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Public museums in a time of crisis: the case of museum asset transfer

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Abstract

In this paper I explore museum asset transfer, a process whereby community organizations take responsibility for managing and governing museums that local governments previously managed. Museum asset transfer has increased since austerity policies were introduced in the UK following the global economic crisis. I offer a two-part introduction to museum asset transfer. Part 1 is a timeline of policies and political developments informing museum asset

transfer, answering the question 'how did we get to where we are *now*?' In Part 2, with reference to interviews and ethnographically informed data taken from my PhD research into this topic, I identify common challenges experienced by local government employees and community members during asset transfer process. The article concludes with a reflective discussion of the negotiation of my own positionality within the research, specifically the question of how to translate research findings on policy-related topics into publications and initiatives devised for non-academic audiences.

Key words
Community engagement, localism, community ownership, austerity, asset transfer, local authority museums, volunteers, positionality

Introduction

It is a timely moment to review the effects austerity policies are having on museum services provided by local government in England (the municipal layer of government in the UK). Local governments are facing difficult financial circumstances when it comes to their public museum services. Spending by English local authorities on 'cultural and related services' has reduced by an average of 35% between 2010 and 2017.[ii] To quote from a document issued by one of the local authorities featured in this research, 'it should be noted that the museum service is discretionary' (local authority document) meaning there is no legal obligation for local governments to provide a museum service at all.[iii] This makes museums particularly vulnerable in a context of funding cuts.

Despite the growing attention within academic research on the way austerity has undermined the ability of local governments to provide both statutory and discretionary public goods and services (e.g. Gray and Barford 2018), the impact on museums remains under-researched. Comment pieces in the media have begun to draw attention to the drastic

effects of ongoing cuts to public services (Crewe 2016; Chakrabortty 2019). Yet, the specific way the form and function of public services such as museums are changing has often been overlooked in favour of critical analysis of the ideological operations of austerity (e.g. Kelsey et al. 2017). By offering a detailed analysis of one change that has resulted from austerity this article intends to draw out what is currently implicit in those accounts where general narratives of loss overshadow the specific ways austerity is altering worlds. Specifically, the article contributes to the story of the reconfiguration of public museum services by discussing 'museum asset transfer'. This is an emerging practice whereby museums threatened with closure following funding withdrawal from the local authority are taken on by another organization, often one which is heavily reliant on voluntary labour.

Museum asset transfer is part of a drastic shift in who manages and controls the public sector in the UK. The global financial crisis and resulting austerity have accelerated the outsourcing of many cultural and leisure services from the public sector to a mix of commercial and charitable providers as well as the transfer of individual public assets such as libraries, community centres and museums from local authorities to other organizations. Museum asset transfer is distinct from the management of museum services by established charitable trusts, a model which has increased in popularity since the introduction of austerity policies but has been in use in the UK since the 1970s (Babbidge et al. 2006). Museum services outsourced to charitable trusts tend to comprise multiple museums with the trust receiving an ongoing (albeit fluctuating and uncertain) grant from the local authority, which means museums are staffed by paid workers. Museum asset transfer involves a single museum that the local authority no longer considers to be part of the museum service (for a discussion of why this occurs see Rex 2019), which means organizations managing these museums tend to receive no grant funding from the local authority, hence why they are often largely staffed by volunteers. Existing studies of asset transfer have drawn out the limitations

of relying on volunteers to fill gaps left by a diminishing state, with a particular emphasis on the implications for volunteers and the uneven distribution of the financial and social capital needed to undertake transfer (Nichols et al., 2015; Findlay-King et al., 2017; Forbes et al., 2017; Moore and McKee 2013). As Forkert (2016) and Rose (2019) point out, undertaking asset transfer may also be experienced with a sense of political discomfort for those who see their actions as 'complicit with neoliberal ideology that devolves responsibility for public problem-solving onto hard-pressed individuals and communities' (334). Drawing on interviews and ethnographically informed data from the experiences of people involved in three different instances of asset transfer, all of which involved a local authority engaging with an external organization in an attempt to avoid the permanent closure or sale of the museum in question, this article adds to the emerging body of work on asset transfer by illustrating how the main challenges of transfer were experienced by local authority employees, asset transfer volunteers and paid workers.

Although much remains unknown about the scale of museum asset transfer specifically, research into the transfer of assets from local authorities demonstrates the spread of this approach: 6,325 assets are estimated to be in 'community ownership' (a term used when a building is transferred to a non-profit trust, social enterprise or any other type of entity other-than the local authority) with 29% being transferred in the last decade (Archer et al. 2019: 21). Preliminary results from another study into museum openings and closures between 1960 – 2017 attributes 9% of a net decline of around 14% in the number of state run museums operating in the UK since 2000 to museums transferring from direct management by local authorities to trust status (Larkin 2018). Given that the 14% refers to national as well as local authority museums and the 9% refers to trusts as well as museum asset transfers these findings do not allow us to put a precise figure on the number of museum asset transfers in the UK. However, there is clearly a growing trend for museum asset transfer as local

authorities attempt to keep buildings open that they can no longer afford to maintain, operate and staff themselves. As this represents a change in the form and function of museums and their institutional identity, it is paramount that we understand the origins of this process and the issues it raises for those groups involved and society at large. In order to develop an understanding of the distinctive nature of museum asset transfer, it is important to clarify the distinction between this approach and community engagement. As Figure 1 visualises, museum asset transfer is a distinctive phenomenon due to the different processes which led to museums being acquired by groups in this way, the entirely different sets of relations between museums and communities transfer involves, the specificity of the issues raised and the novel set of practices through which transfer is negotiated and administered. However, policy documents and press materials issued by local authorities often use the term 'community management' to refer to museums managed by groups following a transfer (e.g. Quirk 2007). This risks creating the impression of museum asset transfer as a form of community engagement when the two are very different sets of phenomena indeed, as Figure 1 illustrates.

There is another reason for avoiding the 'community management' term, as I do in this article. This has to do with the likelihood that the majority of scholars in the field of museum studies will be more familiar with the community engagement literature than with the specific changes in museum management discussed in this article. In this literature, there is a tendency to regard the greatest level of relinquishing power with the most valuable forms of participation (Morse 2019). In Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969), a commonly cited typology of forms of community engagement, 'citizen control' and 'delegated power' are placed at the top of ladder, implying these are the most favoured forms of participation in what is presented as a hierarchical model. However, as this article will demonstrate, the delegation of responsibility for the full spectrum of museum operations to

groups who feel they have little choice but to become 'community managers' with the alternative scenario likely involving the closure of the museum unsettles the presentation of total control as a desirable outcome. To avoid a confusion of museum asset transfer with a form of community engagement, and given their distinctive origins and implications, this article does not channel the vast literature on community engagement into its analysis, preferring to establish clear ground between two practices which bring into focus different concerns.

	Why?	What?	Who?
Community Engagement	-Diversify audience -Representation -Activism -Policy demands	Museums engaging with communities in different ways with a variety of outcomes	Institutional staff of the museum and visitors/community members
Community Management	-Reduced state spending -Big Society agenda	Community members acquire buildings from local authorities to prevent their closure and/or sale and operate them as museums or community centres	Institutional staff of the local authority (minor role for museum staff) and community members

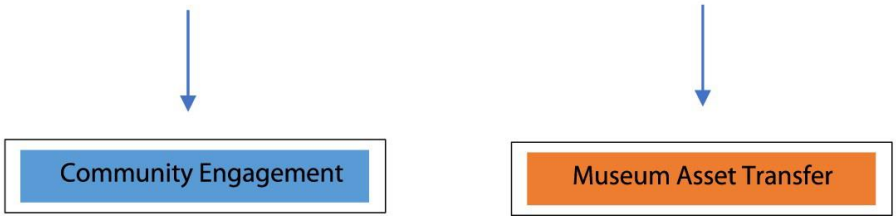

Figure 1: Distinguishing museum asset transfer from community engagement

This paper, then, offers an introduction to the topic of museum asset transfer, marked out as a distinctive object of enquiry. The first part presents a timeline of policies and political developments informing museum asset transfer, answering the question 'how did we get to where we are *now*?' The second part identifies common challenges experienced by local government employees and community members during the process of transfer. The article

concludes with a reflective discussion of the negotiation of my own positionality within this research, which continues to evolve.

Methodology

This article arises out of a doctoral research project (2013-17) into the transfer of local authority museums to charitable trusts and other forms of non-profit organization, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). A multiple case study approach was employed to examine three examples of the use of the community asset transfer process by three local authorities of different types, all of which were located in England. While it is important to acknowledge that asset transfer is occurring across all regions in the UK, the selection of case studies was limited to England due to substantial differences in infrastructure and policy relating to asset transfer between the nations.

In selecting case studies, geographical proximity to the research base was important to allow for multiple site visits and ongoing ethnographic observation of meetings and relevant events. Whilst improvements have been made in the amount of publicly available information about asset transfer since fieldwork began in 2014, there is no requirement for local authorities to publish a list of proposed or completed transfers and there was limited detail available online in general. As such, the process of identifying potential case studies involved speculative emails to representatives from local authorities, arts councils and networks as well as online searches of local newspapers and social media. The question of the 'negative case' where plans submitted to the local authority by a group wishing to transfer a museum into their management are rejected is important. However, the majority of local authority representatives were reluctant to participate in a research process based on this focus. As such, these circumstances are beyond this study's scope, which concentrates on the completed or unfolding transfer of: Manor House Art Gallery & Museum (Bradford Metropolitan District Council, now Ilkley Manor House Trust); Ford Green Hall Museum

(Stoke-on-Trent City Council, now Ford Green Hall Trust) and the Whitaker (formerly Rossendale Museum and Art Gallery, Rossendale Borough Council now The Whitaker Group).[iv] Names have been omitted from interviews to preserve anonymity.

This paper draws on a range of data sources including semi-structured interviews, field notes documenting participant observation and analysis of relevant policy documents. A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior service managers, council leaders, frontline officers and elected representatives with responsibility for culture from each of the local authorities, as well as the range of people involved in transfer in different ways. As one case study involved the in-depth study of discussions within a group working towards acquiring a building and their negotiations with the local authority, a process which lasted approximately two years, the paper also draws on ethnographic field notes documenting 21 formal meetings and 20+ informal meetings attended as part of the research relating to this case.

Although different data generation methods were employed, the research design as a whole was informed by actor-network-theory (Latour 2005), the value of which to museum studies is discussed in full in Rex (2018b). In the interests of brevity, the main point taken from this body of work for this paper is the prompt to trace processes and encounters between people, ideas, objects and other things that occur as part of particular developments, in this case the asset transfer process. This provides an alternative to the tendency to focus on outcomes. Interviews were therefore designed to encourage rich accounts of the processes, challenges and dilemmas involved in facilitating or negotiating transfer against a backdrop of cuts to local government which have been termed both 'unprecedented' and 'the worst in living memory' (Hastings et al. 2013: 5). I transcribed interviews in full and analysed them, drawing on a seminal paper in early actor-network-theory whereby the development of a research process is traced over time, with neologisms and specialised terminology used to

account for how and why certain courses of action are pursued to the exclusion of others (Callon 1986). For clarity, I have omitted the specialised terminologies of actor-network-theory from this article, nevertheless, this methodology has allowed me to undertake a detailed examination of the asset transfer process, the main issues relating to which are presented in the second part of this article. Before this, I start by examining the developments in public policy which created the conditions for asset transfer itself.

Part 1: Policy origins

Community Asset Transfer (CAT) is defined by the UK government's Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG, now MHCLG) as the transfer of management and/or ownership of public land and buildings from its owner (usually a local authority) to a community organization for less than market value – to achieve a local social, economic or environmental benefit. In practice, CAT involves municipal governments transferring the leasehold of assets to community organizations. CAT does not tend to involve a transfer of freehold, which means the outright ownership of the asset is retained by the council despite the length of leases being upwards of 100 years, in some cases. In the UK context, the type of assets transferred ranges from museums to libraries, parks, village halls, community centres, public toilets and sports facilities. Although the collection may be loaned to the transfer organizations it does not tend to be included in the transfer package.

The introduction of the CAT mechanism is a recent phenomenon, although it is useful to place it in the context of public sector reforms in the UK which became a feature of central government policy in the 1970s. Here, the rise of Thatcherism saw a rolling back of the post-war settlement which saw a role for government as a redistributive force and the introduction of mechanisms and justifications for the private sector to play an increasing role as providers of public services and delivers of local government functions. It is possible to identify two ways in which changes in the policy of central government have created an environment in

which the transfer of public facilities and spaces to organizations outside the public sector has become both legally possible and endorsed. Figure 2 shows the key developments at the level of policy and legislation as relevant to transfer, while Figure 3 plots a series of accompanying directives issued by various governments which promoted a shift in the role of local authorities in the provision of public services .

Both timelines offer selective representations of policy change for pragmatic and political reasons. The scope of these timelines is necessarily limited because the aim is to summarise key developments rather than offer a comprehensive history. Yet there is a politics in what is excluded from this timeline. Others have cited the Localism Act (2011), which granted individuals, community organizations and social enterprises a range of legal powers (such as the right to a moratorium period of six months to raise the finance to purchase assets which local authorities intended to sell on the open market) as a watershed moment for the acceleration in asset transfer since its publication a year after wide-ranging austerity measures were introduced (Gilbert 2016: 13). However, in legal terms, the Localism Act is not directly relevant to transfer where ownership is not transferred. This is not to argue that the Act did not form part of the justification for a continued mobilisation of a political rhetoric that enabled the passing of public buildings to self-selecting groups of volunteers or that it did not result in the continuation of an infrastructure with a remit to encourage transfer, only that for the groups involved in the museum asset transfers analysed in this study the process did not involve interaction with the legal powers contained within this Act, hence its omission from this timeline.

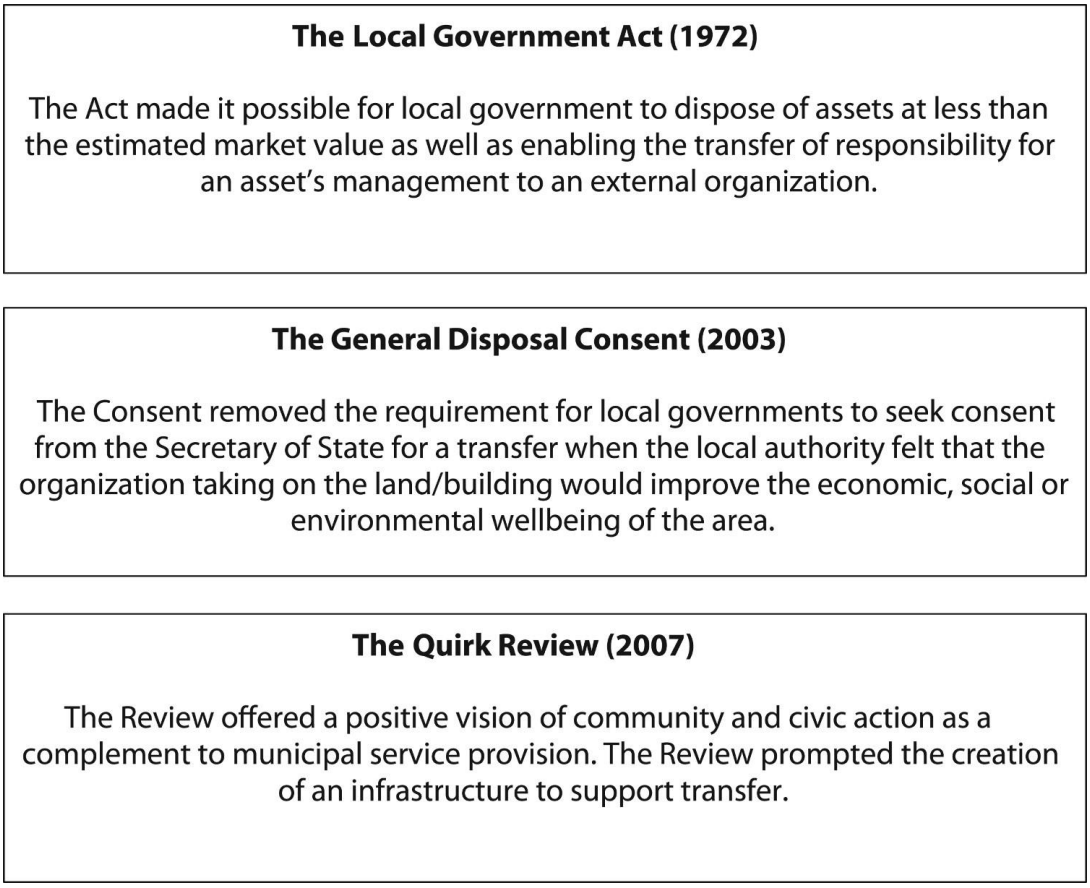

Figure 2: Timeline of policy developments enabling community asset transfer

As shown in Figure 2, local authorities have been able to transfer land or buildings to third sector or voluntary organizations since the 1970s. However, on the basis that local authorities did not make use of this power as it pertains to museum buildings, to any significant degree, until after the austerity programme came into force after 2008, it is possible to argue that it is financial pressures which inform the present trend for museum asset transfer rather than an underlying motivation within local authorities to drastically alter the way their museum services are delivered. As I will go on to argue, there is an important line to be drawn between the way asset transfer was conceptualised in the Quirk Review (2007) and how it has materialised in a post-austerity context with significant implications for the ethics and politics of this approach.

In spite of the drastic changes to the financial position of local authorities since the Coalition government (2010-15) came to power in 2010, the Quirk Review prompted significant investment in an infrastructure designed to encourage engagement in asset transfer, the results of which are still discernible. In the latter stages of the New Labour government (1997-2010), following the publication of the Quirk Review and other policies arguing for community involvement in the design of public services (see Rydin 2013: 177), central government support and funding was provided through agencies for local authorities to develop the processes and policies that would enable asset transfer. Many of the policies and mechanisms developed during this period continue to underpin the practice of local authorities, albeit in a drastically altered context. Likewise, agencies established to advise transfer groups still exist, yet their ability to provide on the ground support has changed. Nevertheless, we see how asset transfer had its origins in policies and initiatives developed by governments of differing political persuasions. However, as Figure 3 illustrates, it must be acknowledged that several important phases of change in the public sector paved the way for the transfer of local authority functions and responsibilities to private companies and third sector organizations, in the first instance, and later to voluntary and community organizations. At a macro political and policy level, such changes provided the foundations for the way the public museum sector is arranged now, with a mix of public, third sector and voluntary organizations involved in the operation of museums.

Figure 3: Timeline of policy developments enabling private and third sector involvement in public service provision

From Figure 3, we see the way successive ministries have issued directives which have altered the role of elected local authorities in the provision of public services and the administration of municipal functions. These developments were accompanied by a discourse which questioned the 'assumption that the functions of local government should be carried out by an authority's own organization and staff' (Stewart 2014: 844), with an anti-bureaucracy rhetoric mobilised to lend further support to these strategies. While this is somewhat of a crude summary, directives issued by the Conservative government (1979-1997) proposed the delivery of services and fulfilling of functions by the private sector

whereas documents issued by the Labour government spoke of a preference for 'Best Value', a move which demanded 'that public sector organizations do not deliver services themselves if more efficient and effective deliverers are available' (see Bevir and O'Brien 2001: 541).

As Martin (2001) points out, these developments led to fundamental shifts in the relationship between central and local government but also encouraged a widespread agnosticism towards the question of who ought to deliver services. Clearly, the requirement for open competition between public, private and third sector providers in many areas of the public sector forms an important part of the history of where we are today, with museum services being provided by a mix of service providers. The work done by the Coalition Government since 2010, particularly its leader David Cameron, has sought to consolidate the idea that the local state is by far the 'best' provider of public services. As Featherstone et al. (2012) argue, the Localism Act (2011) was accompanied by a 'Big Society' agenda wherein the state and society were positioned as mutually exclusive. A loosely-defined 'local' was constructed as in opposition to the state with political rhetoric linking the former with flexibility, openness and dynamism and the latter with rigidness, paternalism and aversion to change (see Newman 2012: 165). This positioning of the 'local' as the preferred level at which services ought to be delivered served the political goals of the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments to reduce the size of the state via dramatic reductions in public spending.

This combination of legislative moves, policy initiatives and discursive formulations all form part of the answer to the question, how did we get here, to this moment, where groups of people who oppose the closure of a public museum are self-forming into charitable organizations and social enterprises and delivering, managing and securing finance for these museums themselves. The next section turns to an exploration of the museum asset transfer

process, in order to bring into focus how policy ambitions developed in one political moment play out when they are realised in a vastly altered context.

Part 2: Stages of transfer and their challenges

Museum asset transfer raises multiple practical, legal, political and ethical questions both for people who are directly involved in the process and for anyone with an interest in how the ownership and control of public resources is being reconfigured in line with a broader moment of change in the size and shape of the state. This article does not claim to be a comprehensive account of the challenges posed by museum asset transfer, and nor are its conclusions universally applicable to each instance of asset transfer as experienced by differently situated individuals and groups. Based on my encounters with three groups who opposed the closure of the museum they ended up managing and the local authority employees they had contact with I outline some of the issues at play around the engagement with and use of the asset transfer process in the context of 21st-century austerity.

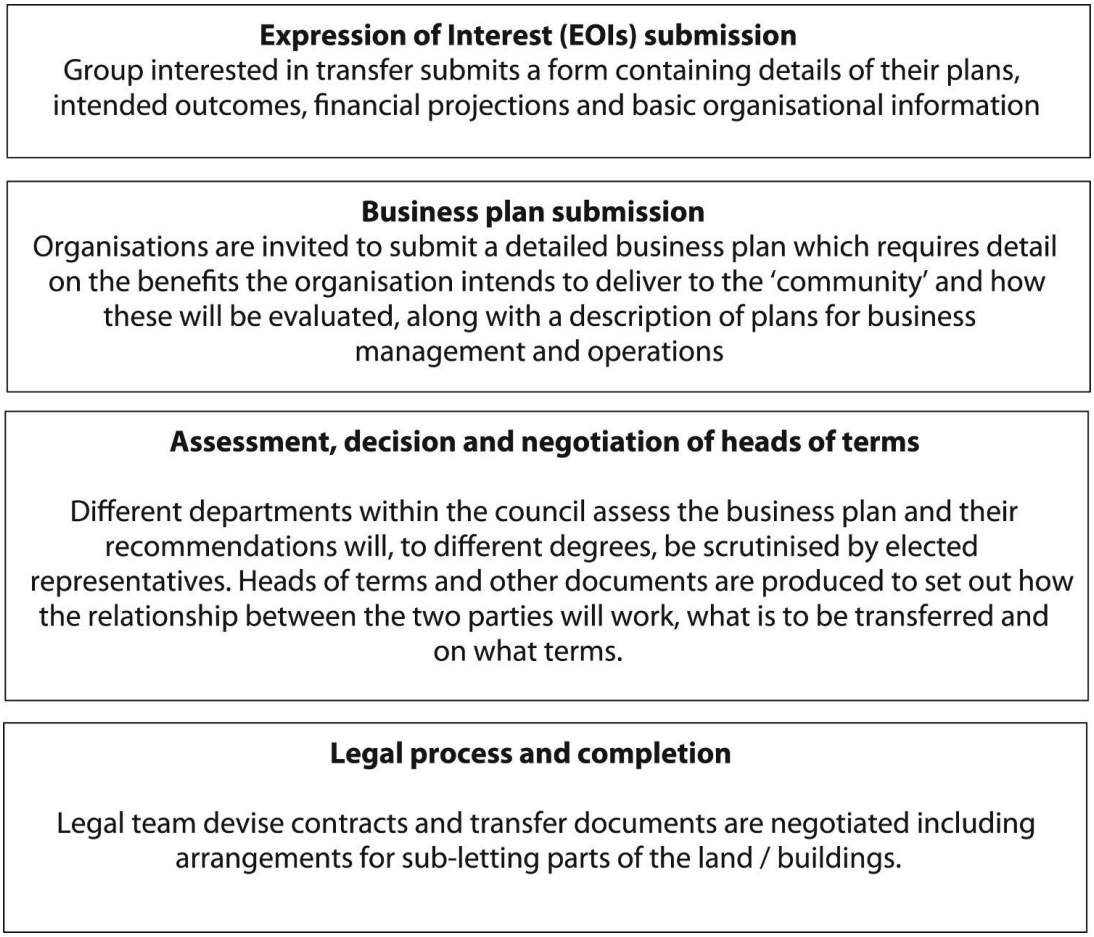

Figure 4: outline of the asset transfer process, adapted from Kirklees Council (2016)

Figure 4 shows a basic flowchart of the asset transfer process. Existing research has emphasised the variation in the way 'asset transfer is instigated, processed and supported' (Findlay-King et al. 2017: 163). While there are significant differences in the specifics of how each case of transfer plays out there are a set of defined linear stages which have to take place in order for the legal transfer of the building to take place. There are no doubt questions to be asked about each stage of this process, about the criteria used to assess EOIs and the assumptions involved, for example. However, my focus in this article is to outline the most important challenges experienced by both parties during the process of transfer itself rather than hone in on points of detail.

Challenge one: mismatched expectations and original intentions

For the majority my research participants it was not their original intention to become managers of a museum. The dilemma of whether to invest themselves in a cause which became about saving the museum from closure by taking responsibility for it themselves was central to the experience of the early stages of transfer. During this stage groups had to decide whether to acquiesce to the request from the council that they proceed with a transfer given the lack of viable alternatives. Due in large part to the different approaches taken as their starting point, this played out differently across the case studies, with the issue in common being whether to configure themselves as an organization in order to go down the route towards transfer, as outlined in Figure 4 earlier.

For one group this preliminary stage was not as tortuous because one of their number had an in-depth understanding of asset transfer and the broader policy agendas linked to its emergence. Each of the three members had also spent the majority of their professional lives in the public sector and local authorities. This meant they were aware of the severity of the financial situation facing local authorities and knew what was expected of them. This was far from the case for the two other groups.

In one case, what was at issue was the failure of initial efforts of a mixed group (including members of the museum friends group and the local residents' association) to campaign against the proposal from the council to withdraw the museum from direct council provision. As an interviewee outlined, 'we set up an action group, a campaign group to try and save [the museum] so that was our first target to try and encourage the council not to close it, so we spent several years doing that' (group member, April 2015). The campaigners already knew of the suggestion to transfer the museum to 'community management' (this was the term used in council documents). However, rather than the information being communicated to them as members of a group which had a long history of involvement with

the museum, this knowledge was acquired due to the routine the museum friends group had established of 'browsing through committee meetings that are recorded' on the council website in order to know 'what is going to go on well in advance' (group member, April 2015).

Via a series of petitions the campaigners sought to register their opposition to the proposal. This was not solely on the grounds of opposition to the withdrawal of funding but due to the specific way the council were proposing to achieve the required budget cuts which was to introduce a classification of the museum service into 'community museums' and the 'city's museums', accompanied by the suggestion of 'possible asset transfer or creation of a local trust' as a viable way forward for the 'community' museums yet not for those museums classified under the title of the 'city's museums' (local authority document). Nevertheless the campaign was lost which meant a decision had to be made as to whether to accept defeat or to proceed with transfer. This resulted in a core group of two forming a trust and beginning negotiations with the council. This brought a fresh set of challenges, which will be discussed in the next section.

The other group's route towards transfer was one of transformation, too. Here, an initial period of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the degree of ongoing engagement in the management of the building expected by the local authority gave way to the realisation that the responsibility for the future of the space was not something any other group or organization were interested in. This was a gradual process which took place over 18 months and was met with initial resistance. As one member of the group put it in an interview conducted during a period when the nature of the relationship between the council and the group had not been determined:

> Bethany: It's interesting that you felt there was a limit to your role, there were certain things you didn't feel it would be appropriate for you to do. My impression from the

council was always that if you wanted to see a big idea realised, it would have to be you making it happen?

Group member: I think that is true actually

Bethany: Did you realise that at the start?

Group member: [long pause] I think what I envisaged at the start was that we would have this great big vision and lots of other people would get excited and sort of take it on and take it forward…I think people have contributed what they were able to contribute but I think you do at some point have to draw a line and say "we've done our best" (group member, interview June 2015)

This comment is notable not only for its stark illustration of a mismatch between expectations and actuality, but also for its seeming resolution to abstain from involvement beyond a certain level. The question of navigating the boundary between forms of involvement and the vastly different implications they have for the level of responsibility the group has for the future of the museum was frequently returned to in discussions amongst group members. In a meeting it was shared that, 'we have to be careful that they [the local authority] do not assume that we will step in to deliver the service', a comment which was echoed by the statement 'yes, we are facilitating a process here, not rolling our sleeves up' (field note, September 2014). Such assertions were made in the initial stages of the project. Yet as various efforts to identify another organization willing to take responsibility for the building failed to materialise a number of the original group members along with others recruited for the express purpose of proceeding with a transfer accepted the fact that it was

not enough to merely ‘facilitate a process’. Eventually, though this stage of the process is beyond the scope of this article, as with the other group, original intention gave way to final acceptance as hopes for alternatives were left behind.

Challenge 2: self-selecting ‘community’ and centralised infrastructure

Part of the way austerity has altered the possibilities for engagement between local government and those people who interact with it is through necessitating a departure from a mode of participation centred on consultation, community development or other modalities where the level of involvement was limited by both duration and degree of control given as the responsibility for delivering the service or maintaining the space remained with the local authority.

As noted, the mechanisms underpinning community asset transfer were developed during a period before local governments across the UK lost significant proportions of funding in key areas related to transfer. Between 2010 and 2017 local authorities lost 53% of their resources in planning and development services and 35% in cultural and related services (Gray and Barford 2018). In parallel to enforcing budget cuts at the level of local authorities, central government invested in infrastructure to support ‘community organizations to be strong and successful’ (Locality n.d.) by funding independent charities such as Locality, the national membership network for community organizations in the UK as strategic partners of the Office for Civil Society (demoted from a responsibility of the Cabinet Office to another government department in 2016) tasked to ‘maximise the opportunities that will flow from the Big Society agenda’, as listed on the GOV UK website. Notwithstanding the range of initiatives such organizations have devised to enable asset transfer and their earnest attempts to cope with the undertaking of being responsible for England, in the financial year 2012-13 Locality received approximately £2million in funding to deliver a range of programmes

including asset transfer support for the whole of England (DCLG 2013). Clearly this cannot compensate for the cuts to community development functions delivered at a local level.

Although there was no uniformity in terms of the specific department tasked with working with community groups to support transfer in my research, in all cases the lack of staff capacity to support groups during the transfer process had effects on how this relationship was formulated. Interviewees at different levels of the local government hierarchy commented on this issue:

> 'It's a partnership but only in the sense of trying to secure the outcome. I think in the case of the Manor House museum, the services that they will be operating out of that building will have limited impact on the council as an organization so I think in that particular case, we work in partnership to achieve the outsource and after that, whilst if they need support we will provide it and try and provide the technical advice and expertise, it is essentially their building to run' (senior local authority employee, interview July 2015).

> 'it was clear that the museums service wouldn't be able to sustain any support or deliver anything, we'd be hard pushed to give them advice just because we were contracting so much' (local authority employee, interview February 2014).

The issue of reduced human resources also played out in the approach taken to recruiting individuals and groups who might be interested in managing a museum following the transfer process. For this interviewee there was a clear distinction between the approaches different departments would take to museum asset transfer. Here, staff cuts in the community

development department mean colleagues in economic development are tasked with facilitating transfer with clear consequences for the level of support on offer:

> 'that's one of the areas that we had to cut, our communities team. We've suffered a 51% cut from our budget so you've got to hone down into what you are absolutely responsible for. The 'nice to do' things have been cut and cut and cut, so our communities team have been disbanded. To a certain degree it falls on me and my teams shoulders, and again its done in a different way. The communities team go out and they'd encourage people to come forward to develop groups and support them through that. We can't do that now…we can only do so much' (senior local authority employee, interview February 2015).

An approach which relies on the self-enrolment of individuals and/or groups in transfer has clear potential implications for issues of equality and fairness, although further research is necessary to address the question of whether participation in transfer is stratified along class lines and patterns of social and cultural capital (Findlay-King et al. 2017). In practical terms what is at issue here is the dismantling of community development infrastructures within local authorities and the demands this places on individuals and groups with an interest in transfer to be in possession of the resources, social networks, cultural capital and capacity to self-educate in this complex process. The raises the question of the uneven distribution of capacity within communities to undertake transfer, disrupting the claims for asset transfer as a route to cultural democracy as well as the issue of whose needs and interests will be met (MacLeavy 2011). Yet it is not only the potential stratification of transfer that needs to be addressed. Important too are the significant financial pressures being placed on groups and the degree of agency they have to revise such demands.

Challenge three: liability transfer and its alternatives

In a dictionary sense, the word 'asset' is a positive term. The OED defines asset as 'a useful or valuable thing or person' or, when it relates to property 'as having value and available to meet debts, commitments or legacies'. Clearly, there are broader questions of what constitutes an 'asset' in the specific case of 'asset transfer' as this might have to do with the ability to generate revenue or the symbolic value to society at large, for example. However, my present concern is to highlight the range of potential forms asset transfer can take in order to demonstrate not only that 'asset transfer' might be more truthfully named as 'liability transfer' given the financial liabilities placed on transfer organizations but also to identify the minor ways transferring local authorities can lessen the challenge of transfer as experienced by groups. Acknowledging that there is not one 'austerity' with each local authority experiencing cuts of differing levels, the different approaches taken by the local authorities in my research points towards the possibility for managing the risk of asset transfer becoming liability transfer.

As stressed by this interviewee in a discussion of the type of lease offered by the local authority, transfer organizations are not always provided with a clear picture of the financial obligations that are contained within leasehold arrangements:

> 'That was something we took on that we weren't meant to have. The officers we negotiated with understood that [there were limits to what the transfer organization wanted to take on] but as soon as it went to the legal team they changed it…We got this lease thrust at us which we didn't agree with but it was a take it or leave it situation' (group member, interview, April 2015)

With the decimation of local government funding, it is perhaps unsurprising that the responsibility for repairs and maintenance is offloaded to transfer organizations. However, a

more equitable distribution of ongoing financial responsibilities was negotiated in one of the case studies, where a formal asset transfer did not take place. A comparison of terminology is instructive here. In the case cited above the phrase 'sign on the dotted line' (local authority employee, interview, March 15) was used frequently as a marker of positive achievement on the part of the council. Conversely, the formal act of signing a lease arrangement in the form of an asset transfer was construed negatively in another case with the 'contractual arrangement' and the 'lease' viewed as opening up a space for the transferring council to, in the words of the interviewee, 'to walk away and say "you've got the building now it's down to you"' (senior local authority employee, interview, February 2015). In an attempt to construct a 'comfortable arrangement' (ibid), this local authority remained responsible for repairs, maintenance and other ongoing costs, illustrating that way local authority employees can counter the risk of asset transfer becoming liability transfer where they have the leverage and resources to do so.

Discussion and conclusion

So far this article has presented my understanding of the political and policy processes which made the transfer of public museum buildings to community organizations possible as well as of some of the main challenges experienced by local authority employees and members of transfer groups during the process by which transfer was achieved. In order to capture a distinct phenomenon associated with 21st century austerity as it is impacting local government museum services in the UK, currently an under-researched topic, I have drawn on empirical data relating to how these changes are being experienced first-hand. I have shown that the mechanisms underpinning museum asset transfer were developed before the current austerity programme was implemented, and while it is likely that transferring museums to community organizations in this way would have involved complexities whether budget cuts were in play or not, each of the three challenges presented in the article were a

product of the financial circumstances facing local government as a result of decisions made at the level of central government.

However, my research project was not stable or tightly defined in the sense that it developed into a multi-faceted undertaking as it progressed and has continued to evolve. By which I mean if, on the one hand it was about documenting one aspect of the way austerity is changing the form and function of public museums as well as investigating different perspectives and experiences of the issue, then on the other, for reasons I outline next, it became about engaging in discussions and activity at the level of policymaking and funding bodies as they addressed asset transfer (or not) in their work. This took several forms from joining working groups, supplying advice, offering a perspective on how transfer was experienced on the ground and so forth. However, my focus here is on my decision to produce guidance for organizations considering transfer. Before outlining some areas for future research, I reflect on my attempt to translate what began as a critique of practice into a practical tool designed to point towards ways of avoiding some of the problems identified through the research. The guide can be accessed via the Association of Independent Museums' (AIM) website where it was published, although the project was funded by Arts Council England (ACE).

What this guidance document intended to do was to address both the lack of human resources to support transfer within local government and the absence of advice with an explicit emphasis on museum asset transfer as opposed to transfer in general. The aim of the guide is to enable future transfer groups to exercise a greater degree of agency as they enter negotiations with local authorities by virtue of being better informed about the legal and financial obligations involved with transfer and the way transfer has been approached by others to create a more acceptable arrangement for both parties.

Clearly, the guide represents an acceptance of transfer as part the new status quo, however, the guide does not advocate for transfer, which is why a decision was made to omit case studies which tend to focus on the positive. Instead it outlines what the process involves and how the different stages were approached by others with an emphasis on bringing into focus that there is precedent for subtle adjustments to be made to how financial responsibility is allocated between the local authority and the transfer organization which, although minor, can help take some of the pressure off new organizations as they find their feet. This is a minor intervention into a highly problematic set of practices, yet it is one which attends closely to the perspectives asset transfer practitioners shared with me during the research. As such the guide is not just about the sharing of knowledge, experiences and lessons learnt, it also provides the means for those reading it to join professional networks to access ongoing support and advice in response to interviewee comments about feeling disconnected from the museum sector.

The full implications of producing the guidance and workshops convened to disseminate it are difficult to assess. On the one hand, this can be understood as a typical example of a practice which is motivated by the principles of participatory action research (see Pain et al. 2012). As I outline in more detail in a blogpost written on the subject, the original proposal to produce such a guide was mentioned by participants, choices about what to include and exclude were driven by people with lived experience of the issue and the decision to accept the commission to produce the guide myself instead of continuing to anticipate that a government body or other agency would take up the task was aided by reminding myself of my aim to undertake research which results in action or positive intervention, however minor, into the issue at hand (Rex 2018c).

As Rose (2019) and Forkert (2016) whose work explores the efforts of activists and campaigners to sustain public libraries as political and social spaces in a context of austerity

have both observed, practices advancing the goals of political endeavours to devolve responsibility for public services and public needs beyond the state can simultaneously be strategic sites for the opening up of alternative political practices. While asset transfer is a clear articulation of government strategies to shift more social responsibility onto non-state actors it need not be formulated so as to enable the clear split between 'state' and 'community' desired in policy statements. The intention of the guide is to illustrate the existence of real possibilities for transfer wherein the burden on transfer groups is lessened and, importantly, to avoid backing transfer as a positive course of action. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Rex 2019), buildings made available for transfer tend to be those considered as problematic by the local authority. As one interviewee put it in relation to one of the museums discussed here, 'all the warning lights that have gone on around this whilst the local authority has looked after this building, they're still flashing whoever takes this building on' (local government employee, interview, February 2014). The promotion of asset transfer as a straightforward solution to the problem of proposed closure is therefore irresponsible, and the clear emphasis on the fact that transfer may well be undesirable seems an important, albeit small, way of countering the risk of groups sometimes being caught up in a saviour complex to their detriment in the long-term.

This research raises important questions about the sustainability of museum asset transfer for those policymakers and politicians who advocate for it. If further research were to trace the efforts of groups after transfer this might indicate whether museums can be sustained once public funding is withdrawn, as well as reflect on the human costs involved particularly when museums are staffed entirely by volunteers. Important too are questions of the social class make-up of the asset transfer workforce, the way the perpetual question of what it means to be a 'museum' is negotiated by people who are new to museum practice and the extent to which justifications offered for transfer in policy are realised in practice,

particularly with regard to the deeper understanding locally situated groups are supposed to have of those they live alongside and the impact this has on the service. While the original study did not focus on the aftermath of transfer, what becomes clear in this article is that there is a danger of sustaining these buildings at all costs which may be to the detriment of the original motivation for saving the museum. As local governments continue to see museum asset transfer as a viable way of keeping museums open and avoiding the permanent loss of these buildings to society, it is imperative that policymakers and researchers continue to work with transfer groups to raise questions about the kinds of values and practices that animate their work and the winners and losers within these systems.

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[ii] This figure is taken from the National Audit Office report ‘Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018’.

[iii] Local authority documents are available from the author on request.

[iv] Full details of the approach taken to asset transfer in each of the case studies can be accessed in Rex (2018a).