

## **Communities and Local Government - a chance for a new start?**

### Introduction – Building from Lockdown

The last six months have seen examples of unprecedented levels of collaboration and coordination at different geographical levels between local governments, CVCs, established community based organisations and local volunteers to tackle the emergency thrown up by the pandemic and ensuing Lockdown. Working together, the different parties have ensured that food, medicine and often emotional support has been provided to tens of thousands of people in need, engaging a new wave of volunteers in doing so, mostly in the 25-50 age group.

Much of the community effort was built on existing community organisations' work (including faith groups); their networks, physical assets, staff and volunteers were critical to mobilising a rapid and well organised response as well as the volunteer networks of organisations with a wider remit (e.g. in care). And while many Mutual Aid volunteers are likely to be pulled back into work the vast majority of the pre-existing, community groups will remain active whilst some Mutual Aid groups will take on a more permanent form.

### Building Back Better - The need for a strong Community Element

There is a considerable appetite among many community organisations to build on the learning from Lockdown. For some groups the enhanced communication between community groups, CVCs and local government led to brought better planning (to provide emergency support) and the recognition of the specific attributes of community organisations, such as their local knowledge and links, agility and responsiveness in a crisis. For others it was better links between local groups within the same neighbourhood to provide support to vulnerable people.

Together these experiences offer a roadmap to new ways of working which make better use of the combined skills and resources available from all parties to offer both support and opportunity to individuals and families.

However, it also needs to be recognised that the patterns of collaboration described above, which have been widely celebrated, were not universal. Research currently being undertaken by People and Work into community responses to COVID in 7 counties in Wales suggests a very mixed experience of collaboration between local groups and county wide structures, meaning that in some areas the local work is likely to remain underappreciated and quite possibly unknown to local government or even CVCs.

Even before lockdown, the New Local Government Network (a think tank advising Local Authorities) was arguing that local authorities needed to be developing different forms of working with communities. This was to tackle both the practical problems ahead and the growing challenges of legitimacy as citizens' demands for high quality services and a stronger voice increase and it becomes harder, due to austerity and demographic change, for public services to respond.<sup>1</sup>

Although their argument has been developed in an English context, many of the issues they see as drivers hold true for Wales including the ageing population, environmental stresses, a growing demand to be involved in local decision making, the erosion of social infrastructure and a marked digital divide.

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<sup>1</sup> New Local Government Network, The Community Paradigm 2019; the Williams Commission made similar points in 2016

And this will be exacerbated by the impact of the impending recession. It will create another level of serious need through massively increased unemployment and exacerbate local hardship as the welfare system fails yet more people<sup>2</sup>, creating need for support at a community level. And as the Wales Centre for Public Policy have argued *maintaining a vibrant third sector and high levels of volunteering after the immediate crisis has passed will be important, not least because it may be needed to respond to future waves of Coronavirus infection. There is an opportunity to create a legacy of community collaboration. Maintaining a sense of community agency could help achieve the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.*

Fortunately in many parts of Wales there is a strong community infrastructure on which to build. A recent mapping exercise (to be published in November) has identified over 440 sustainable community assets in Wales - a figure that excludes faith based organisations and sports clubs. These organisations' work covers a huge range of actions from environmental protection to care to retail to tourism and learning. Almost all of them operate as social enterprises to one degree or another, operating in most cases in different areas of the foundational economy. These organisations already collectively work with tens of thousands of volunteers and have many more users of their services.

#### What will our new Normal be? Communities and Local Government working together

The reaction to improved working practices during COVID (where they existed) has partly been so positive because it reflects a significant divergence from what came before. Relations between local government and community organisations were, at best mixed and at worst characterised by misunderstanding and a lack of mutual respect, with cultural differences in ways of working too often drowning out the clear presence of common goals across the sectors. Relations with Health Boards have been very mixed, with excellence in some areas contrasted with very distant in others.

In addition, even during Lockdown, some of these trends were visible with poor communication between local government and community organisations leading to unnecessary duplication and poor organisation of volunteers.

Before COVID at a strategic level, relatively few local authorities appreciated or understood the work of community organisations and often either ignored their work or expected them to take on responsibilities beyond their capabilities. This has meant that good co-working at a more practical level between community organisations and individual officers was often built on sand and liable to disappear with changes of personnel.

Some positive developments have occurred in the fields of asset transfer (though this is genuinely mixed) and more generally in the area of informal social care. The stronger legal requirements on public bodies to work with social enterprises under the 2014 Social Services and Wellbeing Act have seen better partnership working and funding channelled to local community based organisations who are able to provide accessible flexible support and developed their capacity to offer a range of local activities and services.

However, we now have the opportunity to work in different ways. In many parts of Wales, the response to COVID saw better collaboration between communities and local government in

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<sup>2</sup> Briefing paper no. CBP-8135, Pension Credit – Current Issues. 24 August 2020 – parliamentary report that shows that around 6 in 10 people eligible claim pension credit; third sector orgs are given funding by Government (e.g. Citizens Advice had a big contract around Universal Credit) to prop up a system that doesn't work in ensuring people entitled to money get it

particular (with CVCs usually playing a critical facilitation role) and stronger mutual respect developing as a result. For the most part this also involved a recognition of mutual strengths and expertise, with public bodies focusing on areas needing universal coverage and formally delivered services, and community groups providing flexible support and utilising local knowledge and connections, to reach people swiftly and those who would have been missed. In particular the ability of community organisations which had local contacts and enjoyed widespread trust to provide emotional support to isolated people has proven especially valuable alongside the more obvious widespread provision of food.

In some areas of Wales there are clear efforts being made to ensure the lessons from COVID are not forgotten. In Pembrokeshire, the local authority and community groups are seeking to develop new ways of working which ensure complementarity of work in relevant service areas alongside stronger arrangements for co-design of strategy and better communication.

However, the strategic understanding of the complementary roles of the sector will become more widespread if backed up by national leadership. Much of the thinking needs to be done locally but the following key steps can enhance what is currently an erratic approach to the both national and local government working with communities

A central communities' strategy, co-produced, which sets out how government sees the relationship between the public sector and communities. Currently community based work crosses a range of Ministerial portfolios, few of which engage with community organisations strategically. A more coherent approach will allow for more consistent and long term approaches to funding, regulation and co-working.

Clear guidance to Public Service Boards on how they should seek to work with community organisations in delivering their priorities; at present PSBs are encouraged to engage with citizens as service users but only rarely with local community organisations as partners, despite wide ranging capacity and often having an ability to reach people the public sector struggle with. This also involves recognising the crucial role of CVCs in providing the link between public bodies and neighbourhood based community action.

This work should include disseminating good practice on local government/ community organisations joint working with examples worthy of dissemination being mutually recognised (by both public body and community group)

*The voluntary sector housing and local government group*

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