

Community use of council owned buildings

Main issues

Local

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

There is currently a varied approach to the way the council lets the third sector occupy and use Council space and buildings. A number have been transferred freehold whilst others are let on leasehold arrangements while for others there is no formal contract in place. The intention in a number of cases is to link the rent payable with the use of the property such that in certain circumstances the rent can be waived because the group concerned is deemed to be producing 'community outputs' yet there appears to be no consistent or systematic way of measuring what this means.

Many contractual agreements between the council and the local organisations were made many years ago and may not be reflective of the Council's current objectives or take account of changes in the local community. The council needs to reconsider these arrangements to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all sections of the local community and that their outputs contribute to the social regeneration of the local area. We need to ensure that our public buildings are being used to their full potential.

Brent 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.

Brent is also considering proposals to build a new Civic Centre, this would gather the majority of the councils departments under one roof and would also be available for use by the voluntary and community sector as well as the wider public. The council will need to consider the arrangements for how the third sector will be able to make use of the building.

The role of community use of public buildings has recently moved up the national agenda.

National

The recent Quirk Review¹ considers the benefits to councils of transferring assets to local communities. It looks at how councils can realise the benefits

¹ Making Assets Work, The Quirk Review of Community Management and Ownership of Public Assets, 2007

of transferring the ownership of assets to a community organisation social 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.

Why are we looking at this area?

A scrutiny review should look at how the council can develop a clear approach to the way it manages its buildings that are used by the community and consider whether a Brent Council approach to the proposals set out in the Quirk review is appropriate in a West London setting. This could help to inform a wider council policy and strategy on asset management and the third sector.

Review should cover:

Review contractual arrangements for current buildings and consider how they could be standardised

Gather good practice from other councils on how they manage their properties with the third sector

Speak with third sector organisations about how they would make use of public buildings to be managed

Consider proposals set out in the Quirk review

Review proposals for community use of the new civic centre

What could the review achieve?

Develop a framework for how we make most effective use of our community buildings

Develop a Brent Council response to the Quirk Review