

Local Government and Housing Committee

Policy Review of Community Regeneration – Capacity Building and Training

Issue

To advise the Committee on the recent fact-finding visit undertaken to the Ballyfermot Partnership in Dublin as part of the evidence gathering for the policy review.

Recommendation

The Committee is invited to consider the evidence prepared by Professor Adamson and include in the policy review report.

Background

The Local Government and Housing Committee is conducting the second phase of its review of community regeneration in Wales, which is specifically concerned with the examination of capacity development and training of community regeneration volunteers and workers. During a visit to North Wales to hear evidence, Ms Shan Ashton of Bangor University pointed to good practice in these areas in Ireland and cited the Ballyfermot Partnership as an excellent agency with a strong track record in developing community-led initiatives. A visit to the partnership was arranged for 16th January 2003.

The visit

The Programme for the visit included meetings with the following partnership organisations:

The Ballyfermot Partnership

Ballyfermot Credit Union

Cherry Orchard Equine Education and Training Centre

Ballyfermot Social Intervention Initiative

The Bungalow, Cherry Orchard

Ballyfermot Local Employment Service

The Markewiez Community Centre

A brief account of each visit is given with conclusions drawn about the implications of the organisation's approach for community regeneration in Wales.

The Ballyfermot Partnership

The Partnership is a community led, multi-agency partnership covering the Dublin 10 area. It was established in the mid 1990s as one of the 32 area partnerships which would drive regeneration in Ireland. It operates within the framework of the following national policies and demonstrates an integrated policy framework that has been very successful in linking local delivery to nationally determined objectives:

National Development Plan 2000- 2006

Operational Programme for the Southern and Eastern Region

National Anti-Poverty Strategy 1997

National Employment Action Plan

This policy background provides an important strategic context in which the Partnership acquires funding and institutional support for its locally determined development objectives. The framework provides a major role for local communities and drives funding and decision making to a significantly lower level in the partnership than is currently possible in Wales. The role of local government (Dublin City Council) is as an equal member of the partnership.

Current actions of the partnership are based on three key areas:

- Services to the Unemployed
- Community Development
- Community Based Youth Initiatives.

These are achieved through a wide range of programmes and partner organisations. There is a considerable emphasis on community engagement and control of the actions of the key partnership members. The achievements of the partnership are considerable and too detailed to review here. As an overview its is contributing significantly to employment in the area, it is tackling stigma and the associated low self-esteem and confidence of community members and it is reversing a very negative culture to create a 'can do' community. The projects below provide some examples of how this is being achieved. However, they cannot capture the confident mood and commitment of the people spoken to during the visit. In part, this is due to the buoyant economy of the Dublin area, which is reaching even into the most excluded parts

of the City. However, it is also clear that the Partnership has provided a local framework that has allowed local people to develop skills and confidence to be participants in the economic recovery of the region. For those lacking the skills and confidence it is providing services which will enable them to acquire them.

Implications

Whilst a clear illustration of the value of multi-agency partnership approaches, the Ballyfermot Partnership also illustrates the additional advantages of highly localised, community patterns of participation and control. The level of community involvement is considerable and demonstrates the ability of community members to take on responsible and difficult management roles within voluntary organisations. Central to the approach is the devolution of funding directly to community organisations. This is a real process of empowerment and ensures that locally derived solutions are adequately funded without too much external control.

The second major implication is the value of strong links between national policies and local delivery. The integration of the Partnerships activities with national action plans and funding streams ensures that a unified approach is achieved and supported by all the policy actors in the region. Thus the Partnership can draw on clear support from regional development agencies, the local authority, employment services and national government. This integrated approach is a clear factor in the success of the Partnership.

There are some questions about the relevance of this experience for Wales and its community regeneration programme. The Ballyfermot partnership covers a densely populated suburb of Dublin which itself is a growth region without comparison in Wales. The scale of operation is not comparable to any partnership structure in Wales and the Ballyfermot Partnership is considerably larger than any proposed in the Communities First areas. The linkages to nationally determined objectives is also not evident in Wales and the integrated support from all agencies is not yet a reality. However, these are important factors to aim for and some generic lessons of approach are derivable from the Ballyfermot experience. These are:

- The value of a supportive framework that engages all organisations from central government to local community groups
- An integrated policy framework which links nationally determined objectives to local delivery mechanisms
- Integrated funding approaches which link sources at national, regional, local authority and community level
- The value of building local approaches controlled by community members which link with expert skill at partnership level

Specific Examples of Projects in the Partnership

Ballyfermot Credit Union

The Ballyfermot Credit Union occupies a prime High Street location in the central shopping area of Ballyfermot. It offers physical facilities comparable to a substantial building society branch in the UK and is very well designed and modern in appearance. Established 40 years ago total membership stands at 11,583. Current savings exceed E20m and E15m are on loan to members. The Credit Union offers loan and death insurance under which any member with more than E100 in savings is provided with free death insurance of E2000. It provides Internet account management and is installing an ATM in the near future, although failure to develop a national system and high charges from mainstream banks prevents it currently being networked into the wider ATM infrastructure.

Implications

The Credit Union provided illustration of a complex and large-scale financial organisation being managed and controlled entirely by local community members. Its development over a 40-year period accelerated rapidly from 5 years ago with the involvement of the Partnership and it is an integral element of the Partnership strategy for the area. Through its training programme it directly raises capacity of its volunteers and contributes to a strong sense of 'can do' values in the wider community. It ensures that no illegal lending activities exist in the area and provides vital financial services in the wake of withdrawal by the major banks. It illustrates the need to underpin financial inclusion with the development of local financial services accessible to low income members and the added value of providing insurance for its members as a free element of its services. Recent legislative changes have removed some of its operational advantages in comparison to the banks but it has a sufficiently strong base to compete successfully. It draws attention to the need to support fully the Credit Union in movement in Wales and attempt to reproduce the conditions that have allowed them to flourish in Ireland.

Cherry Orchard Equine Education and Training Centre

The Centre is located in one of the newer housing areas of Ballyfermot where considerable social disruption occurred in 1999. Following social disturbances and extremes of anti-social behaviour, local residents determined to tackle the underlying social problems and the equine centre grew from the interests of one parent. He had identified the central cultural place of horses in the locality, which was evident in the many horses roaming the green spaces in the community. The community campaigned for facilities that would target disengaged and disaffected young people and provide them with specific training in equestrian skills. Funded

by a range of central and local government initiatives, the Ballyfermot Partnership and managed entirely by local people, the extensive facilities are due to open in February 2003. The scale of the operation is vast, with indoor and outdoor arenas and two paddock areas and extensive stabling. It has training rooms, catering facilities and a crèche. Its situation in an entirely urban context is unique and its focus on serving local people is central. In Wales its scale of operation would merit designation as a 'national' facility.

Implications

The Centre provides a major confirmation of the ability of local people to conceive, develop and manage a major leisure and training complex. It demonstrates a commitment of local people to intervening in their circumstance to produce positive change. The project also demonstrated what could be achieved when central and local government supports local partnerships and delivers funding to the local level. It displays a huge confidence in local delivery by all levels of government and ensures that developments arise genuinely from community interests and concerns.

Ballyfermot Social Intervention Initiative

Arising from the same social circumstances that prompted the development of the Equine Centre, the Ballyfermot Social Intervention Initiative is trying to change the behavioural patterns of families with anti-social young members. In particular, it targets families at risk of eviction as a consequence of the behaviour of one or more of the children. The intervention is based on the view that the self-esteem of the mother determines outcomes for the family in terms of their social integration. The project works directly with mothers on a one-to-one basis and provides a wide range of support services in partnership with other agencies in the community. The principal aim is to develop effective communication within the family to overcome the barriers to self-reflection and behavioural improvement on the part of the children. It currently only works with 12 mothers but supports a wider group of women who are engaged with the programme. The programme seeks to intervene actively to promote change and works with:

- Parents
- Young People involved in offending behaviour
- Siblings

The intention is turn their behaviour from a path that conventionally ends in drug misuse and crime.

Implications

The programme demonstrates that behavioural changes in a small number of families can promote significant benefit for the community as a whole. The approach considers the right of communities to be free from anti-social behaviour but also avoids 'knee-jerk' reactions to offenders. It recognises that their behaviour is rooted in social exclusion and that appropriate intervention can remedy the situation. It also points to the need for and justification of intensive working to support more extensive community regeneration. It recognises that some families will require long-term, personal support of all family members. The programme is currently being evaluated and should provide evidence of good practice, which could be of considerable benefit to many communities in Wales.

The Bungalow, Cherry Orchard

The Bungalow is a small outreach member group of the Ballyfermot Partnership operating in Cherry Orchard, which is the most recent housing development area within Ballyfermot. Started by local nuns approximately 8 years ago it commenced life in a two-bedroom bungalow. Despite some minor building extensions it has maintained the intimacy and supportive environment of a very community-based initiative. It provides adult education, personal development and training in a wide range of subjects, from IT to flower arranging. The emphasis is in craft skills as a means to improve confidence and self-esteem. Many of the community workers in the Ballyfermot Partnership had commenced their training in the Bungalow. The presence of a large number of community members in the meeting with the Assembly party demonstrated the success of the unit in engaging with local people and raising their capacity to participate in a range of community activities. The community members were confident and articulate and gave an excellent account of the impact of the project at their individual level. They describes a proactive approach in which they established contact with community members and new arrivals and supported them in attending at the Bungalow, if necessary by calling for them and walking with them to the facility. They experienced more difficulty in attracting men to the education and training on offer.

Implications

Whilst the religious basis of the organisation gave it some entry point into a community where religion is still significant, the model of capacity development the Bungalow provides has a very high relevance to the Welsh context. The development of community initiatives in small, intimate premises has been noted elsewhere in the review process (e.g. The Mount Project, Milford Haven). The shared experience of starting and developing a project from very minor beginnings is an important element of community development. It enables a local commitment to be forged often in the face of difficulties and problems in getting something off the ground. In contrast the provision of spacious and modern accommodation at the start of community projects has often failed in Wales (e.g. SDS built community centres in the 1990s). The likely factor for success is that such small projects provide a low threshold for participants to overcome in order to enable their involvement. It also enables supportive friendship and peer

groups to develop. Additionally, the pattern of training enables small steps to be taken at a pace determined by the individual. Thus no major confidence barriers are experienced to deter would-be learners and volunteers. These factors lie at the heart of successful capacity development and the Bungalow is an ideal example which can inform the development of community capacity building in the Capacity Development Plans established by Communities First Partnerships.

Ballyfermot Local Employment Service

The service provides a range of support mechanism specifically targeted at the long-term unemployed and what are conventionally seen as difficult to reach groups such as substance misusers. Although working closely with the mainstream employment services it is a programme delivered and managed by the Ballyfermot Partnership. It recognises the need for local interventions that tackle issues in the community. The programme employs 10 staff many of them drawn from the local community. In the period 1998-2000 401 clients were progressed into employment, 281 into full-time jobs. There were 504 training progressions in the same period. In one initiative 100, long-term unemployed were recruited to a work experience programme. The Service provides support for a range of problems including substance misuse and learning difficulties. In this way it works with the most difficult social groups. The programme recognises that despite the extensive employment opportunities in the Dublin area there is a core of people with major difficulties that prevent them finding employment. It seeks to overcome those difficulties by intervention primarily at the individual level.

Implications

The Ballyfermot Local Employment Service provides further illustration of the value of local delivery of services to meet local need. Although part-funded by FAS, the national employment service, it works independently of it with a local agenda. It is able to tailor solutions to locally identified needs and provide a supportive framework for its clients, which is underpinned by other agencies in the locality. Its integration into a pattern of local delivery ensures that a holistic service is available to its clients that could not be provided by a nationally organised service. However, it works in close partnership with the national agency and addresses nationally determined policy objectives.

The Markewiez Community Centre

The Centre delivers the objectives of the Partnership to a high density housing area of Ballyfermot where high levels of lone parenting are evident. It provides a range of training opportunities supported by a high quality crèche facility. The Centre has a prominent position in a local shopping centre and has recently undergone major renovation. The crèche facility provides subsidised places for children of people in training, employment or education. Funding for the subsidy is derived from a number of sources at national and local level.

Implications

The provision of excellent child-care facilities at this centre, and almost every other project visited, underpins the central belief of the Partnership that all community regeneration and capacity development activities have to be underpinned by affordable child-care. No project goes ahead without addressing this issue. The ability of parents to be secure about the care of their children removes a critical barrier to engagement, especially by lone parents who are one of the most critical groups to involve in capacity development. The absence of child-care in the majority of Welsh communities presents a major hindrance to the success of community regeneration and associated capacity development activities. An essential lesson to be learned from this visit is that capacity development plans in Communities First neighbourhoods must be underpinned by adequate provision of child-care facilities as an integral component of the capacity development activities.

Summary

The visit to Ballyfermot provided an opportunity to review a community regeneration process which shares many of the objectives and methods with partnerships in Wales. It provided illustration of common problems and shared solutions. However, it also provided a learning opportunity to examine a different policy framework and different working relationships within the partnership at national, regional and local level. It was a context in which the process was maturing over an extended period and provided insight into where some of our most disadvantaged communities might be in five years time. It demonstrated most clearly what was possible, where local determined objectives are supported by a wide range of public agencies. The physical and social improvement in the area was clear from my previous visit (2 years ago) and the confidence and buoyancy of the local community was self-evident. The success in economic terms may owe much to the wider success of the Irish economy. However, it was clear from many of the projects visited that it was local interventions which enable highly marginalised and socially excluded communities in Ballyfermot to participate in that wider economic growth.

Professor Adamson

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