



COMMUNITY ASSETS FUND CONSULTATION RESPONSE

1. About The Digbeth Trust:

The Digbeth Trust is a development support organisation offering services to voluntary and community groups and public and charitable funders across the West Midlands.

The Digbeth Trust exists to enable the development of an influential, effective, independent and sustainable voluntary and community sector across the West Midlands through the influencing of policy and the provision of expertise.

We are a not-for-profit charitable company and a membership organisation. We currently have a membership of 132 organisations and individuals – the majority of which are small voluntary and community based organisations.

We are an active member of Birmingham & Solihull Social Economy Consortium, Birmingham ChangeUp Consortium Steering Group, the West Midlands Regional ChangeUp Consortium and the West Midlands Charitable Trusts Group.

One of our specialist services supports voluntary and community based organisations to explore buildings and land use related issues. We help groups with feasibility studies, business plans, architectural and planning advice, funding strategies and ongoing business support. We deliver this through our Professional and Technical Aid Service, which has a register of quality assured consultants including architects, planning advisers, community engagement experts, management consultants and business support advisers – enabling us to offer a flexible, response, expert service tailored to the needs of individual voluntary and community groups.

We have 21 years experience of working on issues related to community assets. We know what is needed to develop sustainable and effective community assets, we know where the barriers and enablers are, and we understand how to develop a package of support that balances the needs and interests of the stakeholders involved.

2. About this Response:

This response has been endorsed by our membership following consultation through our membership newsletter. We have also incorporated comments from our colleagues on the Birmingham & Solihull Social Economy Consortium.

3. Further Information:

For further information about this response please contact:

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The Digbeth Trust

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4. Consultation Response:

Question 1: The average grant size is currently expected to be within a range of £250,000 to £500 000, perhaps with more for some projects, in order to achieve a strategic impact. Is this the right approach?

This would mean a maximum of 120 grants being paid across the whole country. There are 388 local authorities in England. We agree that grants should be large enough to enable the effective transfer of assets to the community – but we don't think the total fund is large enough. **The total fund should be increased to ensure that all local authority areas have the opportunity to benefit from it.**

Question 2: To what extent should this fund focus on funding large scale beacon projects?

DT: Large scale beacon projects won't necessarily be meaningful or accessible for local communities – either in dispersed rural communities or in urban or suburban areas where communities can be isolated by poor local transport and other social factors. **The Fund should not focus on large scale projects to the exclusion of projects that will have true benefit for local communities.**

Question 3: Should the fund take the proposed flexible approach to determining whether an asset is eligible?

DT: Yes. Over the past 21 years the Trust has learned that it is communities who are best at identifying unused or under-used assets. **The Fund should recognise this expertise and be willing to work with groups to explore imaginative uses for a wide range of asset types.**

Question 4: Should the fund focus on areas where relationships are already strong (between local authorities and voluntary and community groups) and working partnerships are already formed, rather than bringing new partnerships together?

DT: The Fund should not be involved in bringing partnerships together to manage or own assets. The Fund's role should be to respond to approaches from both established and new partnerships. **The Fund should have a role in brokering support from other funders. The Fund should not limit its support to areas with established partnerships as this could perpetuate disadvantage in communities where local government has not invested in its relationship with the voluntary and community sector.**

Question 5: Should we focus on supporting programmes of transfer in a small number of local authority areas, or fund projects distributed across many authorities?

DT: As above, we think the Fund should not be limited to a small number of areas even to act as models for other areas. This would potentially create major inequality between communities as there is no plan for how those other areas would fund similar projects. **The total fund should be increased.**

Question 6: Is there scope for regional allocation of funding under this programme?

DT: In general, no. Most communities are by their nature local. **Community asset transfer should focus on enabling local communities to benefit from taking ownership or management of assets.** There may be some scope to explore the transfer of assets to non-local communities (eg communities of interest which are drawn from across a sub-region or region) but this should be exceptional and its feasibility carefully assessed. If the Fund remains at £30m then the Fund managers should allocate an equal indicative amount per region (eg £3.33m per Government Office region). Whilst there may be some flexibility about this sum, an indicative allocation should ensure that each region stands an equal chance of benefiting.

Question 7: Should the fund aim to support innovative projects that are piloting a range of different approaches to asset transfer?

DT: The Fund's primary aim should be to produce sustainable benefits for communities – not to fund risky ventures. **Funding pilots and innovation should be an incidental aim – and only once the fundamental sustainability of proposals has been rigorously assessed and proven.**

Question 8: Should the fund have a preference for a particular type of asset transfer, such as transfer of ownership rather than a long term lease or management arrangement?

DT: No. The type of transfer needs to be decided by applicants based on their informed assessment of the best local solution. **However, the basic criteria for support must be that the community will be in control of the asset, and that the refurbishment should meet the highest environmental and economic sustainability criteria. The Fund must ensure that applicants (in particular the community-based partners) have access to competent and independent professional and technical advice so that they can decide on the best arrangements for them. This independent advice should cover both the transfer and the ongoing management/development phases (ie including ongoing business support with a particular focus on social enterprise). The cost of this must be built into awards from the Fund and government must ensure that communities who are thinking of taking on transferred assets (whether through the Fund or not) have access to this type of independent support that is free at the point of access.**

Question 9: What opportunities are there to co-ordinate with other funding streams and programmes?

DT: The Fund managers should make links with regional bodies (such as regional development agencies) to maximise opportunities to link with regional economic strategies and the portfolio of assets owned by RDAs. Links must also be made to Futurebuilders, the Community Development Finance Association and other strategic financing providers and coordinating bodies to maximise the best use of available resources. Formal links should also be made to business support funding streams including Business Links and community-based providers of business support (where they exist) to support the ongoing management and development of assets once in community ownership/management. Links should also be made with Government offices and local authorities (through their trade bodies) to ensure that revenue funding (through grants or contracts) will be made available to the assets once they have been transferred. **But the main funding streams that Government must ensure are provided are those that provide voluntary and community groups with access to independent technical and specialist support on asset transfer issues (eg legal, financial, planning, building design and management, etc) and ongoing business support – both of which must be experienced and competent in working with the voluntary and community sector.**

Question 10: How can the fund be managed to influence policy and practice?

DT: The Fund must require funded projects to participate in independent evaluation activities which ensure that learning can be shared with others. **The fund is proposed as a one-off exercise. Asset transfer should be an ongoing option for communities and authorities. As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and their response to the Quirk Review report, Government must come forward with proposals for how asset transfer will be:**

- mainstreamed within the planning of public authorities;
- supported through coordinated provision of competent technical support;
- rolled out beyond local authorities to ensure that all public bodies and QUANGOs are required to adopt a proactive asset transfer agenda.



connecting the
voluntary sector with
consultants' expertise

PROFESSIONAL & TECHNICAL AID SERVICE (PTAS)

Our Professional and Technical Aid Service (PTAS) offers:

- to voluntary and community groups: access to quality-assured consultants who can help you to improve your services and organisation;
- to consultants: access to a wide range of opportunities to make a difference to voluntary and community groups;
- to other partner organisations (including funders and statutory authorities): access to our database of quality-assured consultants to help with needs assessments, service evaluations, etc.

PTAS is a **free** service for voluntary and community organisations in the West Midlands. Currently we can only fund a small number of consultancy each year. However, for every group that contacts us we will:

- Assess your needs;
- Help you write a consultancy brief;
- Help you find a quality assured consultant;
- Give you advice about how to manage the consultancy.

If we cannot fund the consultancy ourselves we will signpost to other sources of possible funding or organisations that might be able to help free of charge.



OUR APPROACH:

We aim to deliver real outcomes for the groups and partners we work with. Our approach is to:

- tailor our support to the specific needs of individual groups;
- work with groups to transfer skills to build their capacity;
- focus on sustainable development – so that groups and projects develop realistically;
- facilitate links between groups and the wider policy and funding environment in which they are working.

OUR IMPACT:

Recent evaluations show that the Trust is:

- Effective at reaching marginalised communities and groups;
- An effective administrator of grant funds – delivering positive outcomes for groups, individuals, communities and funders;
- Effective at helping groups to build their own capacity – thereby having a lasting impact on the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the groups we work with;
- Effective at helping to lever-in additional financial and non-financial resources to the sector.

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