

Resilient
Green Spaces
Mannau
Gwyrdd Gwydn



Exploring Community Access to Farms & Land

Blaenau Gwent Case Study
Resilient Green Spaces



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Setting up a CSA

The Landworkers' Alliance and Shared Assets have teamed up to find ways to realise the challenges and opportunities of access to land for new entrants and local communities interested in agroecological farming as part of the [Resilient Green Spaces](#) project. This series of case studies are meant to showcase existing good practice amongst a variety of groups in Wales, as well explain how they have tried to tackle some of the barriers they've faced along the way, to inspire others who might be on a similar journey.

Blaenau Gwent Case Study – Joining up Community Asset Transfers, Land and Food Growing

Blaenau Gwent Borough Council in south-east Wales has been considering how to use its Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy to support food growing and land-based environmental projects over the last few years. The county has some agricultural land holdings, although the officers we spoke to did not know the full extent of these holdings - a land review is ongoing but could take some time to complete. Currently 104.5 acres is leased out for agriculture and a further 15.3 acres is leased as allotments. The council has a [Community Asset Transfer Strategy](#) and is working with local groups to facilitate asset transfer processes.

Most of the transfers have been of buildings and sports pitches, not land for food growing. With a new officer working for the Public Services Board appointed to look at sustainable food, there is an opportunity and willingness to streamline and extend the CAT process, so it works for food growing land as well as buildings. In this way, it could support the development of a sustainable food strategy by enabling land to be transferred for community food growing initiatives, in which there is increasing interest in amongst local people.

This case study outlines the work to date on these issues, the barriers faced and plans for the future.

Who was involved?

To date, CATs have mainly been managed from the council side by an officer within the Estates Department, supported by and working alongside other colleagues in the Environment and Regeneration Directorate, and staff from external organisations involved in CAT processes. These include Tai Calon (a social housing provider who took over management of lots of former council housing stock, and has significant land holdings), the charity Growing Space (who run Terence Gardens, a community garden, workshop/studio, and café in Brynmawr), and the Third Sector Support Group (a group comprising the main third sector and sports organisations who support CAT within Blaenau Gwent). The membership of the Third Sector Support Group is kept under review, and Social Farms & Gardens recently joined, in part due to the growing recognition of local people's interest in food growing. A new officer tasked with creating a Sustainable Food Strategy is sponsored by the area's Public Services Board, hosted by Tai Calon, and funded from a variety of sources including the council, is also involved in this work.

What were their aims?

The Council's aim to date has largely been to support community groups wishing to take on the management/ownership of particular assets through the processes outlined in their CAT Strategy. However, given the difficult experiences of these groups and others that have approached the Council, there is now a recognised need to have a more joined up, streamlined and accessible approach to CATs, and for this process to work for land as well as buildings, so that it can support local food growing and the soon to be devised Sustainable Food Strategy. This will likely be a core aim of the Council's work going forwards.

What did they manage to do?

To date, the Council has supported a total of 46 community initiatives to complete CAT processes, of which one so far - Terence Gardens - has been focused on food growing. The Council is continuing to provide support to a further six groups in the middle of the CAT process, two of which are planning to work on food growing. The three CAT initiatives completed, or in progress, related to food growing, are as follows:

[Terence Gardens](#) in Brynmawr, run by the charity Growing Space. This was an established community garden expanded to include a larger polytunnel/growing area, as well as a café and other infrastructure acting as a hub for community engagement, volunteering and pathways to other services. The idea was that people might be more open to discussing problems they are having in other areas of life whilst gardening or over a cup of tea, and that this could lead to referrals to other services, as well as, in the other direction, referrals from health providers who could see the benefits for people of engaging in outdoor activities.



[Barefoot Farm](#), Cwm, Ebbw Vale - this project is still in development, being led by a new start up which has had to become established as a company, whilst also navigating the Council's CAT application process and trying to obtain planning consent. The CAT approval will be subject to planning consent being granted and the council advertising the proposal under the Local Government Act 1972 as a loss of public open space and taking account of any representations made.

Pentref Tyleri are a community interest company operating in Cwmtillery. They have a number of exciting proposals planned which will be considered for CAT. Initially they have sublet space from another CAT project and have set up a community cafe and small growing area using funding from Keep Wales Tidy. They are working with the Council to undertake small scale environmental improvements and the café is being utilised as a meeting place for the local community and as a mechanism to consult and generate ideas on future projects, which could include: outdoor seating, community work spaces, enhancing biodiversity, and supporting community businesses. The group have been successful in attracting Kickstart funding to create employment and training opportunities, and recently won a Community Land Advisory Service (CLAS) Award run by Social Farms & Gardens in recognition of what they have achieved so far.



What did they not manage to do?

Blaenau Gwent Borough Council has a good handle of the buildings they own, and which might be suitable for CATs. The local authority has knowledge of what land it owns, most of which is registered at the Land Registry, but has less awareness of the existing use of most of this land or indeed if there might be suitable areas for food growing. There is a land review currently underway, but it is estimated this could take years to complete. In the short-term, the Council is unlikely to have a full picture of its suitable and available land and which of these areas might be an option for transfer processes, and so will have to rely on community groups approaching them and addressing their enquiries on a case-by-case basis.

What barriers did they face?

The council and the community groups have encountered a number of barriers in working through the CAT process. The bureaucracy of the process and associated costs and lengthy timeframes can be difficult to manage for both sides. Council officers have experienced a loss of enthusiasm from initially keen community members once they become embroiled in the complex CAT process. On the Council side, there is a lack of staff capacity and resources to support interested groups through the practicalities of CAT, although this is offset by the extensive third sector support available to applicants.

There is now no budget for undertaking any required actions under the CAT process. This would include adverts under the Local Government Act 1972, or addressing land which may be dedicated under Fields in Trust or as Charity Land, all of which can add time as well as expense to the process.

The cost of advertising under the Local Government Act is one cost which has been flagged up as potentially quite extensive. When the Council undertook the transfer of sports facilities these were all clearly identified and advertised in one large advert in the local paper. For smaller, ad hoc land adverts, the Council may consider grouping sites together into one advert. This may require a certain number of pieces of land to make it cost effective and so may lead to delays in approval.

With such limited resources, the Council may be less likely to prioritise CAT processes for pieces of land that could be used for food growing, as these may currently be underutilised and not be costing the Council much in terms of maintenance. Thus far, the focus of CATs in Blaenau Gwent and elsewhere have been sports facilities and other buildings, which have both high running costs for the Council and an existing service that the community may wish to maintain.

How did they attempt to tackle these barriers?

The council officer noted that having a CAT Strategy has been good for raising awareness of this approach to managing and transferring assets. The current iteration of the CAT strategy also has a simplified approach for small areas of land – under which many small food growing projects are likely to fall.

Regarding the proposed Sustainable Food Strategy, it is hoped that it will address practical delivery issues for interested parties so that potential applicants are fully aware of the requirements and process they must adhere to. This would include completing the CAT application, the applying group to be incorporated, applying for planning consent, addressing environmental concerns and so on. As well as simplifying the current CAT process, the council officer is keen to make sure any future Sustainable Food Strategy is designed from the outset with these practical considerations in mind, to avoid similar problems around accessing land in the months and years ahead.

What worked well for them?

Current land values are relatively low in Blaenau Gwent, meaning policy can often be a more influential driver for land use change than cost. This is an opportunity in terms of community land ownership, as policies can often consider a wider range of social and environmental benefits, such as those provided by community farms, than the purely financial approach to managing land taken by many councils.

The simplified application process minimises the process for any applicants and seeks to ensure any new group is incorporated, understands the obligations they are taking on (including operational costs), and will have public liability insurance in place.

There is a good core network of third sector support organisations in place who meet regularly to discuss applications, new initiatives, and support needed.

What if any lessons could be learned for other community groups and/or public bodies?

A council officer suggested that including pieces of land with building CATs, and connecting new groups with existing CAT sites, might be a way to accelerate the process of accessing more land. The idea was that groups could link with others in their area which already hold land or buildings, so that any additional land could be an extension of the area held by the original group, which would simplify the council CAT process.

Future plans:

As well as continuing to support the groups in the process of a CAT currently, as mentioned above council officers are interested in finding ways to review and further simplify the CAT procedures, and to ensure they work for pieces of land as well as buildings. They are also interested in working with Tai Calon to create more hubs, similar to Terence Gardens, which have food growing at their centre but also link to other services and provide a 'village heart' for communities.

About Resilient Green Spaces:

Resilient Green Spaces is a £1.27m partnership project being led by Social Farms & Gardens to pilot alternative re-localised food systems using communities and their green spaces as the driving force for change across Wales until June 2023.

This project has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

