

## Community Sector Network: February 2019 Workshops Report

In February 2019 BCT and PLANED, as part of their new role on the Third Sector Partnership Council held a series of meetings around Wales establishing a network of community organisations and organisations supporting work in communities. The idea is to establish a network that can feed into deliberations on the Partnership Council and promote sharing of information and good practice across community groups in Wales.

### The Key Workshop Findings

Workshop discussions focused around three key topics; the impact of Government policy on community groups; the key challenges facing community groups and what people wanted from the network.

#### Impact of Government Policy

Much of the discussion here was quite negative. The general sentiments expressed suggested that there was a growing reliance on community organisations to “pick up the pieces” as a result of cuts and austerity but limited understanding by government about how to work with community groups to do this effectively.

Austerity was felt to provide a critical backdrop to understanding the context in which we work; public bodies have significantly reduced capacity to fund the sector whilst the social effects of cuts, including critically welfare cuts and services to very vulnerable people often fall onto the third sector including local community groups.

The Welsh Government provoked very mixed feelings. Some felt they were very distant but others felt they were open and easy to communicate with. Organisations engaged with Welsh Government were positive about their outward facing communication while others felt more detached.

There was more consensus around delivery of programmes which were still felt to be quite siloed and undermined by a risk averse approach. The NHS Transformation Fund was seen as an example of this with a very bureaucratic approach used to allegedly get money to community groups.

One group asked whether Welsh Government still had any policy around communities. There was also a general concern that keeping Local Authorities happy often undermined community action, channelling funding that had once gone to community led activities towards local government despite the success of previously community run action.

Local authority provision of community based actions was felt to be mixed but some councils were able to take in house even successful community run services without any form of accountability when their services were less successful.

The Future Generations Act was known to most workshop attendees but was felt to be having very limited impact on the way that public bodies think or plan their work.

In the field of social care there was more interest in community based solutions; some community groups had had their work recognised and supported but this was erratic. Procurement processes were often inappropriate for small scale community based interventions. The community connector/coordinator role worked well in a number of cases and could build strong bridges between local community provision and more formal public sector agencies but the staff playing those roles needed a great deal of flexibility to be effective.

## Challenges and Opportunities Facing Community Groups

A range of challenges and opportunities were identified; this area probably brought out more consensus than the other discussions.

Funding was obviously identified as a challenge and even while recognising resources were limited the inflexibility of some funding and burdensome procured for small amounts were identified as a barrier.

For those organisations who had often worked alongside public bodies the loss of their staff and their skills was making work harder and in community based play work it looks as though those skills won't be coming back.

Attracting volunteers is a problem for some organisations – and there was a long debate in north Wales about the value of the term. More worryingly though is the future horizon with a feeling that so much volunteering and Board membership is done by recently retired people who in a generation's time may be poorer, in worse health and possibly still working. For some organisations the demand for their services has increased significantly with the impact of austerity despite having no additional resources. Sometimes that has helped them forge new alliances (for example with supermarkets for food projects) but often left them struggling for capacity.

Some organisations saw opportunities for new partnerships and ways of working. This included in the wider care field and potentially with health bodies in the future. Legal compliance including regarding GDPR, disability discrimination act and childcare had added additional burdens on some smaller groups.

The role of social enterprise was seen as ambiguous with organisations expected to fund themselves but then faced suspicion being seen as either "amateur" or unethical (for making money).

Finally social media offered great possibilities for cheap communication but depended on people with the skills and inclination to use the platforms.

### Wishes for the Network

The network can allow its members to comment on policy and quite possibly at an early stage in its development.

Network members were also keen on getting funding information and a chance to share practice among each other.

They also asked if we could do work to showcase work by communities and advocate for the principles we follow.

Specific training in social media was suggested and possibly a conference sharing ideas from across Wales.

Finally in terms of communications while the main ideas from BCT were supported it was asked if information could come out in bite sized chunks when ready and relevant rather than regular newsletters which might leave to key information being held back.