



Building
Communities Trust
Ymddiriedolaeth
Adeiladu Cymunedau



Building Stronger Welsh Communities

Opportunities and barriers to community action in Wales



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1. Executive Summary

This report is about harnessing the strengths and skills of local people so they can build the social infrastructure and shape the services they want and need in their area. We describe this process as community action and believe it is key to building stronger Welsh communities that improve the well-being, resilience and opportunities of local people.¹

Government and public bodies being active collaborators in this process is key to its success. This isn't currently happening to the extent it should or could, despite the Government's ambition to work better with people and communities and some local examples of good practice. Too often Government and public bodies expect community involvement, collaboration and social infrastructure to develop within a vacuum, neglecting the fact that community action is essential to all these.

To inform this report we facilitated a national conversation with over 250 people who attended 20 events held across the length and breadth of Wales. The majority of participants were either working or volunteering in community organisations. We also carried out research mapping Wales's community assets and conducted a review of policy, exploring the barriers and enablers to community action.

Key messages

Communities can do it for themselves but will do better in a more supportive environment

A diverse range of community action and organisations have developed across Wales, strongly contributing to more sustainable and resilient communities. However, these are not evenly spread, with key rural-urban and socio-economic differences.²

Community groups we talked to highlighted that there is no 'one size fits all' and that every community is different. They also emphasised the need for public bodies to better understand the range and capacity of community action and assets in their area, enabling them to target support and ensure they don't duplicate existing community provision. They also describe 'increasing the consciousness, confidence and capacity of communities' as a slow process, requiring long-term community-led capacity building. However, even when community action is developed, community groups often face challenges in sustainably transferring public assets into their hands and securing funding.

¹ Institute of Health Equity, 2020, *The Marmot Review 10 Years On, Community Actions*, p.10
BCT, 2018, *Our Local Economies: Communities Building Prosperity*, p.9

² BCT in partnership with the WCVA, Wales Co-operative Centre, Development Trusts Association Wales and Coalfields Regeneration Trust, May 2020 (yet to be published), *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, p. 11-14

Disconnect between Government, public bodies and communities is a barrier to community action, despite examples of cross-sector collaboration

People in Wales feel increasingly less able to influence decisions affecting their local area.³ Many community groups welcome Welsh Government's policy ambition to involve them more, but there is a feeling that 'worthy words are not being backed up by action'. Austerity is recognised as having an impact on this, but groups still describe 'deficit models towards communities dominating government thinking' and that public bodies are 'doing to, not with' people and communities. They also describe entrenched public sector ways of working characterised by poor communication, lack of trust, risk aversion, silo working, professional bias and staff demotivation as significant barriers to greater community action.

Despite these barriers, some community groups provide examples of effective collaboration with public bodies often based on individual and departmental relationships. They describe helping officers 'make the links' between their statutory duties and what communities want and need. They also highlight the benefits of public sector staff who have worked in and understand community organisations.

The Social Services and Well-being Act is more effective at realising community action than the Future Generations Act

The development of community action is a missing link in the Future Generations Act, with public bodies' duty to involve people and communities not clearly and consistently defined or properly resourced and realised.

However, community groups cite numerous examples of collaboration between the public and community sectors in health and social care settings. This is partly attributed to these areas not being subject to as severe public spending cuts. It is also due to the Social Services and Well-being Act mandating a more preventative approach that works with the grain of austerity, alongside placing clearer and stronger duties on public bodies to promote the development of user-led services and community organisations. In this sense there is the opportunity for future legislation orientated towards communities to learn from the Act.

Crisis highlights the value of community groups and opportunities for cross-sector collaboration

Many of the community groups who joined our national conversation have provided emergency support to local people in response to coronavirus. In most cases this has involved developing new partnerships with public bodies, County Voluntary Councils and other community organisations, alongside mobilising large numbers of local volunteers.

³ Welsh Government, 2019, National Well-being Indicator 23, [Well-being of Wales 2018-19](#), p.79

While most of this work has focused on crisis interventions addressing people's immediate needs, it has nonetheless revealed the potential of community action and collaboration with public bodies. This has been a reciprocal process, with a recent UK survey showing over 90% of councils identifying community groups as playing a very significant role in their efforts responding to COVID-19.⁴

Need positive vision and strategy for communities in Wales

Despite numerous references to 'communities' in policy, there is no overarching vision or strategy for them in Wales, nor are they included in any ministerial portfolio. This has been the case since the closure of the Communities First Programme. Within this vacuum the Government's policy towards communities has become fragmented, resulting in a variety of different approaches across different policy areas. This is one of the major barriers to greater community action. It also presents an opportunity to fundamentally reset the communities agenda in Wales from focusing on weaknesses to building upon communities' strengths. However, there is little enthusiasm for a new Communities First-type programme. Instead, communities that we talked to are keen to create a more effective environment for developing local independent community action that compliments the work of the public sector.

Recommendations

Invest in community action and social infrastructure

- Money from the next round of the UK Dormant Assets Scheme (DAS) should be used for a Community Wealth Fund for Wales, providing long-term flexible funding for communities that most need it (the DAS is additional money for good causes and cannot be used for routine public spending).
- Introduce new legislation enhancing community organisations' right to buy, lease, manage or use land and buildings belonging to public bodies (modelled on parts of the Scottish Community Empowerment Act).
- Enhance the Communities Facilities Fund and ring-fence future Regional Investment Funding to ensure revenue and capital support for developing community action and social infrastructure for all communities across Wales.

Develop a national vision and strategy designed by and for communities

- Develop a Minister-led strategy for building stronger communities, which draws on the expertise of existing community organisations.

⁴ New Local Government Network, May 2020, [Leadership Index Survey](#)

- The Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee should carry out an inquiry into the barriers and opportunities to community action in Wales.
- Include a new duty in the Future Generations Act for public bodies to promote the role of community organisations and development of community-run social infrastructure.
- Introduce a new National Well-being Indicator, measuring community-run social infrastructure by local authority area.

Improve understanding and collaboration between communities and public bodies

- Create a £5m Communities Challenge Fund (based on the Foundational Economy model) to test ways for developing collaboration and mutual understanding between communities and public bodies.
- Develop good practice guidance for public bodies on collaborative working and building stronger communities in partnership with the WLGA and Audit Wales.
- Require Public Services Boards to map local community-run infrastructure as part of their assessment of local well-being alongside a duty to collaborate with existing community infrastructure.

2. Introduction

The winter floods and coronavirus have shone a light on the value, strength and resourcefulness of our local communities. In just a few short months community groups the length and breadth of Wales have provided food, friendship and support on a scale and with a knowledge and care that no state body alone could do. However, this work has been at its strongest when the skills and resources of the public sector have supported the communities' lead.

While most of this work has focused on crisis interventions addressing people's immediate needs, it nonetheless provides a glimpse of the power and potential of community action to shape Welsh society into the future. A recent poll indicates the public support this view, with only 9% of Britons saying they want life to return to 'normal' once lockdown is over, having experienced a stronger sense of community in their area.⁵

This report is about understanding and building upon that sense of community. It highlights the key role community action plays in developing sustainable local communities and the key barriers and enablers in this process.

Over many years government at all levels has been both urging community action and largely insensitive to how their actions affect its viability. Too often Government and public bodies expect community involvement, collaboration, and social infrastructure to develop within a vacuum, neglecting the fact that community action is essential to all these.

This report has come out of a growing sense of frustration from community organisations over the mismatch between the stated aspirations of Government policy in Wales and the actions seen on a day-to-day basis.

Underpinning it are the findings of 20 workshops run across Wales from Wrexham to Milford Haven, and Newport to Bethesda. These workshops were attended by over 250 people, mostly from local community groups but also some larger third sector organisations and a small number of public bodies. Participants were asked what would help them to build stronger communities – and what the barriers were. Throughout this report we draw extensively on their experiences and ideas to better understand the barriers and enablers to community action.

It is also informed by BCT's own recent research into mapping Wales' large number of community-run assets, showing the existing strength of Welsh community organisations. Alongside this we conducted a review of Welsh Government policy relating to communities to better understand what is and is not working.

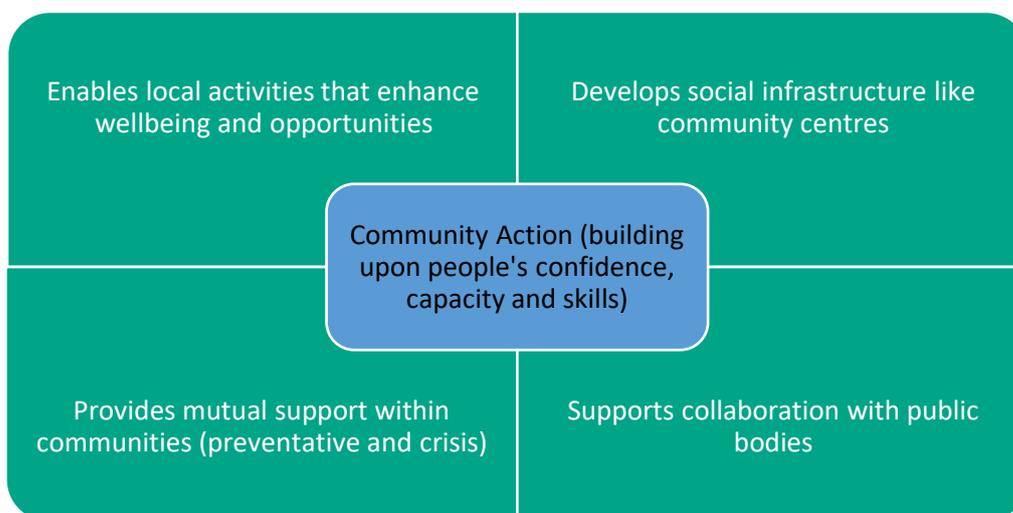
⁵ Sky News, 17th April 2020, [Coronavirus: Only 9% of Britons want life to return to 'normal' once lockdown is over](#)

3. Community Action In Wales

What we mean by community action

Community action is the term we use to describe local people coming together to do the things that matter to them and make their areas better places to live. The vast majority of participants in our workshops endorse this approach, which is grounded in the core principles of Asset-Based Community Development⁶ and manifested in the large range of community-run organisations providing vital facilities and activities across Wales. At its heart it draws on local people’s confidence, capacity and skills to organise and develop social infrastructure and mutual support within their communities. Collaboration with public bodies and involvement in local decision making are also key elements which help enable and develop community action.

Figure 1: Impact of community action



In our workshops with community organisations they describe community action being driven by “people wanting to do things for themselves, regardless of government”. This echoes a common frustration expressed by many that government is often more of a hindrance than a help when people and organisations pursue what matters to them.

“The system doesn’t allow people to create things for themselves. It encourages you to be weak.”

“Do the public sector really want to give power to communities?”

The latter is an important question which runs through this report. It shapes the experiences of people and organisations in areas with both high and low levels of community action. In places with high levels of community action, this might mean a local authority develops a new community hub where there is already an established and trusted community

⁶ Nurture Development, 2017, [Asset-Based Community Development – 5 Core Principles](#)

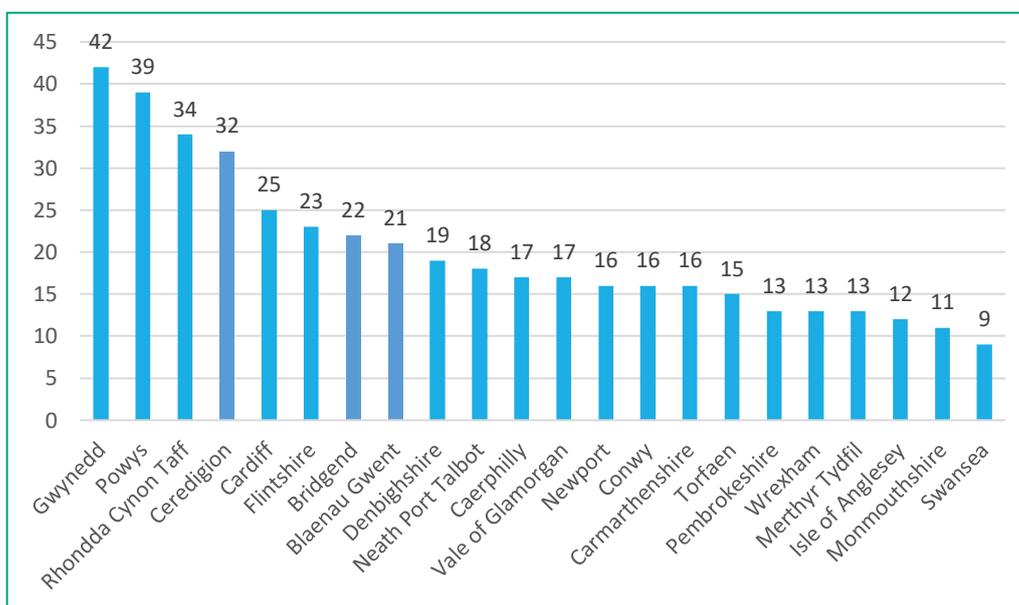
organisation delivering similar support. In areas with low levels of community action this could involve local people not being able to take on an asset or develop a service that they want to run due to lack of community capacity, professional skills and support. In both scenarios the limited rights and support available for communities who want to run community assets belonging to public bodies is a key issue.

Despite challenges such as these, there is plentiful evidence that communities are taking action that enhances local well-being, through the development of their own forms of mutual support and social infrastructure. However, the question remains of how much more could be achieved with a supportive public policy environment.

Communities doing it for themselves

Our research into mapping community assets identified 443 community-led or owned assets across Wales, including community centres and enterprises, arts and heritage facilities, amenities such as pubs, cafes and libraries, leisure facilities and greenspaces.⁷ The study (which excludes certain types of assets like sports clubs and faith-based organisations⁸) provides a snapshot of the scale, spread and opportunity presented by Wales’s vibrant community-led social infrastructure.

Figure 2: Community assets by local authority area in Wales



⁷ BCT et al, *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, p.11-14

⁸ Sport clubs and faith based organisations were not included in the research due to them not always being open to the wider community. However, where we found examples of such assets that were open to the wider community (for example running services such as food banks, community centres and drug rehabilitation schemes) they were included in the study.

The findings from the asset mapping also reflect the diverse range of community action and social infrastructure identified in our workshops. Examples include community groups successfully taking over community centres; local people and businesses coordinating to develop community-owned pubs, shops and cafes; creating social enterprises to run tourist and leisure facilities; and community councils and groups pooling knowledge and resources to realise local assets.

Our asset mapping research found that these community-led social enterprises make an invaluable contribution to the foundational economy across Wales. They provide paid employment and volunteering opportunities, particularly for people who face barriers to the labour market. They also deliver highly valued community orientated services.⁹ Many of the assets we mapped also deliver training as a key service and are often more successful at engaging more marginalised groups due to their integration into local communities. A recent report by the Bevan Foundation highlights the importance of harnessing the economic potential of community assets in order to support local wealth building:

“With a serious recession following the global pandemic now inevitable, harnessing the economic potential of community assets, especially for local economies most exposed to downturn, is more pressing than ever.”¹⁰

Our asset mapping research identifies some of the key drivers of community action; a key first step towards harnessing the economic potential of community assets (see Figure 3). It demonstrates how action increases community organisations’ resilience and resourcefulness, with over two thirds of the assets identified having existed for over ten years. Their resilience to external economic factors is attributed to their ability to control running costs, draw on local people and businesses for support, and inspire and effectively utilise volunteers.¹¹

Figure 3: Drivers of community action



⁹ Ibid, p. 21

¹⁰ Bevan Foundation, 2020, Productive community assets: generating the benefits, Summary

¹¹ BCT et al, *Mapping Community Assets in Wales* p. 17-18

However, the capacity, resilience and innovation shown by many communities and their assets is not uniform across Wales. Nor are the assets evenly spread and reflective of population size across local authority areas. They do however show the possibilities and opportunities presented by communities being able to do the things that matter to them.

No 'one size fits all'

A common theme running through our workshops was that every community and place is different and that Government policy and public body practice needs to be flexible in order to reflect this. The findings of the asset mapping research are testament to this, revealing significant geographical variations in numbers of assets by local authority area. And while the research recognises its findings should not be treated as a definitive figure, it does provide a broad indication of the extent of community assets across Wales. In this context it reveals a significantly higher number of assets in many rural compared to urban or valleys areas, though it is far from being a uniform picture as show in Figure 2 above.

Nor is there uniformity in the distribution of community assets based on the socio-economic conditions in a locality, despite many poorer urban areas appearing least likely to benefit (this may be attributable to more assets like community centres being retained in public sector ownership in such areas).

What is evident in the report is that many poorer areas face significant challenges in developing and sustaining the capacity, skills and funding to develop community activities and social infrastructure. This is a pertinent issue that highlights the symbiotic relationship between community action, social infrastructure and wider economic and social capital in an area. A recent report by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) for the Local Trust evidenced the socio-economic impacts in areas where these key components were in short supply:

“A lack of places to meet (whether community centres, pubs or village halls); the absence of an engaged and active community; and poor connectivity to the wider economy – physical and digital – make a significant difference to social and economic outcomes for deprived communities. Deprived areas which lack these assets have higher rates of unemployment, ill health and child poverty than other deprived areas. And they appear to be falling further behind them.”¹²

The experiences of many people who attended our workshops and wider evidence from The National Lottery Community Fund¹³ echo this finding. They describe the development of community action often stimulating the creation of social infrastructure, which in turn

¹² Local Trust/OCSI, 2019, Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge, p. 4

¹³ TNLCF, 2019, Bringing people together: how community action can tackle loneliness and social isolation, p.18

results in greater community action: there is a virtuous circle where it exists and often a vicious circle where it does not. They emphasised that starting this process in areas with low community action can be a slow process which moves at the speed of community trust, and is ideally supported by skilled independent development workers who take their steer from the community.

Public bodies can play a critical role in supporting and hindering this process and evidence from our workshops and the asset mapping research paint a very mixed picture of their support – direct and indirect – for community action across Wales. A key measure of this is the support and process councils go through when transferring public assets/social infrastructure like community centres and libraries to community organisations.

Challenges facing community-run social infrastructure

In response to austerity many councils in Wales have had to transfer social infrastructure they'd previously run to local community groups and organisations. The WLGA has said that this is the only way they can “retain valuable services and build community resilience” in many areas.¹⁴

Community groups' experiences of local authority Community Asset Transfer (CAT) processes vary dramatically across Wales and there appears to be little consistency in approach and sharing of good practice. In some cases communities we talked to felt that councils were dumping assets on them without appropriate support, while others expressed a frustration that councils were unwilling to let communities run assets due to the perceived risks involved.

Our asset mapping research found that rates of CATs were highly variable across the country, with only a small number of authority areas appearing to have proactively pursued this policy.¹⁵ In some cases the CAT process itself was described as being 'fraught with difficulties often on both sides'.

Responding to the research, some community organisations felt that once an asset transfer had occurred, they were left to their own devices and it would have been helpful to have an ongoing dialogue. In particular, they highlighted the need for support on aspects such as legal, HR, and health and safety, given the complexity of some asset transfers.

The lack of ongoing support from local authorities could partially be attributed to recent cost-cutting exercises. In some cases this resulted in community organisations waiting long periods of time to progress a transfer:

“In one instance, we spoke to someone who had been waiting for months for a survey result from the local authority to progress a community asset transfer. This was holding up their ability to apply for a grant that was needed for the transfer to

¹⁴ Wales Online, 2019, [The club at the heart of a community that faced closing if it did not take a 'leap of faith'](#)

¹⁵ BCT et al, *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, Executive Summary, p. 5

take place. This was apparently due to a staff member who had been dedicated to supporting community asset transfers no longer being in place as the funding for their post had expired after one year.”

In other cases, local authorities had unrealistic expectations of community groups and committees after transferring assets, such as requiring onerous (and often largely pointless) monitoring reports on, for example, numbers of visitors to the building.

A clear finding from the asset research is that more needs to be done at the outset (such as a memorandum of understanding) to agree between both parties what is expected, with an indication of timescales. Key to this is establishing clear partnership arrangements and ideally improving community rights, rather than the transferring body dictating the process and requirements.

4. Disconnect with Government and Public Sector

Government doing to, not with

Our discussions with communities reveal a worrying disconnect between national policy ambitions and rhetoric and the reality experienced at a local community level. While many agree with the Government's policy aims, there is a widespread feeling that "worthy words are not backed up by the actions".

"These sentiments have been around a long time, but their real meaning is doubtful."

"They (Welsh Government) put out all the statements, but want them done with no involvement from them and at no cost to them."

The vast majority of people recognise the disproportionate impact austerity is having on the delivery of government ambition. But there is still a strong belief that "deficit models towards communities dominate government thinking", that the experiences and strengths of communities remain, at best, merely listened to but rarely heard and, at worst, consciously ignored.

Community groups' experiences of working with public bodies are too often characterised by poor communication, lack of trust, risk aversion, silo working and – in some cases – professional bias. One participant in our workshops – with a long career spanning the public and third sectors – described her experience working for a local authority interacting with communities:

"Local authorities often wear a protective shell when it comes to working with communities and their approach is framed firstly by self-preservation. Their officers are often jaded and demoralised by negativity and risk aversion and there is a perception that communities are a problem that get in the way of organisational goals and procedures."

This reflects a widely held view that there is a fundamental lack of trust in community-led action, with community bodies usually being held to a far higher standard of evidence on their performance than public services. This view and its resulting disconnect is felt differently by different communities in different locations across Wales. Many in larger cities describe greater alienation from local government, while those in more isolated and often rural areas further from Cardiff feel greater disconnect from Welsh Government.

"Some areas are increasingly disconnected from local government except for basic statutory services."

"We feel we are often missed by national programmes and funding streams, but this strengthens our local work and relationships with local public bodies."

There is also a socio-economic dimension to these experiences, with the prevalence of community assets higher in rural locations compared to often poorer urban and valleys areas.¹⁶ This indicates that feelings of disconnect and frustration may be driven by very different factors. Nonetheless, community organisations express almost universal agreement that there is no ‘one size fits all’ for working with communities. However, there remains all too limited an understanding of this within the public sector, often leading to under-recognition of the value of community-led approaches and poor partnership working practices.

Many communities also place their experience and feelings of disconnect in a wider historical context of consecutive Government’s ‘doing to, not with’ them. They describe the slow erosion of citizens’ confidence to pursue community action by a system that too often “asks you to be weak”. From their perspective there is still a need to revise and rebalance the relationship between local people’s agency and the role of the state. In the context of increased community action and cross-sector collaboration in response to coronavirus this sense of frustration has become exacerbated as people wonder ‘Why couldn’t this have happened before?’. However, there is also a feeling that there is an opportunity to be grasped.

Less able to influence decisions

The disconnect outlined above plays out in the Government’s own national well-being measures. Over the last 4-5 years people in Wales feel increasingly less able to influence decisions affecting their local area (Figure 4, p17).¹⁷ Data from the National Survey for Wales also shows that over two-thirds of people don’t feel they have the opportunity to participate in local authority decision-making.¹⁸ There is also a long-term decrease in voter turnout in Welsh local government elections,¹⁹ along with reports of lack of community awareness and engagement by town and community councils.²⁰

This widespread disempowerment is contrary to Government’s ambitions for greater public involvement and collaboration in decision-making and service provision. It is also contrary to the wider social trend of people expecting to have more direct influence over their lives. A UK-wide survey held last year, asking who should have a stake in decision-making around local services found a strong preference for more direct control, with 63% of people saying individuals should have a stake in decision-making, while 62% said community groups and 61% said local government. Only 30% said national government should be involved.²¹

¹⁶ BCT et al, *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, p.12

¹⁷ Welsh Government, 2019, [Well-being of Wales 2018-19](#), p.79

¹⁸ Welsh Government, 2018, [National Survey for Wales](#)

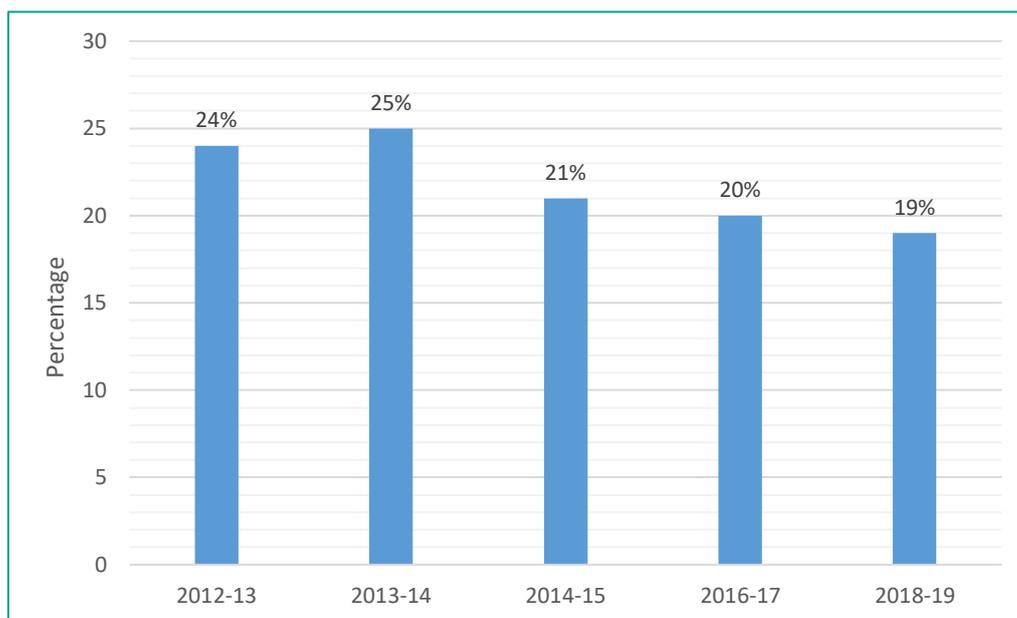
¹⁹ The Electoral Commission, 2019, [Results and turnout at the May 2017 Wales local elections](#)

²⁰ Welsh Government, 2018, [Independent Review Panel on Community and Town Councils in Wales](#), p.29

²¹ New Local Government Network, 2019, [The Community Paradigm](#), p.32

Part of Welsh Government’s response to these challenges has been to introduce a new duty on councils to ‘encourage local people to participate in the making of decisions’ by essentially providing them with more information about how local government operates.²² However, the proposals place no proactive requirement on councils to understand and build upon community action, so that people are able to organise locally and meaningfully participate – especially those who are most disengaged and/or disenfranchised with local government.

Figure 4: Percentage of people in Wales who feel they can influence decisions in their local area



Long-term aims versus short-term funding

Communities also describe a disconnect between policy and Welsh Government funding practice. Temporary and short-term funding streams,²³ while complimented by some for supporting individual models of good practice and partnership work (largely in health and social care settings), are felt to be incompatible with the Government’s wider policy focus on long-term, preventative and sustainable working. In a similar vein, criticism is also levelled at Welsh Government’s apparent fixation with pilot projects, with communities expressing frustration that it is driving local authorities to prioritise short-term funding over long-term community-led support.

“They (local authority) send people to community organisations without extra funding, and then duplicate what they do if there’s a new pot of money.”

²² Senedd Cymru, Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill, para. 46-48

²³ Notably the Integrated Care Fund and Transition Fund

“They’re (Welsh Government) obsessed with models and scaling up; you can’t just copy a model and transplant it elsewhere. It’s the values and principles that are important, plus good governance.”

Audit Wales’s review of the Integrated Care Fund (ICF) echoes this experience. It found little evidence that successful ICF projects (including good practice with third sector partners) are being mainstreamed and funded as part of public bodies’ core service delivery (a key aim of the fund).²⁴

The case for a more sustainable funding model that embraces community involvement and well-being principles appears to be recognised but not yet realised by Welsh Government. In 2019 The Future Generations Commissioner agreed a definition for ‘preventative spend’ with Government to inform future spending decisions:

“Prevention is working in partnership to co-produce the best outcomes possible, utilising the strengths and assets people and places have to contribute.”²⁵

Encouragingly, this definition recognises that the strengths and assets of people and places should be considered in spending decisions. The challenge will be making this a reality. The Commissioner’s response to the 2020-21 draft budget observed that Government is still not comprehensively demonstrating how it is shifting spending towards preventing problems from occurring rather than trying to fix them afterwards.²⁶

In the coming months and years as the social and economic fallout from coronavirus continues, a Government shift towards more preventative spend in line with the agreed definition will be more important than ever. Considering the resourcefulness and willingness to collaborate with public bodies shown by communities in recent months, as well as the strong public appetite for greater local control, now is an opportune time for Government to prioritise interventions that enhance community capacity and develop social infrastructure.

²⁴ Audit Wales, 2019, [Integrated Care Fund](#), p. 41

²⁵ Future Generations Commissioner, 2019, [Budget process and preventative spend](#)

²⁶ Future Generations Commissioner, December 2019, [Future Generations Commissioners response to budget](#)

5. The Welsh Well-being Agenda and Community Involvement

Much of Welsh Government's forward-looking policy agenda is framed in terms of well-being and the involvement of people, communities and their organisations in decision-making and service delivery.²⁷ As highlighted previously in this report, most communities we talked to agree with these ambitions, but their experiences of how it is being implemented on the ground vary dramatically. For communities, one of the key measures of success is the extent to which legislation enables people to live better lives; either through public services which are attuned to their needs and wants, or support for community action which allows local people to take those steps themselves (or preferably a mix of both). Evidence indicates that where you have effective community action and collaboration with public bodies, it can improve the well-being, resilience and opportunities of local people.²⁸

Delivery of the Well-being of Future Generations Act

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WBFGA) takes a broad and ambitious approach to building long-term sustainability into policy and practice across the whole public sector. It aims to put well-being at the heart of decision-making in Wales. It also requires public bodies to take account of the importance of involving people and communities in order to meet their well-being goals.²⁹ In this sense it has huge potential to enable community action and collaboration, although of course it is still very early days in the life of the Act.

However, many of the communities and organisations we talked to expressed a frustration that the ambitions of the WBFGA were not being realised, in particular the duty to involve them more.

“Box ticking remains rife; if legislation drives people this way it won't be effective. Social Services Act is much more useful than Well-being of Future Generations Act.”

The Act and its statutory guidance provide limited direction on how, and to what extent this involvement takes place, leaving it largely at the discretion of public bodies.³⁰ This has the

²⁷ Namely the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

²⁸ Institute of Health Equity, 2020, *The Marmot Review 10 Years On, Community Actions*, p.10
BCT, 2018, *Our Local Economies: Communities Building Prosperity*, p.9

²⁹ WBFGA, 2015, Section 5: The sustainable development principle, 'A public body must take account of the importance of involving other persons with an interest in achieving the well-being goals and of ensuring those persons reflect the diversity of the population'

³⁰ WBFGA statutory core guidance refers to provisions for community and citizen engagement and consultation in existing legislation alongside citing the Citizen-Centred Governance Principles, National Principles for Public Engagement and the National Participation Standards for Children and Young People as a guide.

advantage of allowing for local innovation and flexibility, and the disadvantage of often allowing public bodies to go through the motions without realising real change.

Nor is there any requirement for public bodies to recognise and build upon the strengths and assets that already exist within communities. Instead the core focus of the legislation and guidance is on involving people and communities based on their needs, and including them in decisions which may change the services provided to them. There is little recognition in the legislation and statutory guidance of people or organisations as independent actors.

This is a deficit rather than asset-based model which doesn't recognise what communities already have and are doing for themselves. It also reflects a long-standing paternalistic ethos within Welsh public services which is contrary to the radical, forward-thinking nature of the legislation.

Austerity is also limiting the ambitions of the Act, with public bodies often ignoring many of its implied duties because they simply can't afford it. This is particularly true for local authorities where financial pressure are limiting capacity to lead long-term change.³¹ Some of the community groups we talked to attribute this to the Act being framed as though "austerity never happened". However, this observation isn't shared by all, with some observing that the well-being and sustainability ambitions in the Act are "needed now money is so short" and that its goal is long-term change across the whole public sector.

The broad nature of the WBFGA and the duty to involve people and communities also means it is being interpreted in a variety of different ways depending on the body and/or guidance involved. These range from deficit-based approaches (as outlined above) to variations of asset-based ones:

- The Future Generations Commissioner interprets aspects of the WBFGA as taking an asset-based approach where public bodies create the conditions where people and communities can do the things that matter to them.³²
- Public Health Wales 'Principles of Community Engagement for Empowerment' aims to create conditions where communities can take control and become empowered.³³
- Statutory guidance for Public Service Boards (PSBs) makes passing reference to capturing and building upon the strengths and assets of people and communities as part of carrying out local well-being assessments.³⁴
- The Connected Communities strategy on tackling loneliness and social isolation aims to support connections between people and build on their strengths to ensure everyone has the opportunity to develop positive and meaningful relationships.³⁵

³¹ Future Generations Commissioner, 2019, [Progress towards the Well-being of Future Generations Act](#), p. 30

³² Future Generations Commissioner, [Journey to a Wales of Cohesive Communities](#): Guidance from the Commissioner highlights the importance of public bodies' understanding and engaging the full range of assets that already exist within communities. She also provides examples of how they can act as enablers of community action locally, building on existing assets and stimulating greater community involvement, 4

³³ Public Health Wales, 2019, [Principles of Community Engagement for Empowerment](#)

³⁴ Welsh Government, 2016, WBFGA [public service boards guidance](#)

³⁵ Welsh Government, 2020, [Connected Communities](#), p. 5

While these approaches are commendable they still only equate to ‘light touch’ guidance that skirt around the edges of the duties laid out in the Act, which public bodies are theoretically bound to follow. A recent Audit Wales review of the sustainable development principles in the WBFGA found that while public bodies are engaging with citizens, they are not properly involving them in their work to the extent that they should:

“Public bodies are often not creating opportunities for citizens to be involved from the early stages of design through to evaluation and they need to do more to involve the full diversity of the population.”³⁶

The absence of an asset-based approach enabling greater community action is a fundamental missing link in helping public bodies achieve genuine citizen and community involvement. This is a point made by the Talwrn network of voluntary organisations in their response to the now shelved Government plans³⁷ to build resilient communities:

“And that is where possibly the biggest gap in the Government’s initial thinking about resilience becomes clear, which is the recognition of the importance of local networks and relationships (called ‘horizontal social capital’ in the jargon). Filling this gap would have major advantages. Mobilising social capital, in other words encouraging local people to do things together, can bring real concrete benefits to communities and to service providers who work with them.”³⁸

The absence of social capital – or, in the context of this report, community action – is a key barrier to the WBFGAs ambition of greater involvement and collaboration in decision-making and service delivery. It is also a significant barrier to Government achieving its wider well-being goals. The limitations of the Act highlight the need for a clearer vision and strategy for communities across Government centred on mobilising people’s strengths and assets. In turn this could enable some of the broader ambitions and potential of the Act.

Possibilities of the Social Services and Well-being Act

Despite community groups describing disconnect with national policy and frustration with aspects of the WBFGA, many also identified encouraging signs of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWBA) leading to improved involvement, collaboration and independent community action.³⁹ In our workshops people describe “more joining up of the dots” between health, social care and community sector organisations.

³⁶ Audit Wales, May 2020, [So, what’s different? Findings from the Auditor General’s Sustainable Development Principle Examinations](#), p.42

³⁷ Welsh Government, 2017, [New approach to building resilient communities announced](#)

³⁸ Talwrn Network, 2017, [Building Resilient Communities](#), p. 2

³⁹ Namely the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act section 16 duty](#) on local authorities to ‘promote social enterprises, co-operatives, user led services and the third sector’ and the core principles in the Act for public bodies to focus on well-being, people, partnership and prevention.

“We’re in a different place than five years ago; community work is much better appreciated and understood. There’s more joining up of the dots. Our local Health Board and the third sector are working better on dementia support. However, if the community doesn’t feel involved, it won’t work.”

There are a number of possible reasons why the SSWBA appears to be working better for communities on the ground compared to the WBFGA. Firstly, health and social care has not been subject to the same extreme cuts as more preventative public service areas.⁴⁰

Secondly, and closely related to this first point, is that the SSWBA appears to have been designed more specifically with austerity and its socio-economic challenges in mind.⁴¹ Key to this is the Act’s preventative rather than curative approach that strongly involves community-based work, recognising its ability to reduce pressures on public services.

Lastly, and possibly most importantly, the SSWBA places stronger and more clearly defined duties on public bodies to collaborate and coproduce solutions with people and community organisations. Specifically, section 16 of the Act requires local authorities to promote the development of social enterprises and co-operative organisations or arrangements in their areas to provide care and support and preventative services. It also places a duty on local authorities to promote the involvement of service users in the design and running of that provision, and to highlight the availability of care and support and preventative services from third sector organisations. The Act goes on to provide definitions of what it means by a ‘social enterprise’ and ‘third sector organisation.’⁴²

Unlike the WBFGA, the SSWBA recognises and defines some of the key principles we describe as community action and uses them as a means of coproducing more preventative services designed around the person and community. Considering both Acts overlap extensively in their ambition, there is an opportunity for the WBFGA to learn from elements of the SSWBA section 16 duties to better support the development of community action across Wales.

Communities and public bodies working together for well-being

Despite the many challenges highlighted in this report, some communities and community organisations we talked to describe collaborative working with public bodies improving in

⁴⁰ Over the last 5-6 years NHS spending has increased year-on-year, while local government spending on social services has remained relatively protected. However, more preventative areas of spending, such as ‘community support’ have been subject to cuts of over 40%, Wales Public Services, 2017, [Austerity and local government](#), p.2-4

⁴¹ Government Social Research, 2019, [Evaluation of the Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#), p. 14-15: Various white papers which informed the SSWBA focused on the development of sustainable social services, outlining that ‘change is needed so that social services are better able to respond to changing social and family circumstances and care needs, future needs, expectations and demands’. A projected constrained financial situation presents choices; ‘to contract services or rethink ways they can be delivered’.

⁴² SSWBA, 2014, [Section 16 Promoting social enterprises, co-operatives, user led services and the third sector](#)

their area in recent years. As outlined in the previous section, many of the examples they provided were in social care settings.

Where communities and public bodies do work well together, it is often based on individual relationships built over time, with community organisations and officials finding key common ground. However, communities described these relationships as being very vulnerable to staff changes and rarely culturally embedded within public bodies.

There are also positive experiences of collaboration at a strategy level, most often around the wider social care agenda. These include coproducing well-being plans, developing regional learning disability strategies, and even place plans.

But the wider picture is still one where the knowledge, experiences and strengths of local communities are rarely recognised and understood, and in some cases consciously ignored and undervalued by public bodies.

However, in many parts of Wales the response to coronavirus is changing this picture with a shift towards more improved cross-sector understanding, decision-making and collaboration.⁴³ This more collaborative working environment could significantly improve community action and may prove vital in the face of a deep recession, further austerity and potentially future waves of coronavirus infection.

⁴³ People & Work and BCT, July 2020, *Community Responses to COVID; what's been going on?*, p. 4

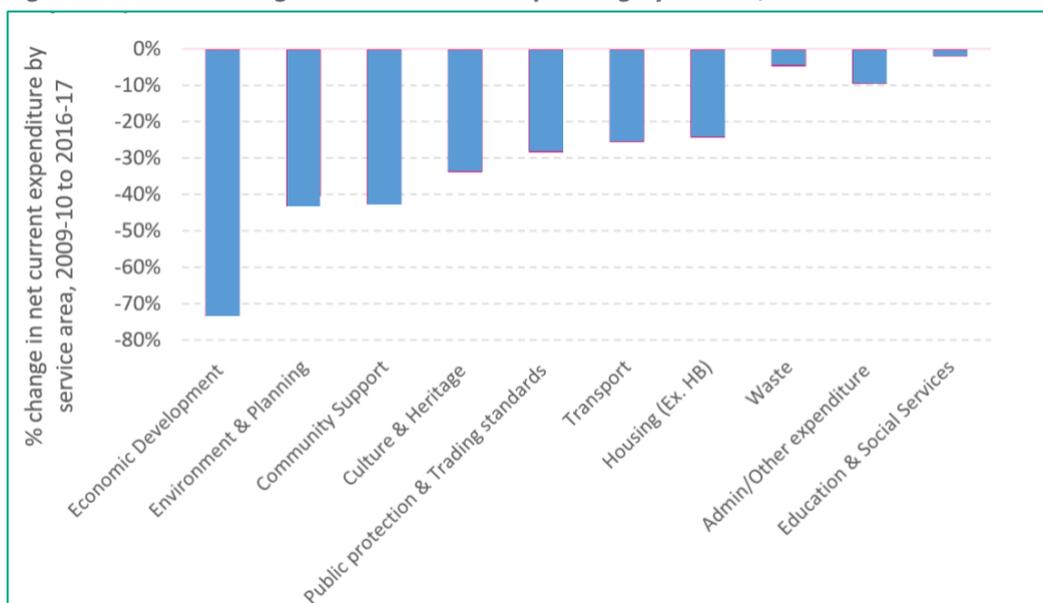
6. Impact of Austerity

Austerity continues to have a profound impact on people and public bodies across Wales. A retreating state, rising demand and complexity of need have put huge pressure on many community organisations at the same time as necessitating new ways of working. This situation has led to the development of a wider range of different community activities and increased mutual support. This is fundamentally changing the relationship between community organisations and public bodies, in some cases improving cross-sector collaboration, but in many resulting in tension, competition and short-termism.

Challenges of a retreating state and rising demand

The depth of public sector cuts in Wales, combined with cuts in non-devolved budgets such as benefits, have led many public bodies to prioritise acute services over more preventative approaches.⁴⁴

Figure 5: Cuts to local government service spending by service, 2009-10 to 2016-17



Public finance pressures have been particularly acute for local authorities, who have seen their funding from Welsh Government drop by nearly £1 billion since 2009-10.⁴⁵ This continues to have a significant impact on service spending in non-statutory areas such as 'community support' which has been cut by over 40% in recent years (Figure 5).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ New Local Government Network, 2019, [The Community Paradigm: why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved](#), p. 22

⁴⁵ Wales Governance Centre, Ifan, G. and Sion, C. 2019, [Cut to the bone? An analysis of Local Government finances in Wales, 2009-10 to 2017-18 and the outlook to 2023-24](#), p.5

⁴⁶ Wales Public Services, 2017, [Austerity and local government](#), p.4

In real terms this has resulted in huge cuts to community services and facilities, including a total of 193 youth centres being closed and a third of all libraries in Wales having either closed or being run by community groups and/or volunteers.⁴⁷ This has put significant pressure on communities, with the social infrastructure which supports community action disappearing or having to be taken over by local groups. As our asset mapping research has shown, local capacity to take on community assets is very mixed across Wales. So too is the ability and willingness of councils to transfer assets; some choose to transfer local facilities to community groups rather than close them, while others would rather close than face the perceived risk of the asset being badly run.

For some communities this has left them with a lack of places to meet, undermining community action and local people's opportunity to be more connected. It is estimated that the cost of disconnected communities in Wales is £3bn.⁴⁸

“Without a physical space how do we bring communities together?”

These cuts have also made public bodies less visible at the local level, fuelling the frustration and disconnect expressed in many of our workshops. However, many in the community sector recognise the difficult decisions facing public bodies, even if they don't always agree with how these decisions are made or implemented.

“The council are failing because they don't have enough money.”

“The wider context is shaped by austerity; local authorities are very short of money; this means successful small initiatives can't be scaled up. Small projects also remain unseen and underappreciated.”

For many in the community sector, austerity is preventing sustainable practice and driving short-termism and competition over prevention and collaboration, contrary to Government policy intentions. Public sector job insecurity is seen as a key driver of this, pulling work in-house that would otherwise be best carried out by community-based organisations who are generally better connected, more flexible and enjoy higher levels of trust among local residents.

Part of managing the cuts has also involved a greater degree of rationing of public services as a way of controlling demand, so that citizens often have to demonstrate a higher level of need or distress to qualify for services. Unsurprisingly, the impact on Wales's older, sicker and poorer population has been rising demand and complexity of need, with longer term problems building up rather than being addressed earlier when they are simpler (and cheaper) to fix.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Unison, 2019, [Shocking picture of austerity cuts to services in Wales](#)

⁴⁸ Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2017, [The cost of disconnected communities](#), p. 7

⁴⁹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018, [Is Wales Fairer](#), p. 6: The report suggests that austerity and the weakening safety net provided by social security are pulling more people into poverty and increasing complexity of need. Children eligible for free school meals have higher exclusion rates than others, while adults and children living in the poorest areas are having poorer health outcomes. Adults living in the most deprived areas of Wales have lower life expectancies than those living in the least deprived areas.

Cuts and reforms in non-devolved areas like social security are also having an acute impact, feeding into the vicious cycle of austerity-driven demand and reduced capacity. The Welsh NHS Confederation highlight the spectrum of complex issues resulting from cuts to welfare benefits:

“There are significant impacts on people’s health and well-being as a result of the changes to benefits and tax credit. All these factors – increased stress and anxiety, eating poorly, living in inadequately heated homes, strained personal relationships, as well as a lack of socialising and being less active – have long-term health implications. These, in turn, are likely to result in the need for treatment, care or long-term support, putting extra pressure on the NHS and social services.”⁵⁰

Changing role of community organisations

Austerity and the resulting pressures outlined above have presented significant challenges and changes for community organisations. Many of these pressures are increasing responsibility and demand on them without the “infrastructure, resources, support and skills to be able to do it”.

“It’s not okay for community to pick up the slack with little or no resources.”

While some of the communities we talked to provided examples of public bodies (often driven by proactive departments and/or individuals) starting to be more responsive and collaborative, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

One of the significant changes driven by austerity is the increase in community action and mutual support. Across Wales community organisations are stepping into the retreating space left by public bodies, including in areas like informal social care, activities and facilities for young and old people, use and protection of environmental space and a range of informal local emergency support like food distribution schemes.

“We’re having to step in to fill the gaps; improving local parks, playgrounds and providing more support for schools.”

In taking on these responsibilities, most people in communities see themselves working to local needs and ambitions rather than to a Government agenda, even if both share similar ambitions.

“Our job is not to meet the national strategies of Welsh Government, that’s for the statutory sector.”

This highlights the complex but pivotal role community action plays as a link between what communities want and how public bodies work with them in meeting their statutory duties.

⁵⁰ The Welsh NHS Confederation, 2015, [The impact of welfare reform on people’s health and well-being](#), p. 9

This symbiotic relationship presents a significant opportunity for people, communities and government alike. This is more important than ever before, considering the economic and social fallout from coronavirus will undoubtedly add to the existing challenges posed by austerity and increase the scale and complexity of demand on public services well into the future.^{51 52}

⁵¹ BBC News, 13th May, [Coronavirus: Chancellor Rishi Sunak warns of 'significant recession'](#)

⁵² Office for National Statistics, April 2020, [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 16 April 2020](#)

7. Vision and Strategy, Crisis and Change

A policy vacuum

Since the phasing out of the Communities First Programme in 2016, Welsh Government have had no overarching policy for communities in Wales, nor are they included in any ministerial portfolio. Within this vacuum a coherent vision and strategy for communities has almost disappeared, despite rhetoric about supporting and developing communities remaining prominent in various policy documents.

An example of this (highlighted earlier in this report) is guidance from the Future Generations Commissioner which advises public bodies to build upon communities' strengths and assets (an asset-based approach). Meanwhile, core statutory guidance for public bodies implementing the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act focuses on involving people in a more consultative capacity to shape services in line with their needs (a deficit approach). The latter is more in-line with the core reality of the Act, while the former is an aspiration which too often is not realised.

Similarly, the Government's national strategy, *Prosperity for All*, places significant emphasis on the benefits of participatory decision-making and community empowerment, but does little to develop coherent policy measures to realise the benefits of community action:

“Communities prosper where people can participate fully and play an active role in shaping their local environment, influencing the decisions which affect them. People can play many different roles within their communities, and they need to be empowered to do the things that really make a difference.”⁵³

The Government's recently published Connected Communities strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections is the closest it gets to empowering communities. Yet, it is clear from the strategy – and the consultation process which informed it – that its core focus is tackling loneliness and social isolation, not empowering communities.

The Ministerial foreword to the strategy reiterates a statement from *Prosperity for All* which may shed some light on this lack of clarity within Government:

“Government cannot create communities, but can foster environments where these links are broadened and deepened.”⁵⁴

Here Government appears to endorse the concept of community action at the same time as relinquishing a degree of responsibility for its development. They are right to say Government cannot create communities – and the communities we talked to would

⁵³ Welsh Government, 2017, [Prosperity for All: the national strategy](#), p. 19

⁵⁴ Welsh Government, 2020, [Connected Communities Strategy](#), p. 4

unanimously agree – but that’s not to say they can’t take a more positive and proactive role to support community action.

This lack of clarity and vision at a policy level, alongside a shared understanding about what community action can achieve and what challenges it faces across Government, is one of the major barriers to its development. For the communities we talked to it is also a barrier to improving well-being outcomes on the ground, which in turn is undermining confidence in the ability of policy to enable people to live better lives.

“There is a lack of consistency in policy and practice; new Ministers are always changing things for their own sake.”

“We’re not seeing a shift in practice in line with policies.”

Crisis and change

In the space of just six months the Coronavirus pandemic has revealed the key role community action and community organisations play in building local resilience.

There is now widespread evidence and growing recognition that community action has been crucial to our society’s response to coronavirus, and in particular supporting our most vulnerable.⁵⁵ Evidence also indicates that developing community capacity and nurturing greater cross-sector collaboration could play a crucial role in our long-term recovery from this crisis. It could also help build a healthier more sustainable society in line with the aspirations of the Future Generations Act.⁵⁶

A recent report from the Wales Centre for Public Policy supports this, recommending that Welsh Government maintain and develop community action in its post-Covid recovery strategy:

“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, and we need a renewed focus on identifying and working with influencers in local communities to understand how change happens in each place.”⁵⁷

The crisis has also seen a significant improvement in understanding, decision-making and collaboration between communities and public bodies.⁵⁸ In many parts of Wales community groups have enabled the public sector to deliver a more effective response. A New Local Government Network survey (inclusive of Wales) highlights that an overwhelming majority

⁵⁵ New Local Government Network, July 2020, [Communities vs. Coronavirus](#), p.8

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 29

⁵⁷ Wales Centre for Public Policy, July 2020, [Planning for a Prosperous, Equal and Green Recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic](#), p. 15

⁵⁸ People & Work and BCT, July 2020, *Community Responses to COVID; what’s been going on?*, p. 4

of council chiefs (96%) say that the contribution of community groups in their councils' Covid-19 efforts has been 'significant' or 'very significant'.⁵⁹

At the same time community groups have been under immense pressure in recent months, with many in Wales having to close their doors and discontinue their services.⁶⁰ The next year will prove critical for their survival, especially as the initial injection of emergency COVID funding comes to an end.

This is why it's so important that Welsh Government's post-Covid reconstruction plan recognises communities' incredible contribution in responding to the crisis and build upon the public's enhanced appetite for community action and an environment of improved collaboration with public bodies.

⁵⁹ NLGN, 2020, [Leadership Index Survey](#)

⁶⁰ Bevan Foundation and Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil, July 2020, *Charity and community group responses to COVID 19 in the Merthyr Tydfil Borough*
BCT and People & Work, June 2020, *Community Responses to COVID; what's been going on?*

8. Policies for Community Action

Welsh Government's ambition of improving well-being through public bodies working better with citizens is fundamentally undermined by their inability to fully understand, support and collaborate with communities. Austerity is exacerbating this weak-link in the Government's policy agenda by increasing the complexity of demand on public bodies at the same time as reducing their capacity to respond. These factors have combined to impair the inclusive, preventative and collaborative ways of working envisaged by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

This research has sought to better understand how we can make these ways of working a reality for communities and public bodies through the development of community action. We identify three key policy steps to doing this:

- Invest in community action and social infrastructure
- Develop a national vision and strategy designed by and for communities
- Improve understanding and collaboration between communities and public bodies

Invest in community action and social infrastructure

Money from the next round of the UK Dormant Assets Scheme (DAS) should be used for a Community Wealth Fund for Wales, providing long-term flexible funding for communities that most need it (the DAS is additional money for good causes and cannot be used for routine public spending).

Evidence shows that community action and capacity is not evenly spread across Wales, with poorer urban areas least likely to benefit. We also know that poorer areas with higher levels of community action and social infrastructure are more likely to have better health and well-being outcomes, higher rates of employment and lower levels of child poverty compared to poorer areas without.

We propose that Welsh Government use the additional money from an expanded UK Government Dormant Assets Scheme (DAS)⁶¹ to provide flexible, community-led, long-term funding for those communities in Wales that most need it. The previous DAS distributed over £360m to good cause across the UK by using funds sitting dormant in bank accounts and building societies. In Wales this amounted to approximately £14m for youth employment and climate change issues.⁶² However, the expanded DAS (which includes dormant assets such as stocks, shares and

⁶¹ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport/Office for Civil Society/HM Treasury, 2020, [Consultation on expanding the dormant assets scheme](#)

⁶² The National Lottery Community Fund distributed DAS funds via its [Getting Ahead](#), [Getting Ahead 2](#) and [Sustainable Steps](#) programmes.

pensions) could release up to £2bn of funding for good causes.⁶³ Under current plans for DAS, Welsh Government retains its role setting the broad 'direction' of how The National Lottery Community Fund (the designated funding body) allocate this funding. We propose that the money from the expanded DAS should go into an endowment fund providing flexible and sustainable support for community-based activity, alongside continued DAS for the existing schemes outlined above. It's important to note that DAS is extra money for good causes and cannot be used for routine public spending.

Introduce new legislation enhancing community organisations' right to buy, lease, manage or use land and buildings belonging to public bodies (modelled on parts of the Scottish Community Empowerment Act).

Our asset mapping research highlights how Wales's diverse and growing range of community-run social infrastructure can improve the well-being and opportunities of local people and communities. But rates of Community Asset Transfers (CATs) vary considerably across Wales, with only a small number of authority areas appearing to be proactively pursuing this policy. Where they do, there are numerous reports from community organisations of the significant lengths of time involved and the complexity of the process, which often appears to be beset by lack of capacity and clarity.

A recent report by the Bevan Foundation found that Wales has some of the weakest provisions for community rights of ownership and control in the UK. It also highlights that a better set of rights and frameworks for community ownership or control can help new forms of community innovation and regeneration to emerge.⁶⁴ And while recent Welsh Government guidance on CATs produced by Ystadau Cymru seeks to improve the transfer process,⁶⁵ many community organisations we talked to still feel communities need clearer and stronger rights.

We propose that Wales builds upon parts 4 and 5 of the Scottish Community Empowerment Act.⁶⁶ Part 4 extends existing Scottish community rights to buy land (urban and rural), allowing them to register interest and giving them first choice if land comes up for sale. Part 5 introduces Asset Transfer Requests (ATRs), giving community bodies a right to request to buy, lease, manage or use land and buildings belonging to public bodies. Relevant authorities are required to publish a register of the land they own or lease, to help communities identify suitable property. An initial evaluation of ATRs found that the majority of requests were for assets such as community hubs, community parks/woodlands/gardens, and sports/recreational facilities. Encouragingly the evaluation identified the potential for a positive impact

⁶³ DGCMS/Office for Civil Society, 2017, [£2 billion boost set to transform charity and voluntary sector funding](#)

⁶⁴ Bevan Foundation, 2020, [Productive community assets: generating the benefits](#), p.8 & Summary

⁶⁵ Ystadau Cymru, 2019, [Community Asset Transfer Guidance](#)

⁶⁶ Scottish Government, 2017, [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act: summary](#)

on the local services available in more deprived communities due to ATRs being evenly spread across poorer and wealthier areas of Scotland.⁶⁷

Enhance the Communities Facilities Fund and ring-fence future Regional Investment Funding to ensure revenue and capital support for developing community action and social infrastructure for all communities across Wales.

Securing support for community action and sustaining community-run social infrastructure are key challenges identified in this report. Too often local people and community-run organisations struggle to develop and sustain the capacity, skills and knowledge they need to run their own assets and local support services. Evidence in this report shows that where these are developed they can result in more resilient community-run social infrastructure that significantly enhances the health, well-being, opportunities and economies of a local area. Our asset mapping research found that while these challenges are often more pronounced in poorer areas, they exist for many communities in different locations across Wales.⁶⁸

The Welsh Government's Communities Facilities Programme currently only provides capital grants to community and voluntary sector organisations to improve community facilities.⁶⁹ We propose that this fund is enhanced to include revenue funding to develop community action as well as social infrastructure in all areas across Wales. We also propose that plans for new Regional Investment Funding⁷⁰ take a similar approach. A recent report from the Wales Centre for Public Policy reinforces this priority, recommending that Welsh Government maintain and develop community action and resilience in its post-Covid recovery strategy.⁷¹

Develop a national vision and strategy designed by and for communities

Develop a Minister-led strategy for building stronger communities which draws on the expertise of existing community organisations.

The Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee should carry out an inquiry into the barriers and opportunities to community action in Wales.

Despite numerous references to 'communities' in policy, there is currently no ministerial responsibility or overarching strategy for communities. Instead, much of Welsh Government's approach is framed by the Future Generations Act and its

⁶⁷ Glasgow Caledonian University, 2019, [Review of Asset Transfer Requests Annual Reports: Summary](#)

⁶⁸ BCT et al, *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, p. 34

⁶⁹ Welsh Government, [Community Facilities Grant](#), 2019

⁷⁰ Welsh Government, [Framework for regional investment in Wales](#), 2020

⁷¹ Wales Centre for Public Policy, July 2020, [Planning for a Prosperous, Equal and Green Recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic](#), p. 15

ambitions for greater citizen involvement and improved well-being. Yet the evidence in this report indicates that the broad framing of the FGA isn't enough to change long-established ways of working and cultural practices in the public sector. These practices leave many communities feeling marginalised and untrusted, even though the goals of community organisations and government are often aligned.

As we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic we propose Government build upon the widespread public support for community action and develop a new deal for communities in Wales. This should start with creating ministerial responsibility for this area of work and producing a strategy for stronger communities with substantial community involvement. Alongside this the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee should carry out an inquiry into the barriers and opportunities to community action in Wales.

We are not asking Government to create communities or define or dictate what they should be. Instead we are proposing that communities and Government co-produce a strategy setting out a vision of how Government can best support them to create a more resilient and prosperous futures for local people. We believe this is entirely possible utilising existing networks of community organisations across Wales which are currently helping to capture the 'community voice' and already inputting into policy.⁷² There are already a multiplicity of ideas and proposals from across the UK on how the strengths and assets of communities can be better understood and supported by Governments post-Covid.⁷³

A new duty in the Future Generations Act for public bodies to promote the role of community organisations and development of community-run social infrastructure.

As highlighted above, the broad ambitions of the Future Generations Act have huge potential to enable community action and collaboration over the long-term. However the FGA in its current form is ill-equipped to make them a reality. Similarly, Government ambitions for developing 'community infrastructure that supports connected communities' do little to actually empower communities to take action themselves.⁷⁴ These challenges have been compounded by austerity, an ageing population and increasingly complex needs in areas like mental health, putting additional strain on both public bodies and communities.

We propose placing a stronger emphasis on the role of community organisations in the FGA. This would be modelled on similar measures in the Social Services and Well-being Act, which this report has shown that public bodies and communities are using to drive collaboration and innovation in the face of challenges like austerity and

⁷² BCT run a network of over 120 community-based organisations supporting learning and advocacy work. Talwrn is an alliance of diverse voluntary sector organisations with their own individual purposes but which support people and communities in Wales.

⁷³ Examples include [Carnegie UK Trust proposals](#) for the relationship between citizens and the state to be reset to better support people and communities to achieve positive change for themselves and the [New Local Government Network's ideas](#) for how public services and communities can unlock community power.

⁷⁴ Welsh Government, 2020, [Connected Communities Strategy](#), p. 26

increasingly complex needs. The SSWBA section 16 duty requires local authorities to promote the development of social enterprises and co-operative organisations or arrangements in their areas to provide care and support and preventative services. It also places a duty on local authorities to promote the involvement of persons for whom care and support or preventative services are to be provided in the design and running of that provision and the availability of care and support and preventative services from third sector organisations.⁷⁵

A new National Well-being Indicator, measuring community-run social infrastructure by local authority area.

Government currently have no way of measuring community action in Wales. Community organisations we talked to repeatedly highlighted the need for consistent metrics to demonstrate the scale and value of the community sector. There are 46 national well-being indicators in the Future Generations Act, but none gauge grassroots community development despite one of the Acts seven well-being goals being ‘a Wales of cohesive communities’.⁷⁶ National Well-being Indicator 23 (the percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area) is currently the closest means of measuring community action nationally.

We propose Government introduce a new national well-being indicator that captures the scale and value of community-run social infrastructure across Wales. This could be aligned with the following recommendation for Public Services Boards to map community infrastructure in their area.

Improve understanding and collaboration between communities and public bodies

Create a £5m Communities Challenge Fund (based on the Foundational Economy model) to test ways for developing collaboration and mutual understanding between communities and public bodies.

Develop good practice guidance for public bodies on collaborative working and building stronger communities in partnership with the WLGA and Audit Wales.

Community organisations across Wales told us that public sector ways of working are a key barrier to greater collaboration and community involvement. Their experiences of working with public bodies are often characterised by poor communication, lack of trust, risk aversion, silo working and, in some cases, professional bias. These experiences are echoed in recent reviews by Audit Wales which found public bodies often lack involvement and collaboration with communities and their

⁷⁵ SSWBA, 2014, [Section 16 Promoting social enterprises, co-operatives, user led services and the third sector](#)

⁷⁶ Welsh Government, [Well-being of Wales: 2019](#)

organisations.⁷⁷ This is detrimental to Government and communities' shared goals of involving people and communities more and improving well-being.

We propose Government create a £5m Communities Challenge Fund to improve cross-sector collaboration in local areas across Wales and support new ways of co-working. This could be used to better understand existing good practice and trial place and asset-based approaches, participatory budgeting and decision making, cutting red-tape and silo working, cross-sector secondments, positive risk-taking and improving communication. Modelled on Welsh Government's Foundational Economy Challenge Fund it would be experimental in nature and recognise there is 'no exact template you can lift and shift to Welsh communities.'⁷⁸ Similar to community action, the foundational economy has been overlooked in public policy in recent years.⁷⁹ There is also synergy between the two in terms of local wealth building through changes in procurement and developing community anchors.⁸⁰ Alongside the Challenge Fund we propose good practice guidance for public bodies is developed, promoting ways of collaborative working and building stronger communities.

Require Public Services Boards to map local community-run infrastructure as part of their assessment of local well-being, alongside a duty to collaborate with existing community infrastructure.

Many of the communities we talked to suggested mapping community assets and services in each PSB area to enable better partnership work and coordination between community organisations and public bodies. This reflects a wider consensus among communities that many public bodies don't properly understand and take into consideration existing community infrastructure when making decisions.

We propose expanding the Future Generations Act duty on PSBs to assess the state of well-being of the people in a community area to include an assessment of existing community infrastructure and an expectation to collaborate. The WCVA previously made a similar recommendation aimed at individual PSBs but without a universal duty.⁸¹ Current statutory guidance for PSBs alludes to Boards having 'the opportunity to capture the strengths and assets of the people and their communities' in their assessment, including drawing on 'the broad spectrum of economic, social, environmental and cultural expertise available... such as youth forums, community groups, older people's forums...'⁸² A duty to map community-run social

⁷⁷ Audit Wales, May 2020, *So, what's different? Findings from the Auditor General's Sustainable Development Principle Examinations*, p.42

⁷⁸ Welsh Government, 2019, *The foundational economy*, the foundational economy is defined by the basic goods and services on which every citizen relies and which keep us safe, sound and civilized. Care and health services, food, housing, energy, construction, tourism and retailers on the high street are all examples of the foundational economy.

⁷⁹ Bevan Foundation, 2017, *Wales' Foundational Economy: why it's time for action*

⁸⁰ BCT, 2018, *Our Local Economies*

⁸¹ WCVA, *Empowering Communities*, 2018, p. 28

⁸² Welsh Government, 2016, WBFGA *public service boards guidance*

infrastructure could make this aspiration a reality, enabling greater understanding and collaboration between communities and public bodies. In many – but not all – parts of Wales the response to coronavirus has already seen a shift towards more improved cross-sector understanding and decision-making. The new duty would build upon this positive momentum.

9. Conclusion

Wales is home to a diverse and growing range of community action and assets that are improving the well-being, resilience and opportunities of local people every day. The value of this work has been proven beyond doubt in recent months as communities across the country mobilised to support one another, often in partnership with the public sector.

Yet too often before the current crisis, the value of community action remained overlooked, under-resourced and taken for granted by national and local government. At the same time many of our local communities have been struggling, especially those who are most socially and economically marginalised. Austerity and a public sector culture of 'doing to, not with' have eroded community capacity, trust and reduced social infrastructure.

Welsh Government have an opportunity to overcome these challenges by building upon the strengths and assets that already exist within our communities. A more supportive public policy environment for community action could also help realise Government's well-being and citizen involvement ambitions, alongside supporting a greener recovery.

This is more important than ever before considering the scale of the challenges we face. This report is a first step towards a broader long-term vision of a Wales where every community has the resources and influence it needs to build community capacity and develop and run its own social infrastructure.