

## **Community use of council owned buildings**

### **Main issues**

#### **Brent**

A strong and vibrant third sector is an essential part of the local community in providing services tailored to local needs. The sector often provides specialised services to 'hard to reach' communities. The council plays a crucial role in supporting this sector, many of whom have limited resources, in not only providing funding but also premises.

The council has a varied approach to letting council owned buildings to the third sector. Many contractual agreements between the council and local organisations were made years ago and may not reflect current council objectives or take into account changes in the local community. These arrangements included transferring some freeholds and setting up some leasehold arrangements. For some there is no formal contract in place. The intention in a number of cases has been to link the rent payable with the use of the property. This has meant that in certain circumstances the rent can be waived because the group concerned is deemed to be producing 'community outputs.' The council now needs to reconsider arrangements for voluntary and community sector use of council buildings to ensure that outputs contribute to the social regeneration of the local area and that arrangements are fair to all sections of the community. Public buildings need to be used to their full potential and all sections of the local community need to be considered.

Brent Council together with Brent Association for Voluntary Action (BrAVA) is looking at the possibility of a voluntary sector resource centre which would be run and managed by the voluntary sector. The project is in the very early stages. It would bring together a range of voluntary sector organisations and although the council may not ultimately be involved in the management of the property, it will have a role in ensuring that the organisations that occupy it operate for the benefit of the wider community.

#### **National**

Community use of public buildings has recently moved up the national agenda. The Quirk Review<sup>1</sup> considers the benefits to councils of transferring assets to local communities. It looks at how councils can realise the benefits of transferring the ownership of assets to a community organisation without risking wider public interests and concerns.

The review argues that transferring community assets to the community can help to unleash the potential of the asset. It can help to engender greater involvement of the community in running the organisation. It also enables them to access funding streams which are not available to councils such as lottery funding. However this needs to be balanced with the finite availability of Council premises and should be looked at from a wider regeneration perspective rather than a property driven agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Making Assets Work, The Quirk Review of Community Management and Ownership of Public Assets, 2007

### **Why are we looking at this area?**

This is an area which has been identified by both officers and members as in need of improvement in Brent. A scrutiny review would look at how the council can develop a clear approach to managing buildings that are leased for use by the community and voluntary sector. It would ensure fairness for all parts of the community are at the heart of this. This could help to inform a wider council policy and strategy on asset management and the third sector. The findings would also feed into Brent's response to the Quirk review.

### **Review should cover:**

- Contractual arrangements for current buildings and consider how they could be standardised
- Good practice from other councils on how they manage their properties with the third sector
- Links to Brent's response to the Quirk review
- Reference to Empowerment White Paper

### **What could the review achieve?**

- Develop a framework for how we make most effective use of our community buildings
- Feed into the Brent Council response to the Quirk Review

| <b>Activity</b>  | <b>Outcome</b>  | <b>Setting</b>     | <b>Officer/s</b>   | <b>Timeline</b> |
|--|---|--------------------|--|-----------------|
| Scope task group activity  | Agreed scope at committee   | Committee          | Richard Barrett<br>Jo Mercer   | Jun 2008        |
| Collate initial data and present to committee  | Committee get initial sense of the situation and can ask questions to shape second paper which will provide analysis  | Committee          | Richard Barrett  | Jul 2008        |
| Collect data and analyse present approach to community use of council owned buildings  | Committee to develop initial idea of factors affecting present situation based on data analysis   | Committee          | Richard Barrett  | Nov 2008        |
| Research context and put together paper on local, national factors and best practice   | Committee to receive report on contextual factors and discuss initial recommendations   | Committee          | Richard Barrett<br>Jo Mercer   | Dec 2008        |
| Have separate task group meeting about particular factor/s arising from reports to committee   | Hear about particular factor/s influencing community use of council owned buildings   | Task group meeting | Richard Barrett<br>Jo Mercer   | Jan if required |
| Best practice example and other witnesses to answer questions on relevant factors to consider <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Council with good policy set up</li> </ul> Other witnesses to outline relevant factors – e.g. Andy Donald on Brent response to quirk review paper, Mike Bibby, on voluntary sector task group and main approach on grants | <p>Presentation of best practice case study and background information to committee</p> <p>Attendance of witnesses to answer questions and aid shaping of recommendations</p> | Committee          | Richard Barrett<br>Jo Mercer<br>Witnesses<br>Best practice presenter | Feb 2009        |
| Draw together key findings from context, data analysis, best practice examples and witness input   | Final report with recommendations agreed at committee   | Committee          | Richard Barrett<br>Jo Mercer   | Mar 2009        |