enthusiasm and energy to develop its use. In some cases this has meant the facility becomes more focused on the needs of users as the volunteers have a greater incentive to increase income and just provide a good service. For example, swimming pools in our sample have greatly increased the number of swimming lessons and stressed the importance of the quality of particular instructors. In one case a clear contrast was made between the tendency of the previous management to cancel sessions with

no notice and the new management's policy of attempting to provide an alternative instructor if at all possible.

An advantage of volunteer management is that all the volunteers' time and energy is focussed on this one facility.

3.3 Developing volunteers and providing benefits of social inclusion

Involving volunteers can be a means of developing people through the experience of volunteering, making them feel part of their community and valued, in the sense of social inclusion. Research has shown that volunteering can provide significant personal rewards and these may develop as the volunteer becomes more involved. For example, for long-term volunteers, extending their event volunteering after the 2002 Commonwealth Games, volunteering in this role became a major part of their lives (3) and was especially important for those who were retired or unable to do paid work. This was clearly the case at one of the museums in our study where a small group of regular volunteers supported the service as guides to the public and school groups. It has also been shown that young people may become involved in volunteering primarily to enhance their employability but through the experience become aware of other benefits (4).

Different people will obtain different rewards from volunteering depending on their circumstances. This has to be recognised in volunteer management, as well as the need to allow volunteers to decide how much time they want to contribute and to withdraw if they wish.

A caveat to seeing the increased involvement of volunteers as providing benefits for the volunteers is that volunteers may feel a degree of coercion if they feel they have to volunteer to keep a local facility open.

3.4 Reduced costs to the local authority and in running the facility

Local authorities have reduced running costs – which was the main aim of transfers. The facilities themselves are cheaper to run because if managed by a trust they are eligible for at least 80% non-domestic rate relief. Trusts have been more active in seeking favourable utility deals. They will be eligible for grants not obtainable by the local government. These grants may be important in meeting future capital costs on aging buildings. However, an increase in the number of facilities run as trusts will mean volunteer groups will have to compete more fiercely for the grants available. Further, significant capital grants are only likely to be available for facilities owned by trusts or with lease of 25 years or over.

3.1 to 3.4 would generally be regarded as positive outcomes of the process. We now consider outcomes which could be regarded as challenges or more contentious.

3.5 Are volunteers replacing paid employees?

Local authorities and politicians are generally unwilling to admit volunteers are replacing paid workers. However, there have been significant cuts in local authority staff and volunteers are enabling facilities to stay open. In some cases the process is obvious: a library

will close unless volunteers are found to run it and local library staff have been made redundant. In other cases the process is more subtle; maybe to keep a library open a volunteer is recruited to work alongside a single paid employee, where previously there were two paid staff. Local politicians and volunteers have come to grasp the nettle of this political reality with extreme reluctance. In some cases it is still resisted on principle. In others this principle may be the publicly stated position while in practice politicians and officers are prepared to take a more pragmatic position and the issue of replacing paid employees becomes a large 'elephant in the room'. It is easy to slip from a principled position of volunteers just supplementing and providing something extra to paid staff, to them filling in for staff shortages.

3.6 Can local authority staff be redeployed?

We have not found examples of a trust set up by volunteers managing to re-employ local authority staff on the same pay and conditions. Their budgets do not allow this and even if they could pay the same wages they could not afford to support the local government pension scheme, which is relatively generous. This means that existing local authority staff have to be transferred to other roles or made redundant. The ability of the local authority to do this can determine the viability of a transfer. Local authorities who wish to support a transfer are therefore more likely to facilitate it by this redeployment of staff, if they have the capacity to do this.

3.7 The influence of local politics

Leisure facilities may not have a statutory status (exactly what the legal requirement is to provide libraries is not clear to us) but the facilities have a high political profile and a threat of closure often mobilises a vociferous campaigning group. Thus local politicians may have a strong vested interest in their local facility staying open, and supporting the efforts of volunteers if this is necessary. The ability of them to exercise these interests will depend on the distribution of power in the local council but local politics will have a strong influence which facilities are supported.

Volunteer groups who have developed independently will have a much greater chance of success in arranging a transfer of facilities if they have an understanding of local politics and are supported by key local politicians.

3.8 The distribution of voluntary capacity is uneven

The groups we have examined who have taken over responsibility for facilities are characterised by high levels of skills, confidence and social capital. Groups of trustees may often include people with experience of finance, publicity and business related skills. They also require time, enthusiasm and confidence. Volunteering is not evenly distributed across social classes and neither is this pool of collective resources, which could be regarded as social capital (5, 6). Further, those living in socially disadvantaged areas may feel a greater sense of powerlessness, discouraging them from taking action.

This means that if volunteers are motivated by a local cause, such as the closure of their local library or swimming pool; the ones in more affluent areas may find it easiest to recruit volunteers with the capacity to take them over. Only if these volunteers can be motivated by

a general sense of philanthropy will their enthusiasm and energy be transferable beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

Emerging volunteer groups in disadvantaged areas need much more support, and over a longer time. These support services have been one of the first areas of local government to be cut. Without this support facilities are more likely to be closed in disadvantaged areas and more likely to be transferred to volunteers in more affluent areas. Once a facility is closed it will be extremely difficult to generate volunteer support to reopen it.

Another concern is that volunteer led groups may rely excessively on the energy, skills and enthusiasm of one or two key members. This makes them vulnerable to changes in personnel.

3.9 The pace of budget cuts may outstrip the speed at which volunteer groups can be developed.

Support agencies and local authorities realise that the cultivation of voluntary capacity; especially in more deprived areas where the population have lower levels of personal resources; takes time. Developing local communities can be a slow and labour intensive process – the Sport England advice (1) notes this may take months or years! So even if local government is fully committed to this objective their capacity to achieve it might be outstripped by the need to make funding cuts quickly. At the same time as Councils for Voluntary Service and Volunteer Centres are facing increased demands for support from voluntary groups, their own resources may be being cut.

On the other hand, the need to react to funding cuts quickly has been the catalyst for the development of groups of volunteers who may have had to rapidly change from a campaigning group to one which will need to manage a facility if it is to survive.

The need to make the politically difficult compromise, between strongly held views that employees should not be replaced by volunteers and the implications of budget cuts, may have further reduced the time voluntary groups have been given to develop and plan.

3.10 The loss of government's ability to plan strategically and to meet social objectives

The loss of control of facilities will reduce the ability of local government to plan strategically. For example, how can it apply a collections policy to a library service with fragmented ownership or plan swimming pool or grass space provision to meet the needs of all the community if some facilities are independently managed? It may lose economies of scale, for example by the provision of central support services. Some groups of volunteers may have a very positive disposition towards helping the local community and the sensitivity of trustees to local needs may mean they are more responsive to these. It is in volunteers' interests to maximise use of their facility to engender a sense of ownership. If a trust is a charity it must have aims to serve the whole community. However there is also the danger that groups of volunteers will prioritise their own interests above those of the general community. For example, a football team taking over management of a pitch may regard it as 'their own'.

3.11 The potential loss of core skills and compromise of standards

If paid employees are replaced by volunteers will core skills be lost? For example, skills of librarianship or museum curatorship, which paid employees, may have invested a degree in obtaining, may be replaced by relatively unskilled volunteers. Of course, volunteers taking new roles have the opportunity to learn new skills and develop themselves. Concerns were expressed that standard health and safety procedures might be compromised. Hypothetically maintenance, such as grass cutting, might be done with sub-standard equipment, or swimming pool safety might be compromised. However, no specific examples of this were provided.

3.12 Are transfers sustainable?

There are two dimensions to sustainability, economic and the enthusiasm of volunteers. Local authority transfer to volunteer led trusts has typically been conditional on a viable three year business plan, which often involves some public subsidy. However the facility will need to increase income and decrease costs to become self-sufficient after that. In how many cases will this be practical? As noted above, under trust management the facility will benefit from relief on non-domestic rates, will be likely to be paying staff lower wages, will not be supporting a staff pension scheme, will be looking to innovative ways of income generation, will be more customer focussed, may be able to gain reductions in utility costs and will be eligible for new grants. In all these respects they are similar to the benefits of converting public facilities to trust status which leisure has experienced since the 1990's (7).

In terms of volunteer enthusiasm, groups may have coalesced around the goal of preserving a much valued local facility, possibly used by several generations. Having converted enough of this enthusiasm from campaigning for a facility's existence to managing it, can this be sustained once community management becomes the norm? In this respect they may be different from the previous generation of leisure trusts because trustees have been developed and recruited in a hurry from a pool of volunteers who were initially a campaigning group. They may not necessarily have the skills and experience which the earlier generation of trusts could select for when appointing trustees. Further, the trustees may be required to research and establish the appropriate legal identity for their trust and do all the work themselves to prepare a viable business plan.

Experience of sports clubs run by volunteers shows that while many have been in existence for over 50 years, the smaller ones are vulnerable to the loss of a few core members. Groups of trustees in volunteer led facilities are relatively small, 8 to 12, so are similarly vulnerable. To be sustainable they will need to convert people with a general good will to the facility, to people who get actively involved in a limited way, to people who are the next generation of core volunteers. This will require an active policy of community engagement.

3.13 The need for a co-operative relationship of trust between local authorities and volunteer groups.

A transfer will be much more practical if local government and volunteers work together co-operatively to achieve it. Local government may employ volunteer support agencies to assess the viability of transfers, produce draft business plans, propose the most appropriate legal identity for the new organisation and develop a new volunteer group. Even if they do not do this, they can offer supportive advice, support running costs during a transition to

independence and assure support with future potential capital costs. Voluntary groups need to be sensitive to the political difficulties local officials and politicians need to deal with.

An alternative is that the local authority gives no support and volunteers attempt to extract maximum advantage from publicity critical of local government's position; which they may see as an extension of their original campaigning role.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Overview

The process of transfer is rapid. We cannot tell how widespread it is but where it occurs its consequences are significant. Local Authorities have to balance making budget cuts with finding a politically acceptable solution to maintaining local facilities. Community groups have to transform from campaigning to delivery. Both need to act very quickly.

Several challenges were explicitly labelled as 'elephants in the room' in that official political discourse ignored them – for example; councillors cannot talk openly about replacing paid employees with volunteers.

A significant finding is that there is no set model. This means volunteer groups have to plan their own legal structure and business plan – although they may be helped by support agencies and local government, where resources are available. A negative consequence is that this process can drain volunteer effort. A positive is that it allows for local autonomy.

While one hesitates to use the politically charged description of a 'Big Society' (8) increasing the voluntary involvement of people in providing services for their own community has many positive outcomes. To an extent it may represent an expanded sense of civic responsibility in the sense of voluntary action advocated by Beveridge in 1948 as initiated by citizens for the public purpose of helping fellow citizens (9) although in most cases it is a reaction to a threatened facility closure. Might it be the stimulus for more active community involvement in the sense of people taking a responsibility for creating their own leisure facilities? Is it possible to transform attitudes from an expectation that such facilities will be provided in exchange for one's taxes to an expectation that they will only be provided if one actively engages in providing them oneself and individuals have a responsibility to do this?

In short, will the continuation of such facilities be made possible by a transformation in public attitudes? Volunteers have different motives. The promotion of volunteering to young people tends to promote instrumental motives, such as enhancing one's employability (10). Volunteering will always be a mixture of self-interest, altruism and philanthropy and volunteer managers have to deal with this mix. However, ultimately a policy of asset transfer to volunteer led groups requires more volunteers to step forward.

4.2 Recommendations

From our limited survey we can see that good practice for local authorities would ideally involve supporting a voluntary group by developing local interest, helping prepare a business plan, offering the most appropriate legal identity while making clear the options, and helping recruit trustees. Local government can commission volunteer advice centres to do this, or provide this support themselves. We did find examples where this was done.

However, this process requires resources – which may already have been cut. It requires more time and effort in more disadvantaged areas, and this may not be possible in the need to react to cuts quickly.

Even if resources are not available to give this support, they need to be allocated to considering the long-term consequences of asset transfer. This will have to be balanced against the political prerogative of preserving a local facility while making budget cuts. An awareness of the advantages of asset transfer to volunteers should at least allow this to be done with a positive vision – which is a service led by and responsive to local people and where volunteering enriches the community as a whole.

Voluntary groups themselves should try and maximise local interest and support. They should convert as much of this as possible to taking a core role in the organisation, while recognising that volunteers may all have different amount of time and skills to contribute. One can think of a volunteer group as layers in an onion. The people with general good will are on the outside layers. The core is the volunteers who take key roles as trustees. In between are volunteers with different levels of commitment, but the key is to blend them all together and encourage as many as possible to gravitate to the core to ensure sustainability. One mechanism is to attach peripheral volunteers to act as ‘shadows’ for the core ones.

Voluntary groups should be sensitive to local politics and the difficulties local councillors and officers face, as Sport England’s asset transfer guidance (1) recommends, community groups need to ‘be alive to the political dynamics at play locally’. In changing from a pressure group to a potential management group they need to work closely with local politicians and officers.

4.3 Research priorities

It is an academic cliché to say ‘more research is needed’ but in this case our pilot has shown an urgent need to understand how transfers can be facilitated and made viable, and the long-term consequences. Research could focus on facilities which have been managed by volunteers for over three years to learn why they have been successful. It could produce different models for new transfers to choose from. It could monitor a group as it changed from campaigning for a facility to stay open to assuming management responsibility: what helped it do this and what challenges had to be overcome? As there is no central record of asset transfer there is no definitive picture of the number of facilities transferred.

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