



## **Communities First – lessons learned**

### *A response from WCVA*

1. WCVA is the national membership organisation for the third sector in Wales. Our vision is for a future where the third sector and volunteering thrive across Wales, improving wellbeing for all. Our mission is to be a catalyst for positive change by connecting, enabling and influencing.
2. WCVA works with a range of national specialist agencies, county voluntary councils and other development agencies, to provide a support structure for the third sector in Wales. We have over 3,000 members, and are in touch with many more organisations through a wide range of national and local networks.
3. WCVA manages the Communities First Support Service. We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the External Affairs and Legislation Committee's inquiry into the lessons learned from the Communities First programme.

### **What worked and what didn't about Communities First?**

#### *Setting outcomes*

4. Communities First has lacked clear and achievable outcomes against which we can measure success. This was a criticism of the Public Accounts Committee in 2010. The programme has lacked a shared understanding of the specific contribution that it could realistically make, not least to tackling poverty.
5. A community-level programme needs to be understood in the context of broader structural causes of poverty. Community programmes operate within wider regional, national and international contexts. This doesn't mean that empowering communities isn't valuable. It should positively influence activities at other levels. However, its particular contribution needs to be understood and valued.

#### *Enabling and empowering*

6. When Communities First has worked well, it has resulted in people being empowered to come together to make a positive difference to their communities. This might be to do things that directly benefit people, or by positively engaging with and shaping what public bodies and businesses do. Collective action can bring about enhanced social capital: people working together and collaborating on things *they* want to achieve.

In its earlier phases Communities First recognised this and made some initial progress in mobilising and facilitating the collective action. Evaluations concluded

that improvements were made on so-called 'crime and grime' issues: anti-social behaviour, graffiti, vandalism, environmental improvements. However, even within the Partnership structure, community members tended to feel outnumbered by elected members, service providers and 'professionals' ([Adamson and Bromiley, 2008](#)).

7. Since 2012/13 Communities First has increasingly worked with individuals, with staff managing caseloads of individuals to whom delivery happens, rather than with and across communities. Communities - of geography and of interest - are not simply made up of a number of individuals but of networks, inter-dependencies, relationships, tensions, histories and collaborations. Social capital is not a mere aggregation of individuals' social capital. A criticism of Communities First is that it has contributed to the management or containment of poverty, rather than tackle its root causes, let alone eradicate it (see Hoban, 2016).
8. Enhanced social capital is not just of use to individuals and communities. It also supports service providers and other parts of civil society - but they must not co-opt or coerce processes that develop social capital. There is a feeling that Communities First in its current phase has retreated from supporting and enabling communities to achieve their outcomes, and become a top-down government-led programme. Government imposing activities on communities who may already be doing things for themselves can be disempowering. Empowerment should mean shifting power to community-level organisations and enabling them.
9. Adamson and Bromiley concluded that community engagement was enhanced by providing multiple routes to participation (2016). The current Communities First lexicon couches participation in terms of Community Involvement (CI) and it is claimed to be at the heart of Communities First. However, many in the programme have complained that the format and timetable of the planning process militated against community participation, scrutiny, accountability and citizen-centred service/project design. This is not to say that there hasn't been involvement, but on occasions, it has felt tokenistic.
10. On the other hand, the STAR cluster in Cardiff, for instance, had a CI Plan constructed around a simple ladder of participation (see Arnstein, 1969) that included projects and activities that enabled people, with support from Communities First workers and local third sector, to take more control of issues that affect their communities and identify solutions. Resilience in this way is not just about the availability of a service (though it does include this and austerity is putting some services under great strain), but about helping to co-produce the conditions that can influence services and develop new ones. WCVA believes that the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act provides an opportunity for empowerment to be linked to well-being conceptually, practically and sustainably, given that it aspires to:

*"make the public bodies...think more about the long term, work better with people and **communities** [emphasis added] and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach'."*

<http://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/150623-guide-to-the-fg-act-en.pdf>

Communities First in its current phase has become much more attuned to asset based approaches and it is definitely more attentive to what people *can* do, rather than what they *can't*. However the increased lack of a community planning dimension in Communities First has meant that an asset-based approach to community development is lacking consistently across its breadth.

### *Community hubs*

11. Community Hubs can be vital agents for social and economic change. WCVA, in partnership with CREW and Community Development Cymru, has previously set out its support for community hubs and would welcome the opportunity to discuss in more detail.
12. A significant lesson from the reconfiguration of Communities First from Partnerships to Clusters in 2012/13 is that the short-term viability of 'community hubs' and third sector providers was greatly affected by the uncertainty, de-commissioning process and loss of funding. Several have downsized since then, while others have closed down (e.g. Ebbw Fawr Development Trust, Clydach Development Trust). There is a real risk that at the end of Communities First there will be *fewer* community hubs than at its start. One could argue that by this, admittedly crude, metric that communities have been *disempowered* by Communities First.
13. That said, some have survived and new ones have emerged such as Action In Caerau and Ely. Welsh Government must minimise the uncertainty by providing clarity about its future plans to tackle poverty in Wales, and its vision for third sector within this. WCVA hopes that the sector is at the heart of the new approach to building resilient communities.

### *Funding*

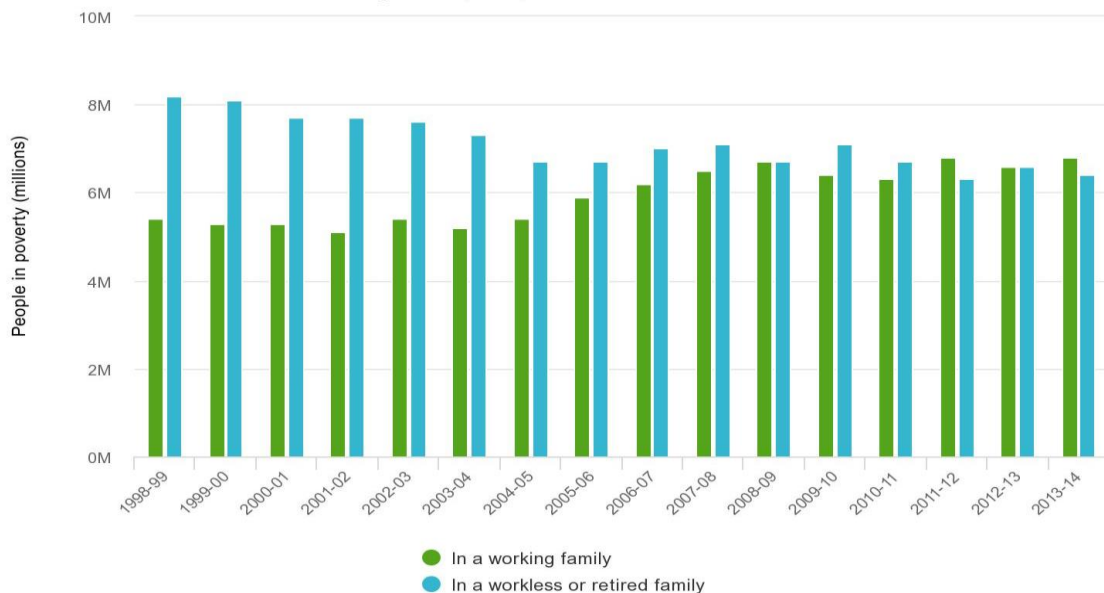
14. Until 2012/13 Communities First was successful in leveraging-in additional monies from a broad range of sources due in large part to the independent constitution of lots of Communities First Partnerships and a programme that actively encouraged the involvement of the local community and third sector. In some cases, these were complemented by trading subsidiaries and similar that allowed for larger sums to be sourced and/or trading. Whatever improvements were made to Communities First by adopting the cluster configuration (increased clarity of purpose, economies of scale, easier to engage with by the service providers, less complex bureaucracy), unfortunately there has been an increased reliance on Welsh Government funding.
15. WCVA has led on the development of new forms of loan and bond finance in Wales and is keen to explore a range of alternative approaches to securing sustainable funding for the sector. Whatever approach to increasing community resilience is adopted its funding should be based on a 'mixed economy' and not solely reliant on government funding.

## Knowledge of poverty

16. Sixteen years of Communities First has broadened our understanding of poverty: its impact on ethnic minorities; rural and urban experiences of poverty; the relationship between poverty and availability and quality of services; determinants of poverty; links between poverty and educational attainment; experiences of poverty by different genders and ages, the impact of digital and more. Financial inclusion activity has greatly helped enhance our understanding of how people with the smallest disposable income often must pay disproportionately more for goods and services and for access to credit.
17. A worrying development is the increase of in-work poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015) concluded that more than half of people in poverty live in a family where someone is in work (see figure 1). The prevalence of in-work poverty fundamentally challenges the presumptions of work in lifting people out of poverty. It also poses an ethical challenge of approaches to tackling poverty predicated on getting people into employment.

**8A: More than half of people in poverty live in a family where someone is in work. At 6.8 million it is 1.5 million higher than a decade ago.**

Source: Households Below Average Income, DWP; the data is for the GB to 2001/02 and for the UK thereafter



## How local authorities will decide which projects continue to receive funding after June 2017

18. Welsh Government has announced 70 per cent of funding at 2016/17 budgets. The option to transition to the model of the Employability Grant but using Communities First allocations for the employability activities is cautiously welcomed. If Communities First is to end there is some merit in not dragging this out unnecessarily long and prolonging uncertainty. However, where poverty and barriers to work for some people are primarily shaped or aggravated by health and educational factors WCVA would be hopeful that the Legacy Fund is sympathetic to funding these interventions.

19. It is not clear at the time of writing what the Legacy Fund's criteria will be. Neither is it clear who will decide on what is funded. There appears to be a presumption that local authorities are best placed to identify and deliver Legacy Fund projects. We question whether this should be the case. Early indication that the Legacy Fund will be eligible for use for engagement activities that complement the Employability Grant are welcome and build on the expertise of Communities First and the value added it can bring to such programmes (see below).

20. There should be a learning element to the Legacy Fund in order to identify *why* a project is deemed effective and to presume that such learning will be shared in order for replication, where appropriate can happen. There is a risk that effective projects are confined to individual lead delivery body areas/boroughs. This must be avoided. We should be looking for opportunities to upscale and transfer good interventions.

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

21. The Lift and Communities for Work programmes cite the value of the engagement activities of Communities First. These ensure that people are ready for and receptive to support; that the appropriate programme works with the appropriate people (Communities First also helps signposting where this is not the case); helps build up the legitimacy of such programmes to operate locally; facilitates effective and appropriate delivery by providing local knowledge about communities; acts as the interface and mediator when tensions occur; challenges the values of workers on these programmes.

22. Poverty reduction programmes generally need to be better integrated, including with programmes that specifically aim to increase prosperity. Activity is needed at many different levels, from macro scale developments to community projects, and we need to be better at understanding the relationships between them. It will be affected by how Wales emerges from Brexit and new legislation such as the Social Services and Wellbeing Act and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

23. WCVA believes that empowering communities through voluntary and community action is a key ingredient for achieving a fairer and more prosperous Wales.

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### **References**

Adamson, D, Bromiley, R (2008) *Community empowerment in practice: lessons from Communities First*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.