

BAME-led community organisations and community asset ownership

Inspirational stories and recent successes

Community Ownership & Management of Assets programme

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Introduction

The experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) led community organisations seeking to acquire and manage assets for organisational and community benefit is not well understood or researched. In its 2015 report [A Place to Call Home](#), Ubele¹ made an important contribution to this theme by highlighting some of the challenges and vulnerabilities for BAME-led asset based organisations operating in the current environment. The report found barriers of limited capacity and resources amongst groups and gave voice to some of the issues that were felt to be going unheard, e.g. in relation to the negative impact of gentrification and rapidly increasing rents in some areas of the country. The report also referred to the lack of effective succession planning and strategies to minimise the loss of community assets used by the BAME-led community organisations that were interviewed in the creation of the report.

Locality, in partnership with Ubele and Voice4Change (a national advocate for the BAME voluntary and community sector) worked together to ensure that there was representation from BAME-led community organisations within the COMA programme. Around 15 BAME-led community organisations are involved in partnership areas within the COMA programme.

In late 2015, Locality, Ubele and Voice4Change ran a webinar to engage people in discussions about equality and diversity and community asset transfer. As a result of feedback it was apparent that there was still a need for good

COMA programme

The Community Ownership and Management of Assets (COMA) programme was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in 2015/16. It supported 51 partnerships between community organisations and local public organisations with progressing ambitious multiple community asset ownership and management projects and ground-breaking single asset transfer projects to produce novel and replicable learning for other places.

¹ Ubele are a not-for-profit organisation which seeks to develop and implement local innovative action-learning interventions based upon leadership development, community enterprise development and social change for African and Caribbean communities within the UK.

quality examples of community asset transfer to BAME-led community organisations to contribute to the paucity of information on the subject. Therefore, this case study explores the community asset transfer journeys of three BAME-led community organisations who are currently on the COMA programme:

- The Lewisham Sports Consortium in London.
- The Manchester Congolese Organisation in Manchester.
- The Soothill Community Association in Kirklees.

BAME-led community organisations like those examined in this case study show a desire to step into the field of community asset transfer as a means to deliver creative, proactive and culturally specific interventions to address some of the more complex and socially challenging problems in communities. Their journeys should serve as inspiration to other BAME-led community organisations who aspire to, and are working hard towards, transforming community assets in their own neighbourhoods.

In addition, this case study should help local authorities to consider how they can use asset transfer to support their own equalities strategies. It also stands as a reminder to local authorities on their role in facilitating dialogue with all sections of their communities when scoping out options for asset transfers.

Context

The Lewisham Sports Consortium (LSC)

The LSC is a black-led South London based community organisation which was set up in 1998 and registered formally as a charity in 2004. The LSC was formed in direct response to the lack of suitable and affordable football and recreation spaces, with access and provision for sports people from BAME backgrounds in the borough. The LSC had an interest in the Firhill Road Sports Ground, which had been unused for approximately 16 years, and had become a rubbish dump and a hub for anti-social behaviour. In 2000 there was a fire in a building (graffiti suggested a racist motive behind that event). Since the fire, the LSC have been operating out

of two temporary recycled huts and three ship containers which were donated by Lewisham Council and the local synagogue.

The LSC have worked hard for 12 years to transform the site into a sports and recreational ground which is now used by local people for sports, fun days, cultural events and school holiday programmes. The LSC have recently agreed a 30 year lease with Lewisham Council to manage the site. With this long lease they will be able to apply to charitable and other funders for the necessary capital investment to build essential sports facilities. New architectural plans are designed to increase and widen the use of the site, creating local employment opportunities and a sustainable future for the organisation.



Image: The playing fields - before and after rubbish clearance

The Manchester Congolese Organisation (MCO)

The MCO is a volunteer-led community organisation engaging Congolese people in Manchester to reconnect and rebuild their lives so that they can achieve their full potential and continue to contribute to the local community. They provide health, financial and employment advice, a homework club (pictured right), ICT and ESOL classes and cultural activities.



The MCO are currently seeking the asset transfer of a community building from Manchester City Council from which they can continue to run their services for Congolese people and the wider community.

The Soothill Community Association (SCA)

The SCA in Kirklees, Yorkshire, operates out of the Soothill Community Centre. A well-used hub that has been in operation for over 40 years, it delivers training and career opportunities, and is used at weekends for private parties.

The current leadership team, who are all from a BAME background, gradually took on the running of the centre over a seven year period after it became apparent that the management role was becoming too much for the previous incumbents to contend with. Since then the building has been extensively repaired and well maintained at the group's expense, even though the structure was the council's responsibility before the transfer occurred.



Kirklees Council are one of the 51 partnership areas in the COMA programme. Although the SCA were not included in the council's original community partnership that applied to join COMA, the project was subsequently supported locally in an effort to reduce the council's maintenance and running costs (estimated at £60,000 annually) and to provide the Association with the necessary freedom to develop the asset through community ownership. Unusually, the speed at which the council wanted to move the project towards completion was faster than the group was initially capable of keeping up with. But despite that, a freehold transfer to the Association was completed in late 2015 for less than market value, with the agreement that the building will benefit the whole community, in line with the Council's stated policy.

What support was needed and provided?

All of the three organisations in this case study were at slightly different stages in their asset transfer journey at the commencement of the COMA programme, but the LSC and the SCA were both much further forward than the MCO. Although the menu of support options from the COMA programme was standard, the emphasis on particular activities was different for each project.

The Lewisham Sports Consortium (LSC)

Given that the LSC was close to taking a formal legal stake in the sports ground, a legal evaluation of their lease terms was particularly beneficial for the group. Negotiation guidance was provided in an effort to ensure that the group achieved a ‘fair deal’ that took into account their willingness to take on an extensive maintenance programme at their own expense. Advice was also provided to ensure that the parameters of the LSC’s agreement with the council would enable them to attract future funding from the Football Foundation.

The LSC also levered assistance and goodwill from outside of the COMA programme from other community organisations in the local area. For example, the [Ten-Em-Bee Academy](#), another BAME-led organisation also based in Lewisham, shared their expertise and contacts. The [Bellingham Community Project](#) provided marketing and advertising experience and liaison between other community service providers in the area. And [Phoenix Housing](#), a ‘community gateway housing association’, also committed their corporate support for the activities of the LSC.

The Manchester Congolese Organisation (MCO)

The MCO were members of a wider partnership in Manchester being supported through the COMA programme. As a result they benefited heavily from the mutual support of other organisations within the Manchester partnership and have attended workshops on the basics of community asset transfer (led by Community Matters) and contributed to a community asset

mapping exercise to build up a detailed picture of the socio-economic context that the partners were operating within.

Each community organisation in the Manchester partnership was then given the opportunity of follow-up 1-2-1 and tailored advice and support through access to technical support providers. As a result, the MCO are now working more closely with other organisations locally and are considering submitting an application for another available community space, should their existing community asset transfer application to the council not be successful.

The Soothill Community Association (SCA)

Representatives from the SCA initially met with Kirklees Council to discuss the possibility of an asset transfer and what would be involved. They were informed about the support options available from technical support providers, and worked with the council to identify their priority needs. These boiled down to business planning and an action plan to maximise revenues for sustainability (delivered by Locality).

With the help of the council's lead officer, the Association successfully applied for a grant from the council to meet their capacity building costs (at the time Kirklees Council were running a seedcorn fund to help likely transfer projects to get moving). The group also used the grant for legal advice on the freehold transfer terms and to fund their costs of incorporation.

What has been the impact?

The Lewisham Sports Consortium (LSC)

The LSC hope to use their secure stake in the Firhill Road Sports Ground to help them deliver against their strategic objectives. Over the years the LSC has found that providing access to the sports ground has enabled people from BAME backgrounds locally to determine their own local agenda with regards to sports. As an organisation run and managed by volunteers rooted in the community, they have four new strategic objectives as a result of acquiring the asset:

- Provide social inclusion and community cohesion
- Promote healthy lifestyles and wellbeing
- Enhance open spaces
- Empower and support the local community.

With a longer lease term now a reality, the LSC have ambitious plans to create a building which will enable them to meet their objectives by providing sports changing rooms, toilets, classroom/workshop space and a refreshment area. They are also looking to create an onsite carpark and provide disability access. These objectives also align with Lewisham Council's open spaces strategy.

The Manchester Congolese Organisation (MCO)

The acquisition of the asset will facilitate better public benefit delivery by the MCO as they will have an asset through which improved community services can be offered, i.e. one location and flexibility in delivery models due to not having to chase space within which to conduct their supplementary school activities. It will also provide the MCO with a more sustainable future as income is generated (through unrestricted funds) that the group can deploy for community benefit.

The new asset will create opportunities for volunteering and employment and foster new community groups, community businesses and resources. The group will also be seeking capital investment in the building and developing a local offer for the geographic community as well as improving services for new communities (especially but not exclusively) Francophone African groups.

The Soothill Community Association (SCA)

Since the transfer completed in late 2015, the SCA have begun to implement their revenue and service development plans that were prepared as a result of funding from the council during the feasibility stage. The Association already received some income from ad-hoc private rents, but as a result of a more comprehensive plan for the marketing and utilisation of the community building, a long term nursery tenant has begun to operate from the centre from September 2015.

This mutually beneficial arrangement is planned to continue for 3-4 years and the SCA is now receiving income from the nursery which gets invested back in the building and the community. In addition, the Association are running training sessions helping local people to become qualified Level 2 and 3 in child care. Regular bookings are continuing to come in also. Overall, the post-transfer signs are good for the SCA.

Key elements of success

The following key elements of success have been drawn from across the three examples in this case study. Although each of the projects placed a different emphasis on each one depending on their own situation, they are common to all. Further, they are all generic points that would apply to a 'typical' asset transfer to a community based organisation, and do not display any unique characteristics pertaining to BAME-led community organisations only.

Invest in building positive working relationships with the local authority

Nurturing a partnership approach and building trust and respect with the local authority has been key to the successful progress of all of the projects in this case study. Lead members of the LSC first approached Lewisham Council to discuss the future of the Firhill Road site many years before LSC was formally established. Their advice to other groups starting out with a similar objective in discussion with their local authority is to prepare for a long journey: *“Form close alliances with a number of departments in the council and do not take ‘no’ for an answer - be persistent as you need them on your side.”*

The importance of maintaining a productive on-going dialogue with the local authority was then reconfirmed when the LSC came to negotiate the detailed terms of their transfer agreement with the local authority. They had to take a robust stance to ensure that they came away with a deal that would enable them to achieve their objectives. This would have been potentially more difficult to achieve if they had not spent considerable time beforehand laying the necessary groundwork with the local authority through councillor and officer contact time to build trust and buy-in to their plans.

Plant deep roots into the community

Engaging the local community in an authentic and meaningful way is cited as a main reason for success. Asset transfer projects typically start in response to local needs: *“The centre is used*

by the community for the community” (the SCA). Therefore, the importance of harnessing the involvement of passionate local residents is key - they can bring a lot of expertise, energy and knowledge.

This is essential for all asset transfer projects as volunteers play such a critical role in service delivery as well as during the asset transfer processes itself, although it is inevitable that strategic tasks will be shouldered by a small group of individuals in the form of the leadership team.

Maximise local partnerships and support initiatives

With this reality in mind, care should be taken to avoid an over reliance on a small number of people as it can affect the efficiency and speed of carrying out the necessary feasibility tasks and the transfer negotiation with the local authority. Members of the SCA reflected that their learning curve was possibly too steep at times, but with external support and a lot of enthusiasm they have achieved much in a short time frame: *“With everyone’s input and time we have achieved something that very few have in Kirklees at this time.”*

The role that partner organisations in the local community can play is an important element in making the transfers a success. All of the BAME-led community organisations here made considerable use of their pre-existing social capital as well as growing new and productive relationships with local organisations in order to supplement their established volunteer capacity.

Grasping other opportunities when they present themselves and making the most of them is another important lesson. The COMA programme helped to facilitate a peer learning event in Manchester, led by Ubele, for BAME-led community groups. The session was well attended with local BAME community organisations coming together, to exchange contact details and begin discussions around working together in the future.

Co-ordinated events like this do not have to be expensive to put on, but they can be very powerful in establishing self-help networks and support systems for the long term. For instance, as a result of contributing to a similar initiative the MCO were a lot clearer about the benefits that they could produce for other organisations and a productive project partnership with another local organisation has since flourished.

What have you learnt?

This case study offers some useful insights into the experiences of community asset transfers by three different BAME-led community organisations. As with the key elements of success above, the following lessons are a composite of their experiences which have been distilled from interviews with each of the three groups.

There was an acknowledgement of the challenges of working with local authorities. All of the organisations have fared well in the end, not least due to their own resilience and determination during significant change. But they all had to deal with, variously: inconsistencies in information received from the local authority; delays in decision making by the local authority and a lack of communication and consistent approaches by and between departments. The latter was particularly evident when the political administration changed in one situation, therefore, BAME-led community organisations should note this risk when plotting out their forward plans for asset transfer.

There has been a growing realisation amongst all of the groups of the value of using social capital and social networks and how efforts to do so can produce both in-kind and in-cash economic value that ultimately benefits the community. All of the organisations have successfully tapped into their internal and external capacity to help them to achieve their objectives. For example, the SCA has shown dedication and initiative in using their own resources to ensure that the building has been adequately maintained, even though the physical structure was the responsibility of the local authority previously. This was viewed in a positive light when Kirklees Council considered the group's community asset transfer application.

Brokering new partnerships can also create alternative solutions, as in the case of the MCO, who is now working closely with another local organisation to look at an alternative building on the local market if their asset transfer from the council does not happen.

The value of taking up training opportunities and attending peer learning events, for example those delivered by delivery partners, Community Matters and Ubele, through the COMA programme, and using online resources available on the My Community website, were referred to as extremely helpful interventions. Business planning and internal capacity building with support from COMA and other sources has reaped positive results for all of the organisations shown here, e.g. the production of clear strategies and the generation of fresh ideas for approaching potential funding opportunities such as using crowd funding sites. The vision that the LSC developed enabled them to work more productively with Lewisham Council, and local councillors are now supporting the organisation's drive to raise capital resources to erect a building which will ensure the long term sustainability of the project. Although national programme support cannot be always guaranteed to be available when required, making the most of local opportunities when they are presented is paramount, as is proven by the SCA's utilisation of a seedcorn grant from Kirklees Council.

The importance of succession planning has also been highlighted. The LSC has started to look at this issue in earnest, which according to Ubele's report is quite unusual and hopefully represents the beginning of a wider cultural change amongst the sector. In the LSC's case, focus and attention is being given to youth empowerment, encouraging young people to 'take the baton' of leadership to ensure that the sustainability of the organisation and the valuable culturally appropriate services that they provide. They have been developing the skills of young people and providing them with relevant opportunities to take ownership and leadership within the organisation as a result of discussions with potential youth leaders to decide what happens beyond the 30 year lease.

In conclusion, what emerges from these examples is that all of the BAME-led community organisations have been on a significant journey, and as a result have accumulated a lot of

skills and knowledge. They are also keen to share their learning to support others with similar ambitions for asset transfer. We note that there has not been enough recognition of this type of peer to peer exchange to date. Therefore, we trust that the experiences of these pioneers will be of inspiration and interest to other BAME-led community organisations with a desire to acquire and manage assets for community benefit.

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