



The emergence of organisations conducting community asset transfers of leisure facilities

Stuart Haw, Paul Potrac, Karl Wharton & Lindsay Findlay-King

To cite this article: Stuart Haw, Paul Potrac, Karl Wharton & Lindsay Findlay-King (2023): The emergence of organisations conducting community asset transfers of leisure facilities, *Managing Sport and Leisure*, DOI: [10.1080/23750472.2023.2180082](https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2023.2180082)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2023.2180082>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 193






View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The emergence of organisations conducting community asset transfers of leisure facilities

Stuart Haw, Paul Potrac , Karl Wharton  and Lindsay Findlay-King 

Department of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT

Community Asset Transfer (CAT) has increased as a way of delivering leisure services in England, where community groups (CG) form to manage leisure facilities in replacement for local authorities (LA). This paper builds on existing studies of the process of CAT to discuss how groups emerge to take on these facilities. Studies situated the emergence of these groups amidst LA outsourcing, with budgetary reductions, and poor management, as contexts for facilities needing transfer with CAT. A critical realist view of emergence is taken, where the morphogenetic framework is used to explain the contexts, interactions, and elaborations within two voluntary CGs that emerged to take on the management of leisure facilities. The paper confirms emergence as shaped by contexts of facility closure and LA cuts with interactions occurring when activists campaign to prevent closures, and form entities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 September 2022
Accepted 9 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Community ownership; sport management; facility management; sport; leisure

1. Introduction

Community groups (CG) have become involved in the provision of leisure facilities through community asset transfer (CAT). The policy involves local authorities (LAs) listing facilities for disposal, with CGs acquiring the facility to ensure leisure provision is continued (Locality, 2018). This has occurred in a variety of localities including affluent and disadvantaged areas, where the impacts of austerity are felt (Nichols and Forbes, 2014). There has been research on the contexts for transfers (Nichols et al 2015; Murtagh & Boland, 2017), yet there has been no attention on groups emerging to acquire facilities, the mechanisms for emergence, and how this process can be

supported (Nichols et al, 2020). Philosophical pragmatism driven by the practical challenges of conducting this research has led to this (Nichols et al., 2020).

This paper examines how CGs emerge to acquire leisure facilities through CAT. The aim is to explain conditions and interactions underpinning their emergence and management of the leisure facilities. The findings have significance for third sector practitioners, as contextual forces for the emergence and evolution of these organisations are examined. This involves examining two cases where socio-economic decline caused LA to close leisure facilities. The study is informed by literature depicting changes in the ownership of leisure

CONTACT Stuart Haw  stuart.haw@northumbria.ac.uk  Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Department of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

facilities and draws on contemporary research on third sector organisations to reveal CGs as being increasingly involved in their management. The methodology of examining stages of emergence for CGs conducting these transfers is then explored, where critical realist methodological considerations for attending to the ways groups emerge are considered, with the morphogenetic approach being used to explain how groups emerge to conduct CATs (Archer, 1998). This framework is used to separate the process of emergence into stages of contexts (T1), interactions (T2) and the elaborations for organisations structures and cultures to emerge (T3). Findings of the contexts influencing transfers, such as the socio-economic state of each locality are examined. This includes the forces causing LAs to outsource facilities through CATs and the social need of residents in these areas. The interactions that these underpin, and the elaborations that occurred are examined, before the structural elaborations are outlined, with another cycle then commencing. The paper discusses the mechanisms throughout this emergence. In adopting the critical realist view of morphogenesis, interplays of structure and agency, which enabled the emergence of CGs are discussed. By addressing these mechanisms, the areas that groups need support in are revealed.

2. CAT of leisure facilities

CAT is the transferring of management of public assets from LAs to CGs for less than market value, to achieve local benefit (Locality, 2018). Whilst policy origins of transfers trace back to Compulsory Competitive Tendering and Best Value (Nichols, 1996), the Big Society agenda and the 2011 Localism Act increased

opportunities for community participation in managing leisure assets (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2016). Further, the discretionary nature of leisure services, and the need for LAs to reduce costs makes leisure facilities desirable for CAT (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2016; Nichols et al, 2015).

There is evidence that CATs have increased and additional LAs have conducted CATs but the extent of this increase remains unknown. Thirty-five percent of LAs transferred the management of leisure assets between 2005 and 2011 (O'Leary et al., 2011, p. 30). There has been a 7% reduction in LA facility ownership between 2014 and 2018 (Mintel, 2018). Consequently, CGs have been pressured to transfer leisure facilities to avoid the permanent loss of the facility within the community. Such groups must be not-for-profit and focused on the interests of the community with how leisure services will be provided at the facility, should a CAT be approved.¹

Of the 6325 community assets in England, 11% relate to leisure (Archer et al., 2019). This does not provide insight on the extent of novel entities forming from CGs to conduct CATs, or the process of this formation. There are no overriding models for the CGs taking on assets (Aiken et al., 2011). They have been understood as membership associations (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2016) mutual aid groups (Authors et al. 2015), and social enterprises (Nichols et al, 2020). In terms of registering as a social enterprise², Community Interest Companies (CICs)³ are the preferred model for community groups attempting CATs, with 48% of CATs being by organisations registered as CIC (Aiken et al., 2011; Thorlby, 2011). Similarly, organisations registered as Mutual Benefit Societies⁴ have also conducted CATs. These models enable CGs to access rate relief and an

¹The significance of this is that it differentiates groups conducting CATs from larger leisure trusts who may operate multiple sites across the UK. This market structure means CGs may be in competition with large charitable trusts.

²An organisation whose main goal is promoting social or environmental welfare rather than making or maximising profits.

³A special form of non-charitable limited company, which exists primarily to benefit a community or with a view to pursuing a social purpose, rather than to make a profit for shareholders.

⁴Mutual societies are owned and democratically controlled by their members and usually aim to benefit members or the community.

Table 1. Structure for entities conducting CATs, Thorlby (2011).

Legal structure	Charitable status	Asset lock	Ownership
Company limited by Guarantee	Yes	Yes	Common and flexible legal structure.
Community Interest Company (CIC)	No	Yes	Flexible legal structure limited by guarantee
Trust	Yes	Yes	Trustees own and manage assets
Cooperative society	Unlikely	Yes	Run for the mutual benefit of members
Benefit of the Community Society (Becom)	Yes	Yes	Run for the benefit of non-members, no profit distribution allowed.

asset lock.^{5,6} See table 1 for a summary of legal structures.

CG structures include a combination of boards, staff, and support from volunteers, but can be informally structured with members of the community being associated in service delivery without having a formal role (Authors et al. 2015, p. 72). Examining the features of CGs involved in CAT, suggests that they are typical of the third sector organisations (Billis, 2010).

Little is known about how groups come together in forming them (Thorlby, 2011). In understanding this emergence, government policy and community politics shapes emergence. For instance, austere policy making may cause facilities to be at risk of closure in localities which are defined by neglect and disadvantage. Sense of place thus impacts whether people will volunteer (Nichols et al. 2020), as residents may be a service user or appreciate the value that the facility provides for the community (Authors et al. 2015). Residents may come together to prevent the closures of a facility. Here, the negative contexts may condition the emergence of the group (Nichols & Forbes, 2014),

understanding this, and the complex process of CATs is necessary (Authors et al, 2015). Contexts of LA facility closure are explained. The examination contains the interactions that occur throughout the process and draws on the perspectives of individuals from CGs and LAs that were involved in the leisure facility transfer.

3. Methodology

The literature on CAT seldom used methodological approaches to explore how transfers have been conducted, as pragmatism shaped how organisations are understood (Nichols et al, 2020). Explaining how organisations emerge requires generating data inclusive of the contexts and interaction pertinent to the participants involved in transfers (Fenwick and Gibbon, 2016).

Central to examining how organisations emerge from these contexts is a compositional view of social entities, which attends to their lower levels of structure and the changes that may occur. The theory stems from Elder-Vass (2007) in exploring how social organisations emerge and evolve over time. Elder-Vass (2007) was concerned with the antecedent properties of these organisations which interact to cause higher-levels of structure to emerge. The theory acknowledges the emergence of social organisations, enabling the antecedent properties of entities to be attended to explain organisational change. This process of organisational emergence was framed through the three stages of Archer's (2003) morphogenetic framework as shown in Figure 1.

The process of morphogenesis is split into stages. T1 concerns the structural and cultural conditions which shapes the possibilities at T2, with this stage relating to the interactions agents have with these conditions. T3

⁵Charities, CATs and community amateur clubs can apply for charitable rate relief of up to 80% if a property is used for charitable / not for profit purposes and LA's can top up the discount to 100% (called 'discretionary relief') if the organisation meets discretionary regulations.

⁶Asset locks prevent the sale of assets for private development and ensures that entities manage community assets with the local community interests as a priority.

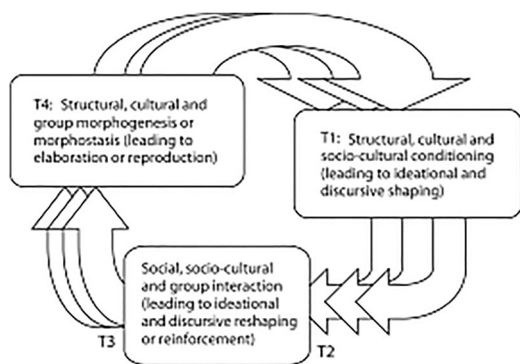


Figure 1. The morphogenetic cycle by Archer (2003).

represents the outcome of these interactions. T4 represents the culmination of one cycle and the beginning of the next, so in this paper, T4 is not covered as only one cycle is examined. Each stage involves examining the interplay of structure and agency in the emergence of high-level social properties. This study uses the morphogenetic framework when examining the data. The objective is to provide an explanation of how CGs emerge, covering the contexts shaping their emergence, the interactions stemming from this, and the nature of CGs that emerge.

4. Methods

The research replicated approaches of data generation from studies of CAT (Findlay-King et al, 2018), and involved two detailed case studies of CAT. Cases were selected through a scoping exercise involving submitting a freedom of information (FOI) request to all LAs in England,^{7,8} Organisations meeting the criteria outlined below were contacted to arrange a conversation to explain the research project.

- Managing a facility which was transferred through CAT in the last 10 years.

- The facility must be operational and still managed by the group.
- Having a relationship with the LA.
- Groups that included a mix of trustees, paid staff, and voluntary staff.

The sample was chosen on the nature of the CAT, where a closing facility was transferred by CGs. Ethical approval was granted by the Author's institution's Ethics panel, and the conditions of this were shared with all participants ahead of their involvement in data generation.

Examining the contexts and interrelations underpinning the emergence of organisations required a mix of qualitative methods including focus groups, and interviews. Each case involved examination of each LAs CAT policy, business plans, annual reports, and news articles to structure the interviews that were conducted with the participants listed in Tables 2 and 3.

Interviews addressed experiences board members had when conducting CATs. Most had a background in the third sector and one was a councillor. The staff had backgrounds in leisure organisations, so the nature of the interviews differed, but CG2 had a greater capacity due to the internal expertise within the organisation, with CG1 lacking this, hence the use of consultants during the CAT process as shown in Table 2. These consultants were accessed for the study through the snowballing process where board members connected the researcher. Different perspectives were addressed with LA1's Head of Leisure in Table 2 and LA Councillor BM9 from CG2 in Table 2 who explained the perspective of LA agents throughout transfers. The connection to local authority agents was made through emailing officers directly but a response was not received from LA2. The background of participants listed in Tables 1 and 2 meant that there were different perspectives addressed throughout

⁷LAFOI contact <https://www.foi.directory/unitary-councils-england/>

⁸Of the LAs contacted, 67 shared CGs that had conducted CATs of leisure facilities and these were added to a list, which contained 288 assets, which were then contacted with a survey. Nine organisations provided responses to the survey.

Table 2. CG1 Interviews.

Focus group 1	Treasurer and board members (BM1, BM2, BM3)
Interview 1	Board member (BM4)
Interview 2	LA1 Head of Leisure (HOL1)
Focus group 2	Senior Duty Manager, Duty Manager, (SDM, DM1)
Interview 3	Local Pool Consultant (CON1)
Interview 4	Consultant (CON2)
Interview 5	Consultant (CON3)

Table 3. CG2 Interviews.

Interview 6	Chair (CH2)
Interview 7	Board member (BM7)
Interview 8	Board member (BM8)
Interview 9	Board member/Councillor (BM9)
Interview 11	Secretary (BM9)

focus groups and interviews. The impacts on the findings of such differences are covered in the conclusion.

Interview recordings were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 12, where themes relating to stages of CAT were developed. These themes were merged into stages of morphogenesis, involving inferences of how groups emerged and the mechanisms underpinning the emergence to be provided. Retroductive analysis was conducted to enable inferences of the emergence of organisational entities (Elder-Vass, 2010). This involved going from observations of data to reconceptualisations of conditions for things to be as they were, during the research process. The first stage of retroduction involved accounting for organisational structures and abstracting these properties across cases. In line with retroductive inference, the empirical material regarding how the nature of these structures emerged were contrasted against the existing literature. The second stage involved identifying interactions causing the cultural and structural properties of the entities. The conditions in which the groups emerged were analysed in a final stage of retroductive analysis, as abstractions were made from the existing data to explore the interactions which arose from these conditions for CGs to emerge.

5. Findings

Findings are split across case organisations with a brief overview of the transfer being provided. Each case is examined across stages of morphogenesis. The conditions for the closure of the facilities are explored, with T2 following these contexts as the interactions that occur between members of groups and staff at LA were driven by these conditioning factors. The properties that emerged are examined at T3, where organisational elaborations are explored. These cover the organisational model that was adopted, where the forces shaping the recruitment of the workforce are picked up. Findings are presented in line with the process of retroduction.

5.1. Community group 1

CG1 acquired a swimming facility that closed due to £100m of LA1 savings. Five facilities were closed, with 4 being transferred to an established leisure trust, but as the facility lost £280k per year, the trust did not include it in their proposal to LA1. The closure sparked anger from community members who established protest groups. Marches were held, public meetings organised, and a CG emerged. It took 3 years for this group to form a legal entity and conduct the CAT as their business plan was repeatedly rejected, with LA1's HOL claiming their financial planning was pie in the sky, suggesting CG1 did not have accurate revenue forecasts. Board members suggested plans were rejected because LA1 had alternative plans for the facility and claimed the LA1 cancelled meetings. HOL claimed the group were not concerned with preventing the facility closure but were pushing an anti-establishment campaign against the LA. Board members came from the campaign groups and only one new board member was recruited. The group reopened the facility in August 2019. A full timetable of swimming is provided at the facility, with

17 schools involved, various swimming sessions, and a fitness suite has been installed.

5.2. CG1 contexts (T1)

5.2.1. LA1 reductions

Austerity measures caused the reductions in leisure services as LA1 could not afford to continue funding this pool. These reductions became contentious given the need for affordable facilities.

The cuts to LA1 means having to make terrible decisions like this. The pool is well-used, including by disabled people, schoolchildren, and ethnic minorities who make up half the community. BM9, CG1.

CG1 addressed how the cuts caused LA1 to make terrible decisions for an area with a local community who needed the pool. They suggested cuts would be detrimental to community members. In addition to these cuts, pre-existing management issues were considered as compounding the financial challenge faced by LA1.

LA1 were terrible at financial management. This is why losses were occurring. CON1, CG1.

There would be lights left on when the staff had gone. BM3, CG1.

The consultant of CG1 claimed the poor management of the facility caused financial situations which were worsened by the cuts. This reflects the anti-establishment view of participants, but the board member provided an example of poor financial management. There were examples from HOL which these criticisms aligned with.

We closed it because it was just unaffordable, it was costing us 800k a year, a massive amount of money, with hardly anybody wanting to use it. HOL, LA1.

HOL addressed the financial issues faced at the facility and they added another issue, reduced usage. These reflections confirm suggestions that cuts from central government worsen

issues that LAs face when managing facilities (Nichols & Forbes, 2014). Wherein, facilities are closed, or services reduced when budgets need balancing, with the poor management and discretionary nature of these facilities as factors in the cuts. LA1 used outsourcing to resolve these financial issues, exemplifying this.

I was invited to meet councillors looking at the closure of the pool. It was obvious, that where LA1 had its income cut by 50%, this was going to happen. CON3, CG1.

Trying to get LA1 to maintain the pool wasn't going to happen in the reality of austerity. CON2, CG1.

Here the consultant addresses that as stakeholders met to discuss finding alternative provision for Pool1. The HOL addressed there being no option of the LA managing the pool.

It was a decision when we were going through the budget to see what we could transfer out. That was community things. So, community assets... We put it out to contract. All bidders said 'we're not prepared to bid if Pool1 is in because it's just gonna drag down any contract price.' So, LA1 made the decision that we would remove it HOL, LA1.

This shows CAT had seldom been used for leisure facilities, but with the pool's financial performance and the cuts to LA1, it was not possible for LA1 to find an alternative provider for the facility. The two consultants of CG1 explained how the financial situation left LA1 with two options, closure or CAT.

LA1 didn't want a CAT. They wanted to transfer this and they tried to market the business twice to the private sector. They took other leisure centres but not Pool1. CON2, CG1.

LA1 going out to market and failing is complete failure. LA1 couldn't keep it. The only would be community ownership. CON1, CG1.

The data showed consultants highlighted issues of CATs being necessary to prevent facility closure. This suggests that some groups do not want to conduct CATs, but it is the only

option to preserve facilities in areas where there are contexts of health inequalities.

5.2.2. Health issues

Board members shared that there were health inequalities near to the pool, so participants focussed on improving these.

It ticks the wrong boxes. There's high levels of deprivation. We are a deprived community; we have a higher need for quality places for people to do physical exercise. BM1, CG1.

The poor health of children and the high incidence of child poverty was highlighted to suggest that losing Pool1 would detriment the health of residents. The comments about having a higher need shows for the campaigners the other 4 facilities being packaged and transferred to an established leisure provider was considered to risk further amplifying the inequalities across the city.

5.3. CG1 interactions (T2)

5.3.1. Campaigns

Two activists met via an online petition and they tried to attract community members to their campaign to protect the facility.

When the pool closed, we did flyers, getting people to sign a petition. We had a protest march going into town, we had press coverage, and a lot of people. BM4, CG1.

As the campaign was aimed at LA1 the interactions were conditioned by the contexts of closure and health issues. These interactions exemplified ways to connect with residents and mobilise support. Residents around the neighbourhood that joined the campaigners coalesced around the pools and mobilised the social capital of the community.

We had success when we were campaigning because we were knocking on doors and talking to people. When you make that connection, they are more likely to buy into the whole thing. BM4, CG1

Suggested by BM4 is that in-person and placed-based campaigns were effective, as the campaigners' informed residents of the health issues in the local area, and in doing so, such contexts directly shaped the interactions they had in campaigning to preserve the facilities. The contexts formed valuable incentives for residents to join, with the shared focus on preserving facilities for those in need, strengthening the social ties that developed.

5.2.2. Issues in campaigning

Consultations LA1 organised with groups were an opportunity to understand the desire and capacity of the community in conducting a CAT, yet support dwindled.

We had facilitated meetings with LA1 once the pool had closed. A lot of support had dwindled. People still wanted to help but the majority of people don't want to get involved with meetings. BM4, CG1.

This suggests that participating in formal meetings may not be desirable for supporters who disengage as the process becomes politically complex (*Authors et al*, 2018).

There's a lady. She tapped me on the shoulder. 'Can you say this? I can't talk, I'm not clever enough, they won't listen to me' ... There are people who've got stories of how their mom and dad learned to swim locally, it means more to them. The fact that they weren't able to get involved is a shame. BM4, CG1.

BM4 explains how local people were not able to get involved with the politically complex nature of the meetings. In disengaging, the campaigners were left to progress with the transfer and develop the properties of the organisation that emerged. This showed that the campaigners such as BM4 were key individuals in both forming the organisation, and conducting the CAT of the facility (Aiken et al., 2011).

A significant interaction for CG1 was the lack of progress the group made with the business plans that were submitted to LA1 during the consultations. The campaigns

caused suspicions from LA1 about the motivations of those from CG1.

It has been a political decision, by an anti-counsel organisation led by the people who are now the board. I know them. But the idea they had to save it, was a political one, rather than being community led. It was an anti-establishment approach. HOL, LA1.

The HOL referred to the background of the campaigners, suggesting that officers within LA1 suspected the group were concerned with attacking LA1. By commenting that they knew campaigners from CG1, they shared the extent of the connection they had with the group. This suggests CG1 had pre-existing connections with LA1, so the issues leading to suspicion were caused by the political campaign. These connections meant that being a novel entity was unlikely to be the cause of the suspicion from LA1. Instead, the behaviour of campaigners was a factor in causing the suspicion as to what the campaigners were trying to achieve. The head of leisure provided examples of this behaviour of campaigners.

It was done to stitch up offices in LA1. That gave us an element of distrust as to what they were trying to achieve. They sent in mass numbers to challenge. Some meetings had appalling behaviour. HOL, LA1.

By sharing examples of the appalling behaviour from members of CG1 the HOL substantiates the distrust towards the group. There was a perception by those at CG1, that it was LA1 being difficult to work with. An example of this was the handling of the business planning.

They were, 'we don't want to commit to fundraising for you or whatever it might be. If we don't know that it's going to reopen. We need assurances before, we are willing to say that we'll support.' That was difficult, because we couldn't do that unless they said yes. LA1 wouldn't say yes unless we had support from different organisations ... There wasn't a desire to help get the project off the ground. BM4, CG1.

This meant the group could not proceed with the CAT as they could not provide evidence of

having appropriate funding in place. Likewise, they felt that they could not demonstrate partnerships, as they felt CG1 needed to have their business planning approved before partnerships could be formed. The frustration that this caused was aimed towards LA1, as board members felt that LA1 could have helped.

... we're just going back and forward with our business plan trying to negotiate. During that period, if there were discussions with organisation they were like, 'Is it going to happen?'. BM1, CG1.

The situation discussed by BM1 meant that CG1 could not proceed with their business planning so the local community did not understand what was happening with the facility. Most significantly, their comment exemplifies the situation of being stuck.

We were in a catch 22 saying we need you to give us the go ahead and agree that you'll transfer the asset. Based on the business plan, this is how much we need. Once you give us the green light and a letter of intent, we will start applying funding bodies to secure the start-up money.' LA1 dug their heels in and said 'we're not giving you the green light because you're not gonna get the money. BM1, CG1.

As they could not progress due to the lack of finances and partnerships, but these could not be developed without having a letter of intent, they were in a catch-22 situation. Others acknowledged how this was a cause of the anti-establishment view that emerged at the organisation.

They hadn't read the paperwork that had been sent to them beforehand, which was always infuriating. We had meetings; we're pinning everything on them. For them, it felt as though it was 'what can we do to make things difficult, so they'll go away? BM4, LA1.

HOL was 1 who didn't respond straight away. In the occasions when they met. I recognised a healthy scepticism there. I witnessed it, the outright hostility. CON3

The comments from BM4 and the consultant suggest the outright hostility and frustration

caused by LA1 officers led to an anti-establishment norm to develop amongst those within CG1. This was described as a healthy scepticism towards the authority by one of the consultants, but it echoes the suspicion from the HOL.

5.3. CG1 emergence (T3)

5.3.1. Community interest company

CG1 became a social enterprise with consultants recommended forming a CIC, as this would enable the group to attract and maintain support and expertise.

As the CIC was concerned, you've got the right support and expertise. CON3, CG1.

LA1 earmarked the site for something else. We were told to get the building registered as an asset of community interest, it meant LA1 cannot do anything, whatever plans they had. BM4, CG1.

The listing protected the building whilst CG1 conducted the CAT with this being shown in [Table 1](#). The approval was premised on CG1 evidencing that residents would benefit through providing opportunities for residents to improve their health and wellbeing, which builds on the contexts at T1.

5.3.2. Workforce

The workforce was shaped by LA1 CAT requirements as appointments were made based on the connection that individuals had with local communities. The board members from the campaign group initially recruited management who had experience of leisure management.

We recruited from the board to recruit the pool manager, we feel the board should have an understanding of whats going on. Otherwise, were getting divorced from whats happening. BM2, CG1.

Operational staff were recruited because of their connection to the facility. This was because the management staff recruiting

them inherited the community focus from the board. Staff became invested in the importance of working with residents to ensure that they were connected. A Duty Manager explained how such cultural properties differed to private and public sector pools.

They come in and bring food. When I was working corporate the manager said 'you can't accept that.' Whereas you're allowed to be close with people, we get that connection. They are happier. DM1, CG1.

The community focus of CG1 shaped the nature of the workforce and explains why staff that joined had a focus on serving the community. The interactions throughout the community campaigning and the CAT process shaped elaborations of being informally structured and having input from all staff, especially those that were grounded within the local community.

In Council it was wrong to use your initiative. There's too much structure in these organisations... In community, you must be hands on, and we've been fixing things ourselves. DM1, CG1.

The data suggest board members are connected to the staff and champions their opinions because they are connected to the community. They contrast this with private sector pools where board members are rarely seen. So, CG1 was found to emerge with an open and flexible structure. This shows that for community pools there is an informality that enables board members to be hands on.

5.4. Community group 2

CG2 took on an Edwardian swimming pool. As LA2 reduced the opening hours, the closure seemed likely, so a former MP consulted residents, to understand their connection with the pool and whether there was demand to justify opening the pool for extended hours. It was agreed with the LA and the campaign group that the only mechanism for the pool

to remain open would be to conduct a CAT. The campaigners put together a business plan, which outlined how the pool could be operated by the community. The group included 40 community members with 10 forming the board of the BenCom⁹ running a pool (Table 1). In January 2013, the transfer was completed.

5.5. CG2 contexts (T1)

5.5.1. LA2 reductions

LA2 was pressured to make cuts to staffing and discretionary services, with facilities that were losing money being the first to be cut. To balance their finances amidst these reductions, LA2 made staff redundant and reduced the pool's weekly opening hours to 29. The Chair shared concerns with residents being unable to access the facility.

They wanted to use it but couldn't as it was only open 29 hours. Chair, CG2.

This shows that campaigners may act when facility closures seem likely to occur in localities where there is a need for facilities to be provided.

5.5.2. Children drowning

There was a perception that affordable swimming provision was needed in the area as children had drowned nearby. Participants highlighted the extent that children were drowning in canals as a reason for why the facility was needed.

8 kids drowned in the canal. It was a waste of life. The statistics show that half of 11-year-olds leave school without being able to swim. Teaching swimming, saves lives. Chair, CG2.

Here the Chair shares that the pool was essential to ensure children could access swimming opportunities. This is a contextual factor that motivated the campaigners to act preventing

the closure of the pool or providing an alternative. This context influenced the campaigners developing social missions during each campaign. Forming this mission exemplifies the influence of key individuals such as the Chair.

5.6. CG2 interactions (T2)

5.6.1. In-person campaigns

In person campaigning was significant in connecting residents to take action to protect the pools.

We launched the use it or lose it campaign. We want it to be community focused. I knocked on doors and said, 'will, you go for a swim. Why don't you come back, you don't need to swim, you can stand in the water? It's warmer than your house and you get a free cup of tea.' People turned up to support. Chair, CG2.

The importance of connecting with residents to develop buy-in was shown with how campaigns fostered connections and developed civic responsibility. The in-person approach of the Chair involved focussing on the relationships residents had with the pool.

The key was the focus on the people and relationships, we went around saying, 'well you used the pools,' even before it closed. Chair, CG2.

Momentum developed with residents joining the campaign, so LA2 organised formal consultations with the campaigners that became the board of CG2. This was overseen by the Chair, evidencing key involvement for community organisations preparing CAT processes.

5.6.2. Developing social missions

As campaigners in CG2 met, social missions were developed which strengthened the social ties between members of campaign groups. These related to contexts of social need, where residents had drowned.

⁹Community benefit societies (BenComs) are incorporated industrial and provident societies (IPS) that conduct business for the benefit of their community. Profits are not distributed among members, or external shareholders, but returned to the community.

The key thing about the pools, and why I got involved is 8 kids drowned in the canal. Chair, CG2.

The Chair shared motivations in ensuring residents could learn to swim, with this underpinning their mission. This confirms that motivations of agents conducting CATs may involve wanting to preserve facilities to meet local need (Authors et al, 2018). Social missions connected residents and campaigners as participants confirmed that as agents with these motivations interacted social missions became clear.

It's clear because it is a swimming pool. That's what it has to be used for. The purpose is clear because it's a strong focus on the pool. BM8, CG2.

The data infers the social missions related to protecting facilities for the benefit of residents. This stage addressed how in-person campaigning and the politicised nature of these campaigns, may develop social missions, that stem from the socio-cultural contexts in each locality. Additionally, this process confirmed the central involvement of CH2 for CG2, as through their chairing, these missions were made clear (Aiken et al., 2011; Murtagh & Boland, 2017).

5.6.3. Managing tensions

Formal consultations included suspicion between agents in CG2 and LA2. The Chair shared that this would impede the progression of campaigns.

I don't want to use the idea that LA2 are the enemy, they destroyed the pools, and we're saving it. I wanted to use the language of a partnership between the public sector and people. Chair, CG2.

Attempts to develop a neutral narrative for the campaign and CAT involved avoiding the term "asset transfer" or highlighting that LA2 had destroyed the pools. This follows the contexts of facility closures being caused by local authority reductions, but resists the influence of anti-establishment cultures emerging through

the interactions. A councillor who joined CG2, also managed tensions.

There was cynicism around LA2 about whether this could work. I was instrumental in having a foot in both camps. I've gone to LA2, and I belong to CG2 as a member of the community. I helped that edge between LA2 and CG2. They have a positive relationship now. BM9, CG2.

Having affiliation with CG2 and LA2 was key in helping CG2 progress with the CAT process, with having a foot in both camps helping to maintain a positive relationship. This suggests having shared understandings can resolve political obstacles in CATs but maintaining these relationships requires continued investment from key individuals (Murtagh & Boland, 2017; Reid, 2015).

5.7. CG2 emergence

5.7.1. Mutual benefit societies

In needing to form a social enterprise, as ruled in the LA2 CAT policy, CG2 formed a BenCom to continue.

I was involved in the bill for CICs. I don't think CIC is the right model. We used a BenCom as it is a benefit to the community. It's a structure that builds in an asset lock. That means that if CG2 didn't work, we can't privatise it and sell it on, it has to fall back to the community. Chair, CG2

The Chair developed policies concerning social enterprises when working in parliament so they knew the advantages of each model. In this model is an asset lock which ensures CG2 directed the use of the pools towards their social mission of preventing local people from drowning.

5.7.2. Recruitment

Board members from the campaign group formed recruitment groups to oversee the process of hiring the initial management staff.

The skills to do an appointment, something that some board members haven't had and to divide ourselves in groups. Our skills

combined and enabled us to do that for a high level. BM10, CG2

BM10 explains that there were skill gaps with the board members involved in the recruitment and that recruitment groups enabled the group to recruit staff at a high level. These skills combined to enable those recruiting to acknowledge the skills necessary to lead CG2.

They came from a different background. She brought skills that we haven't had before, she brought retail skills. She brought understanding and knowledge of design and was interested in culture. The one before CEO1 came from a mining museum. We've got CEO1, who is from a different background. We have people who have stamped a different feel. BM10, CG2.

Reasons to hire CEOs included having commercial experience, retail skills, knowledge of design, interest in culture. The reflection was these CEOs brought more than what other leisure managers would.

The recruitment of staff was premised on providing jobs for local people and ensuring staff subscribed to the social mission of CG2. The CEO shared how the contexts were a factor in needing to create local jobs.

Using community assets to rebalance inequality. We will help with health and wellbeing and the jobs... Let's train young people. It's a great investment plan, but keeping within the community survey... they say they want employability. CEO, CG2.

By highlighting how the provision of jobs can contribute in some way to rebalancing local inequality, the CEO shares broader ways the community would benefit from the facility being run by CG2. The recruitment of those subscribing to the social mission of CG2 was shown by a board member who joined two years after CG2 had conducted the CAT and had been running the facility.

Our motivation was to help the local community stop young people dying in the canal. BM7, CG2.

In this way, staff being motivated by improving the health of residents and preventing them drowning is influenced by the interactions throughout the campaigning phase of organisational emergence. Having staff bring different skills exemplifies the properties emerging from the interactions within CG2, there was a need to manage the pool differently.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Analysing organisational emergence revealed contexts and interactions which underpinned the CAT. Each was explained via the morphogenetic cycle, where conditions interacted with socio-cultural dynamics within a campaigning phase to precipitate the properties of the organisations. Austerity measures were a foundation for the emergence of each group as contexts of LA cuts conditioned the closure of facilities. Such closures add weight to suggestions that leisure facilities are vulnerable to being closed due to their discretionary nature, with profitable facilities being selected by established leisure providers (Findlay-King et al, 2018). This involved closures of leisure facilities occurring where cuts to LAs are disproportionately placed on disadvantaged areas (SPERI, 2015). A similar theme was the presence of social issues in disadvantaged communities where drowning was common, swimming proficiency was low, and the extent of child poverty and obesity were known. These issues became contexts that influenced interactions as with facilities being closed, key agents instigated campaigns to preserve facilities.

The data showed that campaigners perceived the closure of facilities as potentially driving these social issues. The significance of these contexts was shown throughout the interactions which began, as campaigners addressed the contexts of health issues in localities to show the need of such facilities. Activists instigated campaigns where communities were consulted regarding what their needs were, what they would want at the

facility, and what they could afford. Participants from CG1 claimed these consultations enabled connection with residents. Likewise, the Chair of CG2 shared that by focusing on building connections with residents during the consultations, the campaigns gained momentum. These approaches reflect the view that community ownership required resident involvement so CGs can align their interests with that of the communities, with the consultations serving this purpose.

The language used by campaigners suggested they saw themselves as key in improving the wellbeing of community members, so they activated mechanisms for involving the residents. This was shown in the social missions CG2 developed, as these encapsulated aligning the campaign with the collective need for health improvements (*Authors et al, 2018*). Having members of the CG who possess ties with residents and community members enables connections to form, and alignments in missions and needs between the groups and the residents to develop. This showed that social capital is vital for groups instigating a campaign with communities (*Author, 2018*).

With the communities engaging with LAs during consultation and transfer processes, interactions involved anti-establishment views and scepticism towards LAs. Such suspicion arises when closures are made due to budgetary reductions, meaning officers involved in reducing services are involved in the discussion regarding sustaining their future, so this inevitably leads to tension. Possessing political capital proved necessary to manage this scepticism, as the former MP and a councillor developed mutual understandings between the group and LA officers, about the purpose of the CAT. This highlights the importance of developing a shared understanding of what the purpose of initial consultations meetings are and what the purpose and successful outcomes of a CAT may look like. However, stocks of political capital were less apparent

for CG1 who could not maintain a healthy relationship or shared understanding with LA1. Indeed, having members of CGs, who possess political capital can enhance the capacity of CGs to progress with CAT processes (*Authors et al, 2018*). But also, members of groups with such capital may mediate conflicts and any emergent anti-establishment norms.

The interactions explored throughout the findings lead to the emergence of two CGs, with CG1 structured as a CIC, and CG2 structured as a mutual benefit society. The difference in structural elaboration is a consequence of the instigators of the campaigns registering the organisations with a particular model of social enterprise, based on what they perceived the benefits of each to be. The interactions that Chairs and consultants had with other participants proved to be significant as their influence was particularly prominent in which organisational structure was formed. The influence of these individuals confirms that CATs are often overseen by selfless individuals who will drive on the cause (*Murtagh & Boland, 2017; Reid, 2015*).

These structures exemplified interactions shaping structural elaborations, as board members and staff were recruited to the social enterprises based on their connection to the community. There were examples where staff shared motivations with the campaigner (CG1 Duty Managers). Likewise, participants from CG2 subscribed to the social mission of the pool and they could identify what this meant and why they aligned with it themselves. With staff subscribing to social missions and endorsing norms that board members may have set at the organisations, the community focus and anti-establishment view can be seen as cultural elaborations that emerged from the interactions the board members had with each other and LA officers.

Overall, the morphogenetic framework has been used to examine the emergence of the CGs, which conducted CAT. This revealed key

interactions, and contexts that conditioned the structural and cultural properties of each organisation. There were similarities with these interactions and the elaborations which occurred. With both cases involving LAs closing facilities there was a tendency for the process of conducting the transfer to be politically complex. This resulted in groups fairing differently based on their political capital. Indeed, the capacity of communities and campaign groups to engage with political processes differs between localities. This is driven by existing levels of socio-economic disadvantage where facilities are closed. Communities may therefore lack the agency necessary to participate in organisations where there is a complex process to this emergence. This was found with the dwindling support from residents that CG1 received when consulting with LA1. Similarly, CGs faced challenges regarding employing residents, as there may not have been residents with the skills necessary to take on roles. Consequently, there may be fewer residents employed in CGs. These challenges raise questions of whether assets are genuinely community led, as if residents are not involved at facilities or cannot access services, then are they legitimately community led?

Support to address these challenges enabled the emergence properties. This was because depending on the capacity or willingness of public and third sector agencies to provide support, CGs had differing success with CATs. The support from the public sector was insufficient in overcoming such complexity. A consequence of this was for interactions to be defined by contention, as CGs lacking in expertise were held back from progressing with the transfer. The involvement of consultants to support CGs confirmed the lack of capacity from groups and LA. Access to support and professional expertise proved to be a tendency across cases, confirming how the skills and expertise necessary to conduct transfers is disproportionate across society (*Authors et al.*, 2018; Featherstone et al., 2012).

This study confirmed that social enterprises emerge because of facility closures (*Authors*, 2020). Throughout these interactions social properties regarding the importance of community health, learning to swim, and being community lead. The social properties of campaigners shaped the properties of the social enterprises, as the instigators of these campaigns reinforced norms. Indeed, participants with backgrounds in community campaigns reinforced norms concerning community connection and anti-establishmentism. Likewise, the participants with professional backgrounds from the third sector reinforced norms concerning community health and formalising business processes.

This paper reviewed the nature of CGs which emerge to transfer leisure facilities. Theoretical questions of how entities emerge to transfer facilities were raised. The study used the morphogenetic framework to answer such questions by examining the emergence of CGs which emerged to conduct CATs. The paper provided explanations of how CGs emerge, the contexts and interactions underpinning this, and the nature of the groups.

Providing accounts of morphogenesis, revealed austerity-based LA measures as conditioning the contexts in which facilities close. Such contexts influenced actions, capacities, and interplays, and whether CGs emerged to conduct CATs. In explaining how groups emerge links were found between austerity and financial inefficiency, and how taking on facilities may justify the decisions for facility closure. In future, the morphogenetic framework should include additional entities and be used in longitudinal approaches for further tendencies and cycles to be examined. This would involve additional cycles (T4) of the framework being examined.

The study found that to conduct CATs and enable organisational emergence, capacity is significant, as challenges associated with the capacity of CGs to participate in community ownership were identified. These concerned

the social, human, and political capital that residents had, and were considered from the perspective of when residents were involved with campaign groups (Chaskin, 2001). Where CATs occur after LAs facilities are closed and the CGs that emerged did not possess business skills or the knowledge necessary to progress with CATs. Residents lack political skills to engage with LA officers, suggesting that support to address capacity challenges is needed, with this disproportionately provided. LAs were pressured for such support, but were unable to support beyond consultations. Third sector agencies are suitable to support, and may possess expertise in business planning, operations, and political negotiation, but can rarely work pro-bono, so it remains to be seen how this would be funded. The implication of this is a call for investment into third sector support, so organisations can address health and social issues that may exist within localities, through conducting CATs. Therefore, future research examining CAT should examine this with capacity incorporated into the theoretical framing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Paul Potrac  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9616-6491>

Karl Wharton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2578-4326>

Lindsay Findlay-King  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5199-1797>

References

- Aiken, M., Cairns, B., Taylor, M., & Moran, R. (2011). Community organisations controlling assets: A better understanding. Available: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/community-organisations-controlling-assets-better-understanding>. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Archer, M. (2003). Frontmatter. In *Structure, agency, and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139087315>
- Archer, T., Batty, E., Harris, C., Parks, S., Wilson, I., Aiken, M., Buckley, E., Moran, R., & Terry, V. (2019). Power to Change Research Institute Report No. 21. Our assets, our future: The economics, outcomes, and sustainability of assets in community ownership. London: Power to Change.
- Billis, D. (2010). *Hybrid organizations and the third sector: Challenges for practice, theory, and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chaskin, R. (2001). Building community capacity: A definitional framework and case studies from a comprehensive community initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36(3), 291–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780870122184876>
- Elder-Vass, D. (2007). Social structure and social relations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 37(4), 463–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.2007.00346.x>
- Elder-Vass, D. (2010). Realist critique without ethical naturalism and moral realism. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 9(1), 33–58. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jcr.v9i1.33>
- Featherstone, D., Ince, A., Mackinnon, D., Strauss, K., & Cumbers, A. (2012). Progressive localism and the construction of political alternatives. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(2), 177–182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00493.x>
- Fenwick, J., & Gibbon, J. (2016). Localism and the third sector: New relationships of public service. *Public Policy and Administration*, 31(3), 221–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076715610413>
- Findlay-King, L., Nichols, G., Forbes, D., & Macfadyen, G. (2018). Localism and the Big Society: the asset transfer of leisure centres and libraries - fighting closures or empowering communities?. *Leisure Studies*, 37, 158–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1285954>
- Locality. (2018). The great British sell off: how we are losing our vital publicly owned buildings and spaces. Forever. [Online] <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Great-British-Sell-Off-FINAL.pdf>.
- Mintel. (2018). *Leisure centres and swimming pools - UK - September 2018*. Mintel Oxygen.
- Murtagh, B., & Boland, P. (2017). Community asset transfer and strategies of local accumulation. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1347270>

- Nichols, G. (1996). The impact of compulsory competitive tendering on planning in leisure departments. *Managing Leisure*, 1(2), 105–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136067196376474>
- Nichols, G., & Forbes, D. (2014). The transfer of public leisure facilities to volunteer delivery. SRVN Research Report.
- Nichols, G., Forbes, D., Findlay-King, L., & Macfadyen, G. (2015). Is the asset transfer of public leisure facilities in England an example of associative democracy?. *Administrative Sciences*, 5(2), 71–87. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci5020071>
- O’Leary, T., Burkett, I., & Braithwaite, K. (2011). *Appreciating Assets*. Carnegie UK Trust.
- Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute. (2015). SPERI British Political Economy Brief No. 6 LA spending cuts and the 2014 English local elections.
- Thorlby, T. (2011). *Finance and business models for supporting community asset ownership and control*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.