

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING: Ashton Community Trust

The Asset: Belfast Education & Library Board New Lodge Youth Club

New Lodge Youth Centre is a voluntary youth centre based in the New Lodge. The youth centre physical building is owned by the Belfast Education & Library Board (BELB). The management of the facility and youth services provided transferred from BELB to Ashton Community Trust management in April 2012 through a one year Memorandum of Understanding. The Centre, better known as the Grey Gables, had in recent times been unable to function to its full capacity because of resource issues, that being staff and finance. As a result, an already skeletal range of services were in danger of being further reduced to a bare minimum before it was eventually agreed to place the centre under community control.



The intention of the Ashton Community Trust is to increase programme delivery and maximise the overall potential of the centre by ensuring greater accessibility and usage by local young people.

ACT's venture into the New Lodge Youth Club is, as noted above, in response to the demand and need to provide effective youth services. Education & Library Boards in NI have responsibility for the provision of youth services and Belfast Education & Library Board has a policy that acknowledges that it will transfer of responsibility to provide youth services to local communities if they demonstrate they can provide a better service.

At the point at which Ashton stepped in to take over the provision of youth services, the BELB were beginning to run down the service, from full time to part time and it was recognised that the BELB staff were working beyond their individual capacity in trying to keep the youth service alive. The cause for the decline in services are many and it is all too easy to simply criticise the management model of BELB as the reason for poor services and disengaged youth. However there was a disconnect between what was a meaningful and well intentioned public sector management and investment model for youth in the area and the uptake of services provided. Simply transferring responsibility to the local community is not an immediate remedy to engaging young people and providing the services they need. Though the local community, has a track record in working with young people and is able to draw upon this experience as it seeks to bring the building back into use.

The centre (the physical space) and the services needed by the youth of New Lodge is in need of ongoing investment. At this stage ACT is subsidising activity by approximately £50,000 per year

(over 3 years), clearly this is not sustainable for ACT in the longer term, but for now is manageable from profits generated from other activity. The challenge is to make the centre at the very least break even within three years. Chief Executive Paul Roberts notes;

'The project has been taken forward by us in response to need by the youth of the New Lodge and in consideration of the need to deliver a raised level of service not presently available. That in itself will need substantial and ongoing investment. There is a statutory responsibility to provide that investment but budgets and the level of commitment needed are not always evident. In this instance the local education and library board would be more than keen to transfer (or offload) the asset to the local community, but as it stands, the building and the services it provides are a financial and management liability. Co-designing a solution between BELB and ACT will be necessary to take the project forward. Though it may suit BELB to transfer the asset, at this point in time its not appropriate for ACT to enter into an agreement to take on a long term lease or ownership arrangement. Present arrangements are for a yearly lease and as the project moves onto a more sustainable footing then looking at changing that arrangement will then be possible.

The arrangement at present is that BELB continues with the management function, that is for the maintenance of the facility and other direct costs whilst the services are developed and delivered by New Lodge Youth Centre. Existing BELB staff have been seconded rather than TUPE'd to Ashton. ACT are introducing a completely different management culture and understanding on how services are designed, delivered and consumed by users. That cultural shift requires a degree of flexibility from staff and a willingness to try untested approaches. An immediate consequence of this new injection of enthusiasm has led to a substantial increase in usage and in line with increased usage comes increased running costs; more heat, more electricity, more staff, more resources. The agreement to take on the centre hasn't been about rationalisation of services, appropriate services demand appropriate finances. Generating finance necessitates reimagining and maximising usage of the physical space and developing a business model to sustain provision in the longer term.

Ashton are keen to explore the development opportunity in respect of reconfiguring and reimagining how the building is used. For example the centre is only for use by those aged 5-25 and they would like to consider in what ways it can be made available for under 5's. There is also a need to explore how the physical space of the Youth Centre can be utilised by older people. Though the building has conditions on its uses in order for it to be sustainable its needs to have a wider functionality for a broader range of people.

Taking over the asset has provided some quick wins says Paul. *'New job opportunities have been opening up for those staff seconded from BELB, who are now part of a larger organisation. That and the increased usage and a dedicated space for ACT's own youth development team are all positive outcomes'*.

Key Learning Points

- Organisations looking at developing or taking on the provision of youth services and youth centre assets need to understand that the model as it currently exists won't make money, thats the bottom line
- You need to go into this with your eyes wide open and acknowledge that in the pursuit of better services for local communities you are potentially taking on a liability rather than an asset to support you deliver those services.

- If a new model is to work it needs the intervention of statutory agencies, to provide capital development support and to provide long term lease conditions (20/25) that will allow organisations to invest in the physical space for longer term social development return'.

For Ashton Community Trust that is the long term goal and in progressing on that journey they are content with the memorandum of understanding underpinning arrangements at present. The process is an iterative one and incremental gains continue to move the organisation through the stages of asset transfer.