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Abstract

This paper critically examines the 'asset transfer' of leisure services from the public to the voluntary sector. Asset transfer might be theorised as 'austerity localism', in which volunteers are obliged to fill the gaps left by retreating public provision, or as 'progressive localism', which represents new opportunities through the United Kingdom localism and Big Society agendas to develop more locally-responsive, cooperative and mutualist visions. From qualitative interviews at twelve leisure facilities, a grounded assessment of the nuanced balance between 'austerity localism' and 'progressive localism' is provided, including three observations. First, the main impetus for transfer was cuts in local authority budgets which stimulated the emergence of local groups of volunteers. Secondly, the transfers themselves required interaction between local government and the groups; however, the nature of the relationship and support given varied and was limited by austerity measures. Thirdly, volunteers do not automatically fill a gap left by the state: without support transfer viability relies on the financial and social capital among volunteer groups, and this is unevenly distributed. These findings suggest that the capacity for a 'progressive localism' to emerge through asset transfer is limited. However, where transfer has occurred, there are some progressive benefits of volunteer empowerment and a more flexible service.

Introduction

The Big Society (Cabinet Office, 2010) has been defined as the UK Government attempting to roll-back the state and encourage citizens to take responsibility, via community and voluntary groups, for provision of public services at a local level (Crisp, 2015; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). The Localism Act (2012) reflected a policy of reducing the central state and devolving power and responsibility to voluntary groups (King, 2014). At the same time the Government introduced extensive reductions in local government finance which provoked local authority retrenchment or efficiency strategies (Hastings, Bailey, Gannon, Besemer & Bramley, 2015). These combined changes made the ensuing austerity 'peculiarly local in nature' (Donald, Glasmeier, Gray & Lobao, 2014, p.5). Replacing state provision at a local level by volunteer-led groups with reduced funding has been termed 'austerity localism' (Featherstone, Ince, Mackinnon, Strauss & Cumbers 2012, p.177). In contrast, the term 'progressive localism' denotes a political sensibility that does not cede the language of localism to the political right, and instead experiments in place-based political activity that both challenges morally-conservative and neoliberal articulations of localism, and generates new expressions of social justice and participation. Theorisation of localism, however, has developed faster than empirical examination of these progressive possibilities.

This paper critically assesses the balance between austerity and progressive localism through an empirical examination of the process of transfer of the ownership, management and delivery of leisure services from the public to the voluntary sector. This 'asset transfer' might epitomise 'austerity localism': using volunteers and the private sector to fill the gaps left by retreating public provision. On the other hand, it may create opportunities to develop more 'progressive' cooperative and mutualist enterprises that are more responsive to local needs (Crisp, 2015; Williams, Goodwin & Cloke, 2014) and articulate an alternative approach to meeting them (Williams et al., 2014).

Examining the balance between austerity and progressive localism in the transfer of leisure services is especially relevant because the provision of leisure services such as sports facilities and green spaces is not statutory and library provision must only be deemed to be 'comprehensive' (an undefined term) in an overall local authority area (Public Libraries and Museums, 1964). Thus, although the high political profile of leisure facilities makes their closure undesirable, local government is nevertheless seeking to dissociate itself from funding them in order to protect other areas of expenditure, and has attempted to find alternative service-deliverers through asset transfer to achieve the savings required.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with key personnel in eight sport facilities and four libraries this paper examines the mechanisms of public-to-voluntary asset transfer, and provides insights into how volunteers have achieved it, what support has helped them, and what has constrained them.

Austerity localism, progressive localism and The Big Society

The political ideals of a Big Society (Cabinet Office, 2010) involved changing the balance between the public sector and voluntary sector – at a local level more responsibility was to be taken for the provision of services by volunteer-led groups. However, this expansion of active citizenship coincided with substantial cuts in public spending. Between 2010 and 2014/15 cuts to welfare benefits and tax credits of £18 billion were outlined, along with £53

billion cuts in budgets of local authorities and government departments (Clayton, Donovan & Merchant, 2016). A critical analysis has described the emergence of local groups to provide services (which would otherwise be cut) as 'austerity localism' (Featherstone et al., 2012, p.177). 'Citizen responsibilisation' (Hastings, et al., 2015, p.613) is promoted by a hegemonic, anti-state, neoliberal discourse which upholds a shift towards local provision, expanded civic enterprise and social responsibility as a positive phenomenon (Featherstone, et al., 2012).   In this sense hegemony is a body of practices and expectations of ourselves and our world which embody assumptions preventing relations of domination and subordination being challenged, as they are presented as 'common sense' within a dominant discourse.   The notion of a Big Society is part of this discourse – criticised as less about empowerment of local communities as about the use of volunteerism to hide the failed state (Levitas, 2012; Such, 2013; Williams, et al., 2014). It has been argued that these new groups are unable to challenge the hegemonic assumptions within the Big Society narrative, including the need for austerity and the widening of social and economic inequalities (Nolan & Featherstone, 2015). Such groups are merely 'flanking measures' (Jessop, 2002, p.452) or 'little platoons' (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p.390), stepping in to fill the gaps left by state removal, rather than creating new forms of democracy.

In contrast, 'progressive localism' is claimed (Crisp, 2015, Clayton et al., 2016, Featherstone et al., 2012) to involve local volunteer groups being able to 'transcend their immediate locality and … feed(ing) into broader social and political movements that aim to transform national and international policy frameworks, thereby reversing the neoliberalisation of inter- and extra-local relations' (Featherstone et al. 2012, p.118). Progressive localism thus opens new opportunities to resist neo-liberalist hegemony within the localist agenda: the 'little platoons' may be able to challenge the view that austerity and inequality are inevitable. For example, Crisp's (2015) study of Work Clubs found that while they were unable to effectively replace former programmes to address social and economic disadvantage they could still challenge the prevailing orthodoxies around punitive forms of welfare-to-work.

Thus Featherstone et al.'s (2012) main defining characteristic of 'progressive' localism is that it attempts to challenge the dominant hegemony; in particular, the need for austerity and greater income inequality. For Levitas (2012) the Big Society narrative is part of this hegemony because it involves moving socially necessary labour from the public sector to unpaid work, and justifies public sector cuts and increasing economic inequality. However, Levitas argues for a 'hermeneutics of faith': the creation of a narrative in which the Big Society and reduced consumption 'cease to be an ideological cover for neoliberal dispossession of the poor, and become positive attributes embedded in another potential society' (Levitas, 2012, p.336). The 'conditions under which these ideas would cease to be repressive, moralizing claptrap' (Levitas, 2012, p.336) include rethinking what counts as production and wealth, and thinking of 'work' in terms of the 'Total Social Organization of Labour'. Taking a different approach, Williams et al. (2014) suggest the need for a more grounded examination of the cracks and fissures in austerity localism that might be exploited by progressive groups to challenge the neoliberal hegemony.

These theoretical critiques of localism are related to those in the Big Society Audit (Civil Exchange, 2015). Achievements included: some public services engaging the voluntary sector in new kinds of partnerships; the voluntary sector remaining resilient, resourceful and trusted, and strengthening communities; and volunteering remaining high compared to other countries (although at static levels since 2001). However, limitations included services being unable to meet the requirements of those who need them most, thus exacerbating gaps between rich and poor. Service cuts varied geographically and hit the vulnerable hardest

(Donald et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2014). The Big Society agenda ignored variance in privilege (Macmillan, 2011), meaning those who are '…empowered by emerging forms of localism are likely to be those with…resources, expertise and social capital…' (Featherstone et al. 2012, p.178). There was a lack of dialogue with partners to find a way of adapting to budget cuts, and a failure to establish a strong partnership with the voluntary sector. Williams et al. (2014, p.2802) further note that the UK government does not offer the support to ensure 'democratic and equitable participation'; in fact, the voluntary sector and the community are considered to be external to local government as '…subjects to be manipulated rather than as potential partners to be worked with…' (Rees & Rose, 2015, p.89), and have received devolution of 'responsibility and service delivery rather than power and authority' (Featherstone et al. 2012, p.181).

The Audit (Civil Exchange, 2015) concluded that power was not being significantly transferred from the state and that 'large companies [were] benefiting most from public sector contracts … with a bias against the local and voluntary sector' (p.7). The Big Society localism emphasised competition and market based solutions which may force out voluntary community groups, thereby favouring the private sector or charitable offshoots of private companies.

Although the Big Society policy is off the 'political lexicon' (Crisp, 2015, p.1) and did not feature in the 2015 UK election campaign, the impact of the policy continues, through related initiatives to promote localised service delivery by 'the community', and consistent commitments to increase the role of third sector organisations in the delivery of public services and the promotion of citizen action and community organisation (Alcock, 2016, p.111). Therefore, the examination of asset transfer in leisure centres remains valid as demonstrating the balance between austerity and progressive localism, and the practicality (or otherwise) of Big Society ideals.

An overview of asset transfer in leisure services

Recent asset transfers in leisure are different from the earlier generation of facility transfers from public sector to trusts in the UK, such as Sheffield International Venues (SIV) or Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL). In those cases, volunteers took roles in governance as trustees, but the process was led by paid employees of the local authority from which the facility management was being transferred, with a much longer time for planning the transfer. In the more recent examples in our study, volunteers plan and execute the transfer to trust status themselves, and take roles of governance and delivery afterwards, often working to tight deadlines.

A review of 232 local authorities' websites (Livsey, 2015) showed that nine national operators – the majority operating as a form of Non-Profit Distributing Organisation – managed facilities in 44% of authorities. Of 161 contracts with local authorities, three operators held 61%, thus the market is dominated by a few 'big players'. Some of these, such as GLL emerged from the first generation of trusts. This pattern supports the Civic Exchange criticism that market solutions favour an oligopoly of large providers, often from the private sector. An overview of libraries is provided by Public Libraries News (2016), which provides regular updates on library closures and transfers. Since April 2011, 242 libraries have closed, with 100 being taken over by volunteer groups or social enterprises. An additional 103 mobile libraries have also closed. Thus asset transfer of libraries to volunteers has been more

significant than that of sports centres. In contrast to the market for managing sports facilities the market for libraries is not dominated by large commercial competitors.

In this paper we look at the asset transfer of leisure services and how this process works, in order to answer the following questions:

- How has the process of asset transfer of public sport centres and libraries to voluntary groups been driven by and reflected austerity?
- How has asset transfer been 'progressive' in empowering volunteers and making the service more responsive to local needs?
- Does the transfer exhibit the limitations of engendering a Big Society, as indicated by the Civil Exchange audit (2015)?

Methods

A scoping exercise, via a questionnaire to members of the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA), was initially undertaken to examine the issues arising with asset transfer. The response was too small for quantitative analysis, but it showed that a qualitative, inductive, approach was required to understand the complexities of this new phenomenon. Six respondents indicated willingness to be interviewed and were contacted for the main study. Other participants (from relevant cases) were recruited from personal contacts of the research team. Thus the sample for this research included 11 sport/library facilities which had transferred to voluntary operation from local authorities and one facility which had developed volunteers to work alongside employees. Some were single facilities, others represented multiple facilities. Interviews were conducted with volunteers who had led the transfer process, managers of transferred facilities, a manager of a community action organisation, and local authority officers. In most facilities only one interview was conducted; however, overall the sample gave contrasting perspectives on transfers.

Table 1 lists brief descriptions and details of interviewee roles. Further detail is available on a website where cases are described in detail (Nichols, Forbes, Findlay-King & Macfadyen, 2015; CIMSPA, 2016).

Table 1. Facility Overview

Facility	Facility type	Context	Ranking of local government spending cuts per head, by 10 UK regions (Innes & Tetlow, 2015, p.8)	Interviewee role
Sport Facility A	Swimming pool	Urban	4th	Trustee (volunteer)
Sport Facility B	Single sport Academy	Rural	2nd	Director (volunteer)

Sport Facility C	Swimming pool and gym	Urban	2nd	Chief Executive (paid)
Sport Facility D	Swimming pool and gym	Urban	4th	Trustee (volunteer)
Sport Facility E	Swimming pool	Urban	4th	Manager (paid)
Sport Facility F	Swimming pool	Rural	4th	Trustee(volunteer)
Sport Facility G	Swimming pool	Rural	4th	Three interviewees: all trustees (volunteers – including CEO of Community Action Organisation)
Sport Facility H	Swimming pool	Rural	4th	Facility Manager (paid)
Libraries A	Multiple libraries	Urban/Rural	Not listed	Community Library Development Officer (paid)
Library B	Single library	Urban	4th	Steering-group member (Volunteer)
Library C	Single library	Urban	2nd	Trustee (Volunteer)
Libraries D	Multiple libraries	Urban	3rd	Two interviewees: Chief Executive of Charity and Assistant Director of Culture and Leisure (L.A.) (both paid)

An interview schedule was devised to cover the background of the organisation, the reason for transfer, the process of transfer, the involvement of 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 a coding frame was devised to address the questions in this paper. Interview transcripts and summary case descriptions were approved by interviewees, which was important because of the political sensitivity around asset transfer. Facilities are anonymised in this paper

Findings

The findings are structured by examining, first, the nature of *what* has been transferred, and secondly, *how* this transfer process worked and was supported. This structure reflects criticisms of asset transfer made in the Civil Exchange audit. This description allows us to

discuss how these volunteer-led transfers compare with the ideals and limitations of engendering the Big Society, and comment on the balance between austerity and progressive localism by responding to our initial questions.

What is transferred

There was no standard model for asset transfer. Both volunteers and local authorities were learning from their experience across a wide range of situations. Asset transfers varied in that:

- Volunteers may be involved in governance or management or delivery, or all three.
- Transfer may involve the delivery of the service, or the maintenance of the facility/building, or both.

In addition, the legal relationship with the local authority differed: in all cases the local authority continued to own the facility as landlord, but the nature and length of the lease varied, as did the responsibilities contained within it. Some volunteer groups received direct funding such as an annual grant, free use of a facility, or payment of capital costs prior to transfer. All received some indirect funding, which included rate relief, subsidised or no rent (most leases are on a peppercorn rent), or equipment passed over with a lease.

Local government is required to provide 80% relief on non-domestic (business) rates to charities, but has the discretion to provide 100% relief. Prior to April 2013, local government had to pay business rates to central government on its own leisure facilities. Thus the first generation of leisure trusts, registered as charities, saved considerable transfer of rates from local to national government. Since 2013, local authorities can keep a proportion of the business rate income (DCLG, 2011). So if local government now gives 100% rate relief, rather than 80%, this is a direct cost to its own income. Even if it has given 100% relief in the past, local government can reduce that to 80%. For example, Sport Facility B had 100% relief for 2 years – an important benefit – but this was subject to regular review. Thus local authority discretion over the amount of rate relief can provide uncertainty for financial planning of the transferred facilities.

Whilst some facilities considered themselves to have had little support from the local authority, they all received financial support indirectly through peppercorn rents (in one case this was only £1 a year for a swimming pool). Some facility managers implied criticism of local authority motives as giving rent relief to gain 'reflective glory'.In all cases the facilities, even where breaking-even, were dependent on financial support from the local state, as similarly observed by Fenwick and Gibbon (2015) in their review of an asset transferred swimming pool.

How does the asset transfer process work?

There has been no set way in which asset transfer is instigated, processed and supported. In all the facilities in our study, asset transfer was stimulated by local government leisure budget cuts, a characteristic of austerity localism. The process, from announcing planned asset transfer or closure of a facility, to the ~~planned~~ transfer date, was often less than 12 months. Several themes arose in the analysis of this time-pressured process, including:
- The support given by local authorities and volunteer development agencies, and whether it was sufficient;
- The disadvantaging of small volunteer groups in the transfer and support process;

- The social capital and community stability evident in and around those volunteer groups which needed to fill the gaps left when these services looked set to close and to overcome the deficiencies in support during the transfer process.

The support given by local authorities and volunteer development agencies, and whether it was sufficient

Volunteer groups interested in taking on a facility had to engage with a professional bidding process. Firstly, they had to establish an appropriate legal entity (with seven different types possible) and prepare a business plan to show that they could manage the leisure facility. Volunteer-led groups struggled to decide on the best legal identity to establish. A description of the alternative legal identities is provided in the Sport England (2014) Asset Transfer Tool Kit, although none of the organisations we interviewed were aware of this: it was produced after their original asset transfer. In some cases local authorities provided time from local officers to help with planning; others had commissioned a volunteer support agency to give assistance; or in some cases the volunteers did all the work themselves.

Support of a development officer and volunteer development agencies was extremely valuable in recommending and establishing the appropriate legal entity, preparing a business plan and developing the volunteers' confidence, such that they felt ready to take responsibility for a facility. This support, apparent in Sport Facility G and Libraries A and B, lifted a considerable burden from the volunteers. For example, a rural community action organisation (CAO) supported Sport Facility G by providing a guide tailored for the circumstances of this swimming pool. The CAO explained and supported the formation of a new trust as a charity limited by guarantee. As one trustee said:

> … I wouldn't have been in a position to write a business plan and we needed that support off [CAO] to do that, … we needed that expertise to get us up and running.

Similarly, Library B and others in the same city were supported by the local voluntary action organisation. Support prevented new groups' energy being dissipated into these demanding tasks of which volunteers had little or no experience. Support could be tailored to the group.

The best examples of local authority support showed responsiveness in doing everything they could to ensure the community transfer was successful. This was evidenced by extensions of leases to allow for grant applications or absorbing loss of income from competition with other local authority facilities. In these cases, a clear relationship could be seen with the local authority; for example, at Sport Facility A, a volunteer reported:

> …we'd heard loads of stories about groups falling out with the council and them having this real 'we hate you because you're doing this' relationship with the council, and it just didn't work and the buildings end up closed, … we really didn't want to take that approach to it. We obviously had to be a partnership relationship with the council and they had to be open to what we were doing and then work with us … it was a pretty seamless handover.

It was clear that not only local authority guidance, but also local political support and goodwill made asset transfer easier for voluntary groups. For example, Sport Facility A worked closely with council officers to make the transferred facility viable, despite it being in competition with the remaining local-authority-run facilities. This assistance reflected a political commitment within the council, facilitated by a prominent local politician being a

member of the voluntary group. Similarly, at Sport Facility G, the district council was very accommodating and employed the county volunteer support organisation to assess the viability of a transfer and then assist it. Other facility volunteers were critical of the training and advice they received from the local authority, but still noted that there was a desire for them to succeed among local politicians. As one facility director said, 'in terms of their moral support they wanted us to do it; it was whether or not we could actually provide the evidence that we could do all of the aspects that they wanted…'.

The disadvantaging of small volunteer groups in the transfer and support process

In contrast there were groups who stated that support was not provided or was considered to be not relevant enough to the community-group's needs. Most described being offered some generic support for business planning, but not for continuing to run the building as a leisure facility with a volunteer staff base. For example, in Sport Facility B the council and an enterprise agency gave support, but for a range of community assets of which sport and leisure made up only one part. Council run seminars covered legal, business and financial models, but did not focus specifically on how to run a sport facility. An officer with 'enterprise expertise' met with the community group to give advice, but this officer did not have experience of volunteer-led facilities.

Technical training on how to run the facilities was often lacking. The new manager of Sport Facility E had to teach himself how to operate the boiler as no instructions had been provided. The leader of the group which took over Sport Facility F found that his technical knowledge of water treatment, from his paid employment, was essential. The Sport Facility B group educated themselves on how to prevent legionella developing in the showers. It seems remarkable that local authorities do not, have technical manuals describing the running of facilities which they could hand over to volunteers, even if they are unable to provide relevant training. In the case of Library B, the city libraries service provided extensive training in use of the library management system that linked all the libraries together, enabling the exchange of books. Clearly, the more extensive the training offered to volunteers, the more able they will be to manage the facility.

Managing the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) legislation (TUPE) was inconsistent and unclear. Only one transferred facility had been able to take on the same local authority staff, as others could not afford to pay the same wages and meet the pension liabilities. In Sport Facilities A and G, the local authority redeployment of staff enabled the the new groups to employ new staff to do the same work. In another county, Sport Facility B was to operate a specialist single sport academy, which was therefore not considered a business transfer; thus existing leisure centre staff could be made redundant. This arrangement means that the academy is not able to run the same activities as provided by the former leisure centre and cannot continue to call the facility a leisure centre, as this would be contrary to TUPE regulations. The duration of this restriction, however, is unclear. In contrast, paid librarians in one city have been made redundant and volunteers are running the same libraries. Thus TUPE is an area where councils and volunteer groups need guidance if volunteer groups are not to be deterred from taking on such responsibilities.

Short facility-lease lengths could be problematic as the lease had to be long enough to allow the facility to bid for grants to maintain or develop the building; this was the case in Sport Facility E where, in 2014, 21 years after the volunteer-led trust started to run the pool, the council extended the lease by 20 years to allow a successful bid for £50,000 from Sport

England to fund refurbishment. Similarly, Sport Facility B had to have a minimum 10-year lease to gain a Sport England grant to repair the heating system. The conditions of the lease may themselves be negotiated: in one case, three years after transfer, there was still disagreement about the lease's implications for responsibility for facility maintenance. As lease lengths and content vary, this is another area where support is needed if community groups are not to be disadvantaged.

Social capital and community stability to fill the gap, where support is lacking

Volunteers often found the transfer-planning process more difficult than operating the facility afterwards. Where groups had achieved asset transfer without support, the volunteers themselves had to contribute excessive time – a limited and unevenly distributed resource (Such, 2013). An extreme example was the volunteer director of Sport Facility B who contributed 7 days a week for 3 years, in addition to his normal job. During the 6-month period of transfer bidding, this volunteer's normal coaching role at the facility had to be put aside. It was not until 3 years later that the volunteer felt able to restrict his time at the centre to 5 days a week. At Sport Facility A, a volunteer reported working to prepare for the transfer until '2 or 3 am every night after my day-job finished at 5pm'. She would say to others contemplating community asset transfer 'Do you really want to work full-time and then work another full-time job on top of it to open something in the community?' However, she also felt the task had provided a lot of satisfaction.

In such circumstances, asset transfer required volunteers not only to give up a significant amount of time, but also to have the appropriate skills, confidence and tenacity. This often meant facing judgement from the local authority, with some groups receiving feedback stating that they were expected to fail. For example, the manager of Sport Facility E thought that the local authority wanted to close the pool and only allowed a volunteer-led trust to take it over as they thought it would fail.

Our study revealed considerable anecdotal evidence of potential asset transfers which had not happened or had failed. It was suggested that these transfers failed because dedicated, skilled and confident volunteers are rare, and are not evenly distributed across society. However, oversupply of amenities and other business issues may also have played a part in the demise of some facilities. Authorities which had taken a developmental approach, such as with Libraries A and D, and the support agency helping Sport Facility G, reported that much more support was required to develop volunteer groups in socially disadvantaged areas. As one CEO of a voluntary action group said about supporting a series of asset transfers across a city:

> The demography will be really important. Some of them will have ... people with professional skills – lawyers, accountants, etc. – they need the technical support to set up a community organisation, but they will have a lot of the business skills they can transfer to the running of an organisation. ... There will be other places where people do not have the skills, or need a lot more focussed support to develop them.

Apart from developing skills and confidence, the population in such areas tended to be less stable, which leads to the sense of community ownership and interest in facilities being weaker, therefore limiting volunteer capacity.   Many participants talked about generations of local people who had used the facilities (for example, Sport Facilities A, C and G). In this respect Sport Facility B was an exception because, although the facility was in an area of

high social deprivation, the sport club which took over the facility had a national reputation and a regional catchment area; it had a pool of supporters and volunteers who were mainly parents of the young sportspeople. It was also different because the centre could be reorganised to focus on meeting the specialist needs of the sports club, rather than remaining a community facility with longer opening hours and lower levels of demand.

In all transfers complex decisions needed to be made in a short time-frame, and this was very difficult where advice was lacking. Mentoring and contact with other volunteer-led asset transfers was valuable but should have been facilitated, in participants' views, by the local authority. As one facility director said:

> …we should almost have a little group of consortiums that get together to discuss the issues we've had, the problems we've had, how we've tried to overcome some of those, because at the moment we still are little isolated islands and we don't have any sort of support from similar bodies, … that's probably something which I would recommend, …

The Sport England (2014) Asset Transfer Toolkit provides examples from a small sample of transferred facilities, but this could be extended to a supportive network, identifying contacts who would be willing to advise volunteer groups considering accepting a transfer. For libraries, the website 'Public Libraries News' (2016), which is independently run by a librarian in his spare time as a volunteer, provides a database of all the libraries transferred to volunteers. This is searchable by local authority and would enable volunteers in one area to contact volunteers in another.

Discussion

Further to understanding the experience and issues of asset transfer in these leisure facilities, we now look at how we might understand the transfer of them, in the context of austerity and/or progressive localism. Overall, we consider who is empowered by the form of localism constituted and how this compares with the issues that have been faced by engendering the Big Society nationally, across all service sectors.

How has the process of asset transfer of public sport centres and libraries to voluntary groups been driven by and reflected austerity?

The transfer of the facilities we examined was driven by the need to cut budgets rather than by local authority support for ideals of empowerment and local responsibility. This characteristic was evident in local authorities generally reacting to community groups, rather than developing them; a pattern which privileged volunteer groups with high social capital (in terms of business skills, confidence and a belief they could intervene successfully), and groups in stable communities. This approach represents austerity localism and may be exacerbating social and economic inequalities. However, there was a balance: authorities helping Libraries A and D, and the support agency assisting Sport Facility G were committed to developing volunteer capacity, but were limited (by budget cuts) in their ability to do this.

The need to respond rapidly meant that those with the best market solutions were advantaged, mirroring critiques that the rolling back of state favours large and commercial solutions (Featherstone et al., 2012). The community groups we looked at were small and usually interested in one facility only. Large leisure trusts will be a safer and easier option for transfer of a sizeable tranche of facilities, but these operators will only take on potentially profitable

facilities. An interviewee referred to one such leisure trust as 'predatory' because it was not focused on serving the needs of a specific community and lacked an ethos of transferring responsibility and power to local people and thus would not be able to engender the same community engagement as local trusts.

Following a period of austerity, public sport facilities and libraries offered for transfer may operate in difficult market conditions, requiring capital investment. The power and control of community groups may be limited by their reliance on the local authority for funding, their inability to obtain grants and loans which are based on longer lease periods, their lack of freedom to offer whichever sport services the market desires (free from TUPE constraints) and the condition of the facility they have taken on. Facility condition is a difficult area to negotiate as some buildings will need substantial repair soon, whereas in others, future capital costs are uncertain, but pose a potential long-term burden for volunteers. In this sense, the term 'asset transfer' may disguise the transfer of liabilities, as noted by Hastings et al. (2015) in their study of three English local authorities' approaches to managing austerity. They found that the official emphasis of '…regenerative and social capital benefits' (p.613) sometimes masked the real impetus to transfer responsibility for future costs. 'Asset transfer' rather than 'liability transfer' could therefore itself be part of a hegemonic discourse. Clarity is also required over the implications of grants awarded prior to transfer, and whether they might represent a liability on the new organisation. In the case of Sport Facility B, it was a surprise to the volunteers that, at transfer, they became liable (if they closed) for a near-£500,000 Lottery Grant that had been awarded to the facility in 2002, (even though their liability would be restricted by their status as a limited company).

A 'healthy and active relationship with the local public sector' is important for localism to be successful (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2015, p.15). However, with large local authority sport and leisure budget cuts, many facilities were up for transfer within a tight time-frame, which allows little time for a relationship to be developed. Others have noted that the speed of cuts can restrict innovation (Hastings et. al. 2015). Clearly, there is no consistent support across local authorities and many of the facilities were critical about the lack of (and/or appropriateness of) advice on asset transfer, and the confusion surrounding the process. Our facilities had all transferred prior to 2011 and local authority support may now have improved. We also found little evidence of businesses showing leadership in committing resources for the common good, apart from minor sponsorship in kind. Overall, the limited and variable support represents a void of leadership on localism, similarly identified by Fenwick and Gibbon (2015).

In this austere context, where community groups must support themselves and drive their requests for support, the asset transfer of leisure facilities privileges a form of localism based on high levels of social capital and community stability (Williams et al., 2014). There was some evidence of effective local authority volunteer development and grass roots political support assisting facilities; however, these resources were allocated in response to demand. For example, library support groups emerged in one city and then asked for support from the local volunteer action organisation. In contrast, in the town where Libraries A were located, the development officer realised he had to allocate more time to groups in disadvantaged areas because they needed more help. Thus, as long as support reacts to demands from groups which have formed themselves, rather than helping to develop the groups initially and provide long-term support, such support is likely to be focused on more advantaged areas. Paradoxically, the largest cuts in local government budgets have occurred in the most deprived areas where the greatest support is required (SPER Institute, 2014). So in line with

the academic critique of the Big Society agenda, asset transfer was found to be more viable in socially advantaged areas (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2015; King, 2014; Williams et al., 2014).

How has asset transfer been 'progressive' in empowering volunteers and making the service more responsive to local needs?

Similarly to other authors (Crisp, 2015; Featherstone et al. 2012; Morse & Munroe, 2015), we found evidence of facilities which represented a form of progressive localism in the sense that they were strongly identified with their respective local communities, and this shared identity motivated volunteer support as collective action to further a mutual set of values. Volunteers clearly coalesced around a shared set of interests or values in a desire to provide for themselves and their community, albeit with the threat of facility closure as a motivator (Nichols et al. 2015). This archetype supports the view of Bovaird and Loeffler (2012, p.1137) that:

> …. there appears to be a huge latent willingness of citizens to become more involved, but only if they can play a worthwhile role. However, citizens are only willing to co-produce in a relatively narrow range of activities that are genuinely important to them.

Where transfer was successful there had been a genuine handover of power, as advocated by the Big Society Audit, to harness the motivations of the volunteers and to allow them to take advantage of flexibility to adapt the service to better meet local needs. The transferred facilities had considerable autonomy; for example, in relation to pricing and programming. This autonomy meant that the volunteer groups felt that they had power and responsibility. Without giving them such independence it would have been difficult to motivate them to take over the facilities. These benefits provided impetus for community empowerment and survival in the initial years of transfer, but the facilities were still dependant on local government, in the form of peppercorn rents and reduced rates. Thus there is resistance to neoliberal conservatisms (Williams et al., 2014) to the extent that our groups offered an alternative to private sector provision. Greater sensitivity to local needs was a very positive, progressive outcome of small asset transfers. However, we have not been able to identify where the groups have challenged neoliberalist hegemony in the way 'progressive' is defined by Featherstone et al. (2012) or by Levitas' (2012) examples of working class organisation over the last 200 years. Our examples are mainly very recent and their priority has been with the practicalities of asset transfer, with limited time and resources.

Does the transfer exhibit the limitations of engendering a Big Society, as indicated by the Civil Exchange audit (2015)?

The limitations of engendering the Big Society through leisure facility transfer mirror those identified by the Civil Exchange Audit (2015). The empowerment of community generally appeared to be an incidental or secondary consequence of state retraction, rather than a prime objective of the local authorities. The localism constituted, is reliant on high social capital, whereas the desired 'support of a strong public sector' (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2015, p.2) was less apparent. In our examples a core of volunteers were highly motivated by shared values to contribute a great amount of time and effort. However, such effort and capacity needs to be supported and nurtured by the rest of society so that volunteers feel they are 'flowing with the tide' rather than battling against it. Unless more support is provided, the facilities which

remain open will be increasingly in the areas of highest social capital. Yet, as King (2014) notes, achieving progressive localism may not be financially viable. Local government is balancing the giving of resources to help transferred facilities to succeed (such as maximal rate relief, favourable leases, guarantees of capital repairs and support of development officers), with limiting its support because the initial impetus for asset transfer was to save costs. Local authority and voluntary agency support needs to be stronger: our research shows the important supportive role of Volunteer Advice Centres. The Audit (2015, p.9) advocates 'targeting resources and support on areas of greatest need… [and ensuring] voluntary sector infrastructure is properly supported'. Similarly, the 'paradox of large companies benefitting most from public service contracts…with a bias against the local and the voluntary sector' (Civic Exchange, 2015, p.7) is reflected in the market for sport and leisure facilities, although not in libraries, which means that in sport and leisure, volunteer-led, single-facility organisations will probably remain the exception.

Conclusion

On balance, we conclude that the asset transfer of the leisure facilities we examined is best conceptualised as austerity localism (Featherstone et al., 2012) with a progressive potential due to the resilience and resourcefulness of volunteer groups with high levels of social capital, skills and knowledge. However, our empirical work illustrates the complexities of the balance between the two. Volunteer-led groups are empowered to have autonomy over most of the management decisions in the facilities; they are more flexible in meeting local needs; yet the facilities still require local authority financial support, if only indirectly. Asset transfer has been driven by budget cuts which, in turn, have reduced the support available to community groups, with the authorities being both 'victims and instigators of new forms of…austerity' (Donald et al. 2014, p.5). Local authorities have not had the resources to support a truly progressive localism in which all community groups are empowered. Without these resources, the community groups who are successful will be those who already have high stocks of social capital, operating in more favourable markets, and thus existing inequalities will be potentially entrenched rather than challenged through the asset transfer process. The overwhelming need to grapple with the process of asset transfer has left little time or energy for volunteer-led groups to consider ways of challenging a hegemonic neo-liberalist agenda; although they might in the future.

The limited and uneven sport and library asset transfers are due to the constraints on achieving the Big Society and localism, as identified by the Civil Exchange Audit (2015). Where a market exists for the management of sports facilities, large established providers are favoured. In contrast, asset transfer of libraries to volunteers is more viable, partly because there is no market competition, and possibly because the management of a library is less complex. If volunteer governance and delivery of sport and library facilities is to be equitable, within and across communities, local state and voluntary agency support must be developed. As Levitas (2012) suggested, we can have faith in the potential for organisations to emerge which challenge the Big Society narrative, but only if social and economic conditions are changed to allow this.

Clearly volunteer-led groups and local authorities are rapidly learning about the asset transfer process so further research could include examples of failed transfers to help develop guidance. Reviewing transferred facilities three years after transfer would indicate good practice to ensure sustainability, both financially and in the enthusiasm and efforts of volunteers.

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