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Is the asset transfer of public leisure facilities in England an example of associative democracy?

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Abstract: In England public sports facilities and libraries provided by local government are being transferred to management and delivery by volunteers. The catalyst for this development has been reductions in local government budgets. However case studies explore if this asset transfer “offers a way of restoring the ideal of committed public service in the face of widespread bureaucratic failure and retreat” [1] (p.6), as a form of associative democracy and empowerment of both the volunteers and those for whom the services are provided.

Keywords: associative democracy; public provision; leisure services; volunteers

1. Introduction

Associationalism has been advocated as an alternative to socialism or even liberal democracy. Through association individuals group together to attain some purpose or govern some activity defined by them as important to their interests [1] (p. 50). It is claimed that associationalism can limit the scope of state administration without diminishing social provision. The concept is seen as developmental because the active involvement of volunteers can empower them and the communities they are providing services for. A normative judgement is that devolving the provision of public services to voluntary self-governing associations is preferable to state provision because it is more efficient and sensitive to local needs, but also maximises human liberty.

This paper considers how applicable these ideas – which were popular in pre-second World War Britain – are to small groups of volunteers taking over the management and delivery of public leisure facilities today.

2. Associative Democracy and the Big Society in the UK.

The idea of associationalism has commonalities with the current UK coalition Government advocacy of a 'Big Society'. The Conservative partners in the coalition wanted to develop a society characterised by “much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; ... where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; ... where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control” [2] (p.1). It was claimed that an expansion of the state had stifled independent voluntary action. Promoting a 'Big Society' could be seen as reflecting government confidence in the role of voluntary action [3] (p.380). Similar to the principles of associationalism the Liberal Democrats coalition partners were committed to devolving political decisions to local levels as far as possible, and promoting local community activism. However, the state still had an active role to play. A Cabinet Office Paper [4] stated that “government will make it easier to set up and run charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations...” (p.1). The Big Society policy aimed to engender responsibility, mutuality and obligation [5]. This notion is similar to Beveridge's idea, expressed in 1948, of voluntary action as “private initiatives of citizens outside their homes, not under the direction of any authority wielding the power of the state; it is action for a public purpose” [6] (p. 8).

Key critiques of the Big Society ideal are that society is different to the 1930's in ways which make associationalism less likely; was the “mosaic of local civic institutions that developed in nineteenth-century Britain” and the early 20th century [7] (p. 812) a product of specific circumstances? It has been argued that people do not have the available time to volunteer, and the time that they do have available is in small packages so is difficult to use and coordinate [8]. The fragmented distribution of leisure time and the ever-competing demands on it can be used to explain trends towards both episodic (time-limited) volunteering, and individual participation (for example in sports) [9] and away from collective activity. Pre-WW2 the commercial and public sectors were much less developed as providers of leisure activity so there were fewer opportunities and fewer demands on leisure time. Time diaries suggest the advent of television ownership rapidly absorbed spare time [10] and today

mobile electronic media will fulfil the same function. Thus, although commentators generally agree that the average person spends less time at work than in the 1930's [11-12] the proliferation of leisure alternatives means that individuals are bombarded by opportunities and choices.

This still raises the question: if there is more time available, why don't people chose to spend more of it volunteering? Have social values changed? In the 1930's Keynes anticipated that improved productivity would allow much more leisure time. Explanations for why this has not happened include a combination of the intrinsic interest of paid work, the economic system forcing people to work longer than they want, and the insatiable demand for material goods [13]. All of these factors will reduce time for volunteering, but the latter will also reduce motivation for it.

A broad audit of progress towards a Big Society over the term of the present UK parliament has concluded negatively, "Fewer people feel they can influence local decisions, disenchantment with the political system remains widespread and communities are less strong. A market-based model for reforming public services is concentrating power in the hands of new 'quasi-monopoly' private sector providers rather than in those of local people and is reducing, not increasing, transparency and accountability. Despite efforts under successive governments, key public services are still failing to respond effectively to the needs of those who most need them, with stubborn educational attainment gaps and health inequalities between the richest and poorest. Social action – giving time and money to good causes and communities – has been stimulated, with some successes, but is still below levels achieved in the last decade and is not reaching the parts that need it most" [14] (p 6).

This audit has to be set in the context of considerable reductions in local government budgets which have fallen disproportionality on the most disadvantaged areas [15]. Therefore it is impossible to divorce the theoretical case for a Big Society from a pragmatic view that services will cease to exist unless members of the public run them [16].

This summary sets more specific questions to be examined by our case studies of the transfer of management and delivery of local government leisure services to small volunteer-led groups:

- What are the characteristics of groups of volunteers who feel they can associate together to operate leisure facilities?
- Why do they do this (i.e. associate)?
- Is this asset transfer a genuine transfer of power to local communities?
- Does transfer of management to volunteers increase the responsiveness to local needs?
- How is this transfer affected by the increasing inequalities between the richest and poorest?
- Is social action meeting the areas that need it most?

The next section describes the process of asset transfer; we then describe our methods; and finally structure our findings around the questions above.

3. Asset Transfer of Leisure Facilities

The term ‘asset transfer’ covers a range of relationships between local government and volunteers [17]. Our focus in this paper is on leisure facilities, including sports centres, swimming pools and libraries. This is because these facilities have a high political profile, but their level of provision, if any, is not a statutory requirement of local government. Findings from our previous research [18] revealed that local politicians are reluctant to close them, but may be forced to do so in order to preserve funds for more essential services, such as street maintenance, refuse collection and policing.

The complete ownership of a facility (such as a library or sports centre) might be transferred to a volunteer-led group; however, more commonly the group is given a lease for a ‘peppercorn’ rent. Local government may only give such a lease for an initial short period until they have confidence in the group; however, for the facility to be eligible for capital grants, such leases need to be for 20 years or more.

The role of volunteers had changed with the transfer of public leisure services, and we found that volunteer delivery is not a one-size-fits-all model. Several models were found. In some examples authorities had completely transferred all aspects of the facility to volunteers. In one respondent’s opinion, “*Asset transfer to the voluntary sector potentially delivers all the benefits above and can grow the capacity of the sector*”. In several cases volunteers were partly involved: the capital assets remained with the council who retained the maintenance of the fabric of the building, while the human resource was managed through a mix of paid staff and volunteers.

There are two ways in which we might categorise the transfer towards volunteers: the first is to distinguish between the functions of governance and delivery (governance involves strategic planning and policy development, while delivery involves directly providing the service) [19-20]; the second is whether the roles are taken by volunteers, paid staff or both. These distinctions help us place our case studies in the framework illustrated in Table 1.

For example, at Wirksworth Swimming Pool volunteers were members of a trust which made the strategic decisions related to the facility, and a paid manager was employed to direct the pool on a day-to-day basis, together with paid staff. Ordsall Hall Museum was managed at a strategic level by local government and at the delivery level by a paid manager and volunteers. The museum had a combination of paid staff and volunteers dealing with the public and maintaining the grounds. The core service was delivered by employees and ‘extras’ by the volunteers. The same combination was also found at Worsley Library, where paid staff were supplemented by volunteers. At Jesmond Library, Deerness Gymnastics Academy and Ecclesfield Library, governance, day-to-day management and delivery were all undertaken by volunteers. Hence, the model in Table 1 illustrates a conceptual framework which applies the dimensions of governance and delivery of leisure services after transfer from public sector to civil society.

Table 1: Examples of Delivery and Governance of Leisure Services Post Asset Transfer

Governance Delivery	Governance by paid staff	Governance by paid staff and volunteers	Governance by volunteers
Delivery by paid staff		King Edwards Baths, Leeds	Wirksworth Swimming Pool, Derbyshire Richmondshire Leisure Trust (RLT), North Yorkshire
Delivery by paid staff and volunteers	Ordsall Hall Museum, Salford Worsley Library, Salford	Deerness Gymnastics Academy, County Durham (from 2 year, post transfer)	Bramley Baths, Leeds Lonsdale Swimming Pool, Derby
Delivery by volunteers			Jesmond Library, Newcastle Deerness Gymnastics Academy, County Durham (in first year, post transfer) Eccelsfield Library, Sheffield

4. Methods

To gather information about the impact of funding changes on leisure policy a qualitative approach was chosen as part of this inductive research. A scoping exercise was undertaken in 2014 to identify and gain insight into the key issues that had developed as a result of the changes in government funding. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from local authorities, volunteer organisation support groups and volunteer leisure organisations. An interview schedule based on concepts identified in previous research and the literature was devised. This schedule was adapted taking into account the initial interviews and the role of the interviewee. Questions were asked on the background to the organisation, the process of change, the involvement of various stakeholders (e.g. local authority, volunteer groups, etc.), the role of volunteers before and after the transfer, the

benefits and challenges of volunteer delivery, and the long term prospects and sustainability. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and/or summary notes developed. Common themes were identified. The chronology of the interviews allowed for inductive insights to be developed as the research progressed.

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with facility managers, local authority managers, volunteers and support organisations. These interviews were conducted between March 2014 and February 2015, and covered a range of facilities (including libraries, museums and sports centres) in different local authorities. The range of interviewees, facilities and local authorities provided different perspectives and showed that while there are a set of common issues there is no common approach. The facilities specifically referred to in this paper are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of Case Organisations

	Description of facility
Bramley Baths Leeds	A centre which houses a public gym, swimming pool, steam room and space for community events, meetings and fitness classes. Established in 1903, community led since 2013. http://bramleybaths.com/
Deerness Gymnastics Academy, Durham	A centre, built circa 1979 which, post-transfer, houses gymnasiums, dance studio, activities room, fitness rooms and sauna. Led by Deerness Gymnastics Academy volunteers as a limited company since 2011. The club (now a charity) has operated within the centre since 2002. The club specialises in acrobatic gymnastics and tumbling, at recreational and elite levels. http://deernessgymnastics.org.uk/
Ecclesfield Library Sheffield	A library run independently, supported by a grant from Sheffield Council. Borrowers are still able to use their own library card to borrow and reserve books and use computers. Run by Friends of Ecclesfield Library (FoEL) from September 2014 as an Associate Library. http://www.ecclesfieldlibrary.co.uk/
King Edwards Baths Sheffield	A small swimming pool; the King Edward VII School Swimming Pool Trust, formed in 1993 to run the pool. http://www.kesp.co.uk/index.php
Lonsdale Pool Derby	Lonsdale Swimming and Sport Trust limited are a company limited by guarantee. The trust was created to take over the management of Lonsdale Pool in 2007. http://www.lsst.org.uk/
Jesmond Library , Newcastle	A library reopened by Friends of Jesmond Library as a limited company and registered charity in September 2013.

	http://jesmondlibrary.co.uk/
Richmond Pool, North Yorkshire	Richmond Swimming Pool, Colburn Leisure Centre and Liberty Health Club are all under the management remit of the charitable Richmondshire Leisure Trust (RLT) established in 2005. http://www.rltrust.org.uk/
Wirksworth Pool, Derbyshire	A community swimming pool, which operates as a charity. Run by volunteers since 2012. http://www.wirksworthswimmingpool.co.uk/

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 What are the characteristics of groups of volunteers who feel they can associate together to operate leisure facilities?

The key to successful association can be dependent on the diverse volunteer characteristics which include their level of education, gender, age, family background, employment status, and psychographic and socio-demographic variables. The cases illustrated many of these characteristics during the process of the transfer of assets. There was evidence of professional, skilled, employed volunteers; for example, educators from varying establishments, such as at Wirksworth Swimming Pool a head teacher became the chair, and at Deerness, the Director who was a key driver of the transfer and the research behind the necessary business plan, was working as a university lecturer in a sports department and had access to knowledge and advice, through his professional role.

“...so basically [I] got a load of the lecture material off the Programmes just to say right when I’m putting this business plan together I need to make sure that I’ve covered this aspect, and this aspect so I suppose I was a little bit more in an advantageous situation than some because I had access to that sort of material and staff to ask questions of.”

In some instances specific volunteer skills were recruited purposefully. At Lonsdale the trust director was an environmental consultant who ran his own business. He therefore had expertise in building systems, heating, lighting and electronics and so was able to understand technicalities of running a swimming pool. He recruited trustees with a set of skills and he appreciated that the ability to draw on these abilities considerably reduced the costs associated with bringing in professional staff.

Volunteers and trustees responsible for financial planning of the budget and future proposals were deemed to be critical in most cases. For instance Wirksworth, Bramley, Jesmond and Deerness specifically recruited volunteers with financial management backgrounds, e.g. a partner in a chartered accountants, and a former senior financial officer from Boots became treasurer. In addition to specific

finance knowledge, trustees and volunteers demonstrated a variety of skill-sets, as illustrated by the following quote:

“I wrote the expression of interest that went into the council around August 2011 and then from there went on to link the development of the business plan. So from then on I’ve just been involved with the steering group up until we opened, so I worked on the whole finance sections of the business plan, all the sensitivity analysis. My background is that I used to manage pubs years ago so I’ve general managed pubs so I ended up doing all the operational side of it as well, like recruiting all the staff, putting together the HR policies and procedures” Bramley key volunteer.

Local government officers, sports officials and development partners were involved throughout the process. One interviewee stated,

“I was the social enterprise development manager at the [a local] charity, so they asked me to go to the public meeting as a local resident, with my knowledge, to go and talked to people about potentially setting it [Bramley Baths] up as a community run enterprise.”

In Jesmond a local councillor (although not for the ward) played an active role due to their background in the Library service. The CEO of Rural Action Derbyshire, who lived locally, also became a trustee of Wirksworth; inspired by the commitment and skills of the other trustees. A leading group member at Bramley was the former MP for Leeds West, who had considerable experience of working with local politicians, officer of the council and voluntary groups. This person’s role was critical in gaining the co-operation of key stakeholders, in particular gaining the support of politicians and council officers, which helped the group refine their business plan.

“they got a really good ex-MP involved as Chairman and he was fantastic and he just smoothed the way of the whole thing for everybody. He was exceptional.” Local authority officer.

Deerness had a very structured approach to identifying volunteer skills. After initial interest from 300 members of the local community to save the club, interest waned when they learned that the same services could not be provided due to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE). So instead the manpower for the transfer phase came from within the gymnastics club. The club audited members’ (parents/carers) skills and knowledge, against the criteria they needed to fulfil in the business plan (e.g. HR, finance, law, building maintenance, joinery, electrics, and plumbing). Members strongly supported this initiative; for example, one of the electricians committed to three years of free labour and electrical support. Volunteers also included one senior coach who was a Chief Fire Officer and so took on health and safety co-ordination. Thus a wide range of professional and skilled manual backgrounds of parents and coaches helped the transfer.

Family influence was evident at Wirksworth: most trustees were parents of children who used the pool or pool-users themselves. Volunteers also had an interest or hobby that closely aligned with the facility; for example, a swimming pool club at Lonsdale; library users at Jesmond and the gymnastics club at Deerness. Bramley Baths had been the place where generations of local people had learnt to swim, and continued to so.

A relatively stable local population resource was important from which to draw volunteers in all cases. Both the Bramley and Wirksworth group thought it was important to have a good mixture of people, and also essential for the group to work well together. The impetus of a core group of volunteers, to drive the work forward was recognised and identified by the cases.

“Yes, I think it’s probably down to a few mad people. There are a few of us that are so dedicated that, you know, I would say there was five key people and of those five, four of them are volunteers”
Deerness Volunteer.

At the same time, having access to a pool of transitory or episodic volunteers had both benefits and costs. Jesmond benefitted from having a student population who were available and eager to develop their knowledge, skills and experience; however, their availability was limited to university-linked or short-term projects.

5.2 Why do they do this (i.e. associate)?

The motivation to get involved and to volunteer has been extensively researched. Mueller [21] identified four categories of benefits: the family unit consuming the collective good (a child using the pool); selective incentive (having social contact or prestige); improving human capital; and volunteers volunteering for altruistic motives, to help others.

In all the cases the main motivation of volunteers was to save and maintain a loved local facility. One volunteer at Bramley saw the pool as a community asset:

“I think because I live locally as well I have always used it. I kind of got sucked into it I guess. If you’d have asked me a year ago why I did it, I would have said because I was absolutely stupid and I should have just walked away! But now it is up and running and it is all fine, ...”

The influence of family was mentioned by volunteers at Wirksworth:

“even though I am not a big swimmer myself, I have children who use the facility and I volunteered to put my name downobviously somebody a long time ago thought what a great idea to have a pool

there and probably a lot of effort went to *get it built ... It would have been such a shame for it to close* and fortunately we had the opportunity to get involved and my daughter was starting baby swimming lessons there so I have enjoyed going there with her and I thought oh gosh it is a shame it is going to *become closed down or whatever happens to it.*”

At Deerness the transfer of ownership to the club enabled them to use their success and high profile in the sport to tailor the offer to the users’ needs. For example, they now open different hours so that senior and international athletes can be better prepared for competitions by mimicking the timings of the competition programme they are preparing for. Also Baby Gym sessions start later than they used to, allowing parents time for the school run. Previously, according to a volunteer director,

“Weekends they closed at five, so again if we wanted to hold a competition we had to stop it before so it gave us ownership to when we could actually access the building and use that building. I think that’s one of the biggest pluses we got out of it that we had total ownership.”

At Lonsdale the volunteers came predominantly from the local swimming club who used the pool, and wanted to retain the ability to use it. However, they also had a general commitment to promote swimming and ensure opportunities were provided for all. Partly because of this, but also to increase revenue, they increased the hours the pool was open to expand lessons and public swimming times.

In the above cases the process of association was driven by external factors, primarily the austerity measures adopted by local councils since 2007. However, for one of the longer running cases, King Edwards pool, the transfer to an independent trust in 1993 was part of a reorganisation of Sheffield facilities around the 1991 World Student Games. The role of volunteers then and now is focused at a governance level; paid employees are responsible for the day-to-day operation and management of the facility.

5. 3. Is this asset transfer a genuine transfer of power to local communities?

A central element of localism and empowering communities is the transfer of assets. This “encourages individuals to take charge of their communities through philanthropy, civic participation and social enterprise” [22] (p.3). Volunteers have to be given this control to allow them to increase revenue and to better meet local needs. Transfer could not work otherwise.

“...when it was ran by the Council we had none of that flexibility, it was like this is when your session times are, this is what is going on here, this class in here then, you can’t use it then so it’s been great in that respect that we can do that, you know...” Deerness Volunteer.

Prior to asset transfer consultations and public meetings were attended by significant numbers of the local community. In Jesmond over 200 attended a public meeting; in Deerness 300 responded. Friends groups were established and petitions drawn up to save the facilities. Working groups were created to draw up business plans and proposals for saving the services. Input from agencies, experts and consultants was sought, e.g. Rural Development Agencies or voluntary centres.

The cases demonstrate that asset transfer had enabled them to take control of the organisation at a strategic and operational level. Through governance, the cases had the ability to define the mission and direction of the organisation. An analysis of the organisations' web sites stresses the direction, aspirations and more importantly the involvement and power of the local community. For example the Richmond Leisure Trust site stresses that the Board of Trustees determine the strategic direction of the Trust and are members of the community; Bramley baths is "community-led, championed by local residents and determined to provide an affordable space for health and fitness"; Wirksworth's trustees "most of all, have a passion for developing our pool in to a great community facility".

Post-transfer, at an operational level, the trustees and volunteers demonstrated a clear awareness of the needs of the local community. Research enabled them to review the current facilities and elicit local opinion. For the facilities to be self-sustaining income had to be generated. In some cases the profit and loss making activities could not be accurately identified under the previous budgeting systems. Careful examination allowed the facilities to develop existing services, add new ones and attach appropriate economic pricing.

At Wirksworth prices for swimming lessons and children's parties increased. At Lonsdale the leisure services offered were reviewed, and longer viable opening hours were introduced, and the facility is now open 70-80 hours per week. At King Edwards Pool sessions are run from 7.15am, at lunchtimes and evenings.

The existing offer was amended and specific activities were developed for different segments of the local population. Lonsdale pool offered swimming lessons to approximately 600 children. At Bramley the Naturist Society use the pool and gym for two hours on Friday evenings; circus skills sessions are run for kids; and a gardening group has taken over the cultivatable grounds and are producing their own vegetables. Offering new additional services and facilities ranges from something as simple as a coffee machine in Jesmond Library to Bramley Pool introducing a series of films projected in the pool, which can be watched while swimming. Knowledge and understanding of the local market enables control over pricing and programming of facilities to take advantage of the sensitivity to the local market needs.

In addition to generating revenue all cases had sought to reduce costs. Different service providers were identified for utilities. In Deerness the club has been able to reduce facility costs, because it is not required to keep to the methods used by the council. For example, the entire lighting system was modernised to LED's, with room-use sensors, and on the advice of a volunteer electrician the amount

of lighting in each room was reduced (within legal limits) resulting in a significant reduction in electricity costs.

Nevertheless, with power comes responsibility. For example, Deerness has full control of services (via programming, pricing) but also has liability for equipment, building decoration and refurbishment. At Jesmond Library a full new library information system had to be purchased at considerable cost to the trust.

5.4. Does transfer of management to volunteers increase the responsiveness to local needs?

Much of the responsiveness to local needs is demonstrated in the cases (and the above discussion) by their efforts to be more market- and community-oriented, and to be seen to be operated and managed as a viable business. To ensure sustainability they had a greater need to seek new profitable opportunities but also be more in touch with what the local community wanted. Marketing communications, i.e. promotion, was seen as important in getting the message across to the various stakeholders, with several groups having a designated volunteer for publicity and marketing. In Wirksworth the trustees believe the stronger links with the local community are a very effective marketing information system.

Several Friends groups were set up to raise the profile of the facilities and generate income. Wirksworth group meet once a month to discuss, plan and deliver fundraising events; while being a Friend at Jesmond includes donating money and volunteering time. At Bramley Pool there is more scope for the Baths to offer what the community wants and to try new things, to keep people interested, even if they are not always popular.

“...there is a real flexibility in what we can do. We are quite open for anything really. We’ve got a group of naturists that come in, on a Friday night, so the Leeds Naturist Society and they come in and they use the swimming pool and the gym.”

“...we need to be constantly changing because if we stay stagnant, so we just do the same programs, people will stop doing, will stop coming, so our big thing is that the fitness classes have to change on a rotation.”

For Deerness, however, as only gymnastic-related activity is allowed due to TUPE, they could not offer the previously provided kick-boxing, taekwondo, aerobics and zumba. So the centre now runs activities based around the concept of gymnastics and movement, e.g. gym-fit, cheerleading (part of British gymnastics), and dance. The introduction of baby gym is an example of how the club has closely listened to local customer needs.

“It is a fantastic play place really and we started off with half a dozen mother and toddlers and we are probably up to on average of about 80 a day now. It has just grown so much and we’ve not really had to publicise it because I just think it has been by word of mouth...We wanted them to have a proper structural, education-led session but when we asked the parents what they wanted and they said they would rather come in and just explore with their kids...I think they use it as more of a social setting to come and meet other mothers and just have a chill and to get out of the house I suppose so it’s been quite good...” Volunteer Director, Deerness Gymnastics Academy.

For the facilities to be sustainable it is also important to identify non-users in the local community. Friends of Ecclesfield Library (FoEL) are very keen to make contact with the people who don’t use the library, for instance the hard-to-reach younger population. As one volunteer stated:

“We should have a games club, educational games club maybe and develop activities where older people and younger people can swap skills so whether it’s computering, whether it’s craft based getting them interested into now.”

Operating as an associative democracy was summed up by FoEL’s mission statement:

*“FoEL serves the public in the district of Ecclesfield, the City of Sheffield, and its surrounding area, by providing a community lending library, and associated services. We are doing this by **associating together** residents, local authorities, voluntary and other organisations, in a common effort to provide facilities in the **interests of social welfare** for recreation and leisure time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life for the residents”*

Volunteers have to be responsive to local needs to be economically sustainable – to generate more revenue. Being responsive enables them to recruit more volunteers and in the long run retain them to ensure continuity and sustainability of the service.

5.5 How is this transfer affected by the increasing inequalities between the richest and poorest?

And

5.6 Is social action meeting the areas that need it most?

Hastings for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [23] states that as a result of the austerity measures the poorest communities and residents are being hardest hit and those least able to cope with service withdrawal are bearing the brunt of these cuts. Evidence from the cases we examined indicated that in more affluent areas it was easy to generate income and recruit volunteers who had the capacity to take over the facilities. Most of the cases are characterised by individuals with high levels of skills, confidence and social capital. The volunteers and trustees often included people with experience of finance, IT and business-related skills. The majority were retired or semi-retired professionals.

“we got a load of volunteers, we got a lot of financial support from local residents” Trustee Jesmond

For groups to develop they require time, enthusiasm and confidence. Volunteering is not evenly distributed across social classes. The CEO of Rural Action Derbyshire feels that when there isn't an existing group prepared to take on an asset and one has to be developed – patience is critical; it can't be rushed. So this takes possibly years. Volunteer groups in disadvantaged areas need support but have been one of the first areas of local government to be cut.

“it takes a hell of a long time to get it right and make it sustainable” Support Agency Manager

Bramley Baths was saved but two other pools closed as there were no volunteers to take them over.

Another concern is that volunteer-led groups may rely excessively on the energy, skills and enthusiasm of one or two key members. This dependency makes them vulnerable to changes in personnel.

“you're reliant on just one or two people possibly and then those one or two people get too old or they move on or stop doing it” Support Agency Manager

In our cases volunteers were mainly seen to be generally serving the needs of their own members and people in their own vicinity. There was even evidence of multi-volunteering, for instance volunteering in both a pool and library but in a particular area.

There were exceptions to this pattern; for example in Salford volunteers come into inner city libraries to help with more disadvantaged people using the computers.

“we've not got the resources to deal with that nor the skills so the Rotary Club are running a pilot where they are putting people in who have got a bit more IT expertise”

Also, Deerness Gymnastics Academy was in an area of social and economic need and yet operating successfully, providing for local gymnastics needs. The facility has a wide catchment area, drawing in users and volunteers from across the region and thus its sustainability is based on this wider input.

6. Conclusions

The voluntary provision case studies we have looked at, do indeed exemplify associationalism, coming together to meet their own and local community needs, more efficiently and sensitively, prompted by

state retraction from leisure provision. We have seen that despite the time constraints and competing pressures of other leisure priorities [8, 24-25], volunteers are stepping up to take on and manage sizeable services and facilities. This development is in line with the associationalism we have long seen in leisure provision, particularly in sport clubs. However, the current trend is different in nature, as despite some sport clubs having their own facility assets, very few will be of the scale or management complexity of the leisure facilities which these asset transfer organisations have taken on.

Other authors have expressed concern with regard to how volunteering can be grown to deliver ‘The Big Society’ agenda [8, 24-25]. Our organisations enable this growth in one of two ways: either by being driven by a core group of volunteers who were giving heavy commitment to their roles; or, in cases where involvement was limited by time, deliberately structuring the volunteering into tasks, to meet the supply of episodic help available.

The volunteers are drawn from a variety of backgrounds. Most fitted the notion of the typical volunteer as a well-connected and educated professional [24]. Generally the transfer bids and then provision were led by core volunteers with business, building and financial skills, whilst a number noted that the vocal support of local politicians had been important. However, many organisations included individuals who did not fit this profile; manual skills were seen to be particularly important.

Our cases imply that asset transfer, as a consequence of state reduction, often instigates individuals to act out of a sense of compulsion to save the resource often within a rapid timeframe imposed by closure notices. Their motivations for maintaining the provision of the facilities will usually start with “rational self-interest” [24] (p.393) for the benefit of themselves and their families. Nevertheless, this is, in itself, altruistic associating, as service-maintenance also benefits existing users who are part of the local community. There is also an awareness that there are others in the community who will profit at different points in time (e.g. providing a service for children to learn to swim). We found, however, that such provision is less likely extend and to “aid a broader section of society” [24] (p.393), as volunteers are motivated by localism, rather than wider regional concerns.

All examples showed a genuine transfer of power to the community groups, evidenced through strategic and operational management control, although in some cases, there were restrictions on what could be provided under the transfer due to TUPE legislation. Clearly a localist orientation to delivery meant that the associations were more in tune with local needs and, without local authority corporate plans, they could be more creative and flexible. Similarly, Hogg and Baines suggest that “the sector’s capacity for innovation is one claim that underpins the case for more involvement in public services” [26] (p.345). Likewise better control and the cutting of costs were evident, but necessary as users expect ‘quality’ and ‘value for money’ [24] p.389. The cases acknowledge that a business focus is required to keep pace with private sector competitors.

It proved difficult to address whether transfer is affected by the increasing inequalities between the richest and poorest. High social capital was evident in all the cases examined and the complexity of management meant that a particular professional skill set was required. Volunteers were mainly drawn

from users at each facility or those in close vicinity. Only Deerness Gymnastics Academy was different to this trend. Whilst volunteers from across the region were sustaining this centre (which is in a deprived area), they were providing for their own or their child's needs. Users were willing to travel for the level of excellent gymnastics development and coaching.

We heard of a number of cases where other facilities had failed in asset transfer or had closed. However, without examination of these cases we cannot conclude whether social action is failing to meet demands in the areas of greatest need, or whether this failure is a consequence of people being less likely to associate together in these areas. Given the speeds at which local authorities expect asset transfer bids to take place, it may be that attracting help from outside the area is even more difficult.

Overall, leisure asset transfer supports the notion of groups associating to step in to the provision of leisure services and develop them further, supporting the notion of a 'Big Society'. Our study was conducted against a backdrop of continued pressure to reduce local government costs [27]. Hence there is a need to further understand the voluntary service that is, in some cases, replacing state provision, and to identify the scenarios that make associating together more likely to happen, more successful at transfer and more sustainable. Also, another factor for consideration is whether these groups are preventing a reduction in provision or providing a service of a distinctive quality compared to public sector delivery, as our findings suggest.

We believe, from our research, that the asset transfer process demonstrates a form of associative democracy, as it empowers individuals and communities to meet their own needs more effectively. This process resonates with the current policies and encouragement of local and central Government to advocate localism as a means of developing human capital. Nevertheless, further research is necessary, because, as Morgan argues, "the uncritical acceptance of the benefits of voluntary action, both to the individual and the broader community, requires scrutiny" [24] (p.382).

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the design, development, data collection, analysis and writing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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