

CF 21

Ymchwiliad i dlodi yng Nghymru: Cymunedau yn Gyntaf – yr hyn a ddysgwyd

Inquiry into poverty in Wales: Communities First – lessons learnt

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What worked and didn't work about the Communities First programme;

The answer to this depends on the set up of the partnership delivering the programme in each area.

In general on Anglesey from its early days, the CF programme relied heavily on the input and drive of people who were often new to the world of community development. The *Bottoms-Up* approach, although based on sound theoretical thinking and meant to empower people, often fell short of delivering true meaningful progress because of the lack of knowledge, expertise and confidence of grass roots activists. The ability to run a competent and successful programme cannot be achieved by complete novices as the skills set and knowledge needed to deliver a major publicly funded programme is often not at their fingertips. Also, the way each CF partnership was structured often dictated the level of freedom and flexibility to make things happen.

The Bottoms-Up approach is a laudable formula to adopt as a basic principle for developing, empowering and growing communities but without appropriate monitoring and guidance from the funders this can sometimes lead to chaos. There were major headline grabbing instances where partnerships were almost left to their own devices which caused abuse of funding and brought the programme under an unwelcome spotlight.

One basic key element of CF as an anti-poverty programme was the targeting of the whole community with almost a “cradle to grave” approach. Although providing almost unlimited scope as to what could be tackled by practitioners in the programme, the underlying issues of social exclusion and poverty were massive aspects to get to grips with. No one programme could ever crack the complex problem of poverty in a matter of 10-15 years. The only way to tackle ingrained and deep seated generational issues is over the long term – more than 30 years ideally.

This extremely long term approach also needs the buy-in of the education system to radically change the way young people are prepared for life. The failure to equip young people with basic literacy and numeracy skills is for many pupils a sad indictment of the pan-Wales education system. Firefighting is one way to describe the efforts of CF partnerships to help young people and adults who faced barriers because of poor education.

The need to assess effectively the outputs and outcomes of the CF programme was never undertaken as comprehensively as could have been possible. Action needed to be taken in the early days to root out the bad performing areas and instigate a major overhaul using examples of best

practice in other areas as a model for delivering support throughout the CF areas.

Channelling the funding via, in most cases, the Local Authority may be a prudent way to allocate public funds but in reality the bureaucratic machine of a county council doesn't always allow for flexibility and rapid reaction to circumstances. The auditing and monitoring processes were not robust enough from Welsh Government level – those CF areas not performing should have been tackled head on without the fear that public opinion would be unfavourable to the public officials or politicians running the CF programme.

There were often massive gulfs between what some CF partnerships achieved and others who were able to deliver small scale, low value activities which didn't challenge the community's ability to move forward positively.

With some areas having a number of individual partnerships operating in close proximity to each other geographically in the first 10 years of CF there was often a competitive edge to inter partnership relationships. Instead of fostering a co-operative and best practice sharing ethos the programme made some partnership inward looking and insular – afraid to share experiences of failures as well as successes with other neighbouring wards/partnerships.

With such a high profile programme attracting substantial amounts of public funding the Welsh Government should have been more hands-on in routing out under performing partnerships at a much earlier period. The laissez-faire approach probably intended to create autonomy and freedom to experiment for CF partnerships actually led to lack of structured monitoring and insufficient calling to account.

The re-organisation in 2012 where the 160 or so CF partnerships were greatly reduced to form 52 clusters should have been an opportunity to radically re-assess the programme's aims. It should also have been the time to take stock of where CF partnerships had been ground breaking and to share these examples with all clusters – allowing for a sound footing to propel the programme to greater and improved outcomes. The remit should also have been narrowed to focus on a handful of key areas rather than the 3 quite broad focal points of Prosperity Learning and Health.

If the consensus is that one of the quickest ways to get people out of poverty is employment, why was this not taken as the core aim. Also, insufficient notice was taken of in-work poverty and allowing CF partnerships to work with people already in work – rather than focus solely on the out of work.

With the right ethos and working practices in place there are solutions to some of these issues – but they require a concerted co-ordinated effort from Welsh Government down to the practitioners on the front line.

What worked well was the freedom for some partnerships to focus on their strengths where they could make steady inroads into key issues in their wards. The ability to devote often many years of effort into changing perceptions and attitudes within certain LSOAs meant that momentum was created and real meaningful life changing outcomes achieved.

This trust between the community and the partnership could have formed a solid platform to deliver more worthwhile outcomes – given the right support and guidance from on high. This however should have been founded on specialisation and a drive to extend on the good practices learned and adopted to forge more meaningful and productive outcome for individuals in the community.

Towards the later years there were still too many instances of woolly soft outcomes being delivered where through the years of experience already gained via the CF programme a more pragmatic and ambitious outlook should have been adopted.

How different poverty reduction programmes (Communities for Work, Lift, Flying Start etc.) will change as a result of the end of Communities First.

The legacy of CF as a programme was the diverse nature of problem solving and community driven activities adopted throughout Wales. No two CF partnerships offered exactly the same offer and solutions and this perhaps was the result of the initial design process of CF – which allowed for freedom and flexibility to devise strategies and plans for each ward.

The key message from CF has been that poverty is too big an issue to try and eradicate under the umbrella of one programme. There are so many facets of daily life including the range of influences of family, society and other individuals which affect people's ability to thrive that it is almost impossible to provide a cover-all programme.

The co-operation and networking between the 3 poverty reduction programmes could at some levels have been closer and more productive. It has often been the case that a protectionist attitude and/or silo mentality has led to insufficient talking and joint working between the 3 programmes. In reality there have been a number of individuals assisted under all three programmes without staff at these institutions being aware that their counterparts are providing support for the client. There has been a danger of duplication caused by reluctance to engage in true partnership working – as partnerships often involve letting go of some responsibilities and control to another organisation. This is easier to explain than make happen in reality.

Communities First is destined to be history in less than 12 months but the legacy will hopefully be new programmes which will take the best elements of CF - and deliver a new more impactful service which makes a real and

visible contribution to tackling some of the practical issues which people need to overcome to reach their potential.