



Montserrat

# Exploring Community Access to Farms and Land

Welcome to Our Woods Case Study  
Resilient Green Spaces

# Welcome to Our Woods Community Asset Transfer

Welcome to Our Woods is a Community Partnership in the Upper Rhondda Fawr, in the South Wales Valleys took on a 25-year lease on around 3 acres of land owned by Rhondda Cynon Taff Borough Council via a Community Asset Transfer in May 2023. This land is down slope from a commercial conifer plantation, which is in the process of being clear felled. The land will primarily be used for fruit & vegetable production and as a site for regenerative horticulture students from Black Mountain College. It will compliment other projects that are managed by Welcome to Our Woods, such as a Food Hub and youth group, Valley Kids.

## Who was involved?

The CAT was managed from the Council end by Senior Community Development Officer Debra Hanney, part of the Community Services and Development Team, with involvement from the Estates Team, supported by Sustainable Food Coordinator Sam Evans. Historically, the CATs were led and managed by the Estates Team, but this shifted to the Community Services and Development Team as part of an overall development of the CAT process to make it more responsive to community demand and easier for community groups to contact the council about potential CATs.

Welcome to Our Woods has a long-standing relationship with the Council and has been active in the area since 2009. The partnership is focussed on connecting people and place and is a blend of local private sector businesses and landowners, statutory government and agencies, voluntary sector organisations, local community groups and individuals who offer their time and skills.

The key individuals involved in the asset transfer were Matthew Reardon, The Project and Social Enterprise Director and Ian Thomas and who sits on the board of Welcome to Our Woods Ltd.

## What were their aims?

From the Council's perspective, the aim of the Community Asset Transfers are:

- To encourage local communities and groups (new or existing) to become empowered and active citizens by delivering services and managing local assets in their communities.
- To develop capacity in communities and promote shared use of community assets through a collaborative approach between public, private, voluntary and community sectors.
- To safeguard and protect valued local spaces, buildings and services for community use and benefit.
- To maximise social value i.e. the value of importance that people place on the positive changes they experience in their lives.

From Welcome to Our Woods' perspective, taking over this land provides the opportunity to establish a community farm for fresh fruit & vegetable production, education and recreational/volunteering opportunities. They plan to erect polytunnels and raised beds and/or terracing to grow vegetables. The produce will be sold via their own food hub, which was initially set up under with Resilient Green Spaces project funding, but has temporarily closed after struggling to source sufficient local fruit & veg supplies. By having a route to market already established the team have already addressed one of the challenges that new farms face when starting out.

For the growing itself, Welcome to Our Woods are working in partnership with Black Mountain College in the delivery of their [NVQ in Regenerative Horticulture](#). A head grower and horticulture tutor is currently being recruited with the course due to start in September 2023.

## What did they manage to do?

They successfully completed a Community Asset Transfer.

Welcome to Our Woods (WTOW) submitted an Expression of Interest to the Council in October 2021, and were subsequently invited to submit more information, including a business plan. As part of the development of the business model/plan, WTOW conducted an 8-month consultation and co-design process with the community to ensure that the business plan had proper local buy in and would meet the community's needs and wishes as far as possible. The resulting business plan was submitted to RCTBC in May 2022.

RCTBC usually run a 30 day Window of Opportunity at the start of the process to enable any other "not for personal profit" community groups to submit an EOI; however, because they had a long existing relationship with WTOW and had participated in the ongoing community engagement and consultation activities with residents and key partners during 2021/22, RCTBC were confident that the project had strong community buy in and support from both residents and other local organisations. RCTBC were therefore able to bypass this process in this instance, with Elected Members approval. The Council undertook an Open Space Notice, which was published in September 2022 with no objections being received. This is a statutory obligation when local authorities dispose of land: the public are notified and have the opportunity to object to it. The transfer was given formal approval in November 2022 and the Community Asset Transfer was completed with the lease signed in May 2023.

The lease put in place a long-term partnership, with the Council continuing to be involved. There is a long-term management plan attached to the lease, which was agreed between both parties and WTOW are required to submit a new business plan to the Council every year.

By opting for a 25-year lease rather than selling the land the Council retain an interest in the land and oversight of its use.



## What challenge did they face and how did they attempt to tackle these?

The main challenge for the Community Development Team was that their CAT experience previously was primarily with buildings rather than land and business plan templates had a greater focus on buildings.

For CATs in general, multiple departments are often involved and due diligence checks needed. These can take around 2-3 months plus and community groups often find the process frustrating, as they are generally keen to commence with plans.

To address some of these challenges, WTOW and RCTBC received support from the Community Land Advisory Service (CLAS), who provided a short land business plan template. This covers meeting the obligations of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act; and the Community Development Team have now embedded this within their CAT process.

Another challenge is that multiple council departments are interested in land for different priorities and obligations, including housing, renewable energy, allotments and more. Councils will likely get more economic gains from projects such as housing and solar farms than they will for community farms. However, the biodiversity, carbon sequestration, health and social benefits of community farms can also be factored in.

In the case of WTOW, the project was well timed with the Council's own objectives. In 2022, the Council agreed an updated climate change strategy "Think Climate" RCT Climate Change Strategy 2022 - 2025 and WTOW's plans fitted well with both this and their tree planting and biodiversity policies. Both WTOW and the Community Development Team could point to this alignment, which no doubt helped get broader council approval.

Since the publication of the Institute of Welsh Affairs' [report](#) into Community Ownership in Wales, RCTBC have been developing a new CAT process. The aim of this is to make it easier for communities to engage with and processes and requirements that are more proportionate to the size and value of the assets.

As there is no single map of Council owned land, community groups are required need to identify a specific piece of land and enquire if it is Council owned; and are not able to simply ask what land is available. Nonetheless, the Council lists all assets including land that become surplus to Council needs via the RCT Together webpage [Community Asset Transfers](#) and Corporate Estates [Land and property availability list](#).

### What if any lessons could be learned for others?

Having support to navigate through the Community Asset Transfer process via the Community Development Team, helped improve the process and make it easier for communities to engage with the Council.

Streamlining the CAT process in response to the IWA report, seems to have gone well.

The experience of WTOW shows the importance of developing long standing relationships between local authorities and community organisations. For new or less formal organisations who do not have this relationship, a potential solution could be to partner with community groups that do have a long-standing trusted relationship with the Council.

*Resilient Green Spaces is a £1.27m partnership project 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.*

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