

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

SJR (2)-11-06 (p.7) Annex A

Emergent Findings from the Evaluation of Communities First

Cambridge Policy Consultants

The evaluators believe that the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has taken the right direction by prioritising an investment in capacity building as a necessary pre-condition for regeneration. Some partnerships are working and others are developing into functioning partnerships. Considerable political courage has been shown in holding the line on this in the face of the inevitable calls for "quick wins" at a local level.

However, WAG has found it difficult to communicate this vision to all stakeholders, especially in the crucial early stages of the programme. While many endorsed the principles of the programme, few could describe how this process could be put in place in practice because the stock of knowledge of how to address these practical issues was limited to a few experienced development workers.

The evaluators believe that Communities First has been permissive with the WAG giving flexibility to construct local solutions in delivery and this has brought significant learning about what is working and what is not for the WAG and partners. The decision by the WAG not to drive the programme centrally has been the right one. It is to the credit of programme managers that they have largely resisted the inevitable pulls toward centralized control. It is our view that this is a strength of the programme that must be maintained.

The evaluators believe that the WAG, after a difficult start, has managed to create a structure and framework with guidance through which partnerships could achieve community engagement and a platform from which now they will be able to engage with partners. Not all of the partnerships are there yet, however most of them should be able to get there.

An example of where programme bending has worked is the significant police engagement with Communities First at a local level. This is because of the national policy of increasing community policing in local communities and the willingness of the police to pilot new ways of working in Communities First areas.

There is also evidence that the sheer weight of youth focused projects is having an effect on the totality of mainstream provision – even if it is not directly re-profiling mainstream provision.

However, there has been no evidence so far of the long term sustainable mainstream programme bending that would lead to service provision in deprived areas being more effective.

There were a number of decisions that meant that the central core team in the WAG was inadequately and insufficiently staffed in the first three and a half years of the programme (April 2001 to September 2004). Despite the lessons from the Interim Evaluation of People in Communities (The National Assembly for Wales, Housing Research Report HRR 3/01, October 2001), the key decision taken was to go with the 100 most deprived wards according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation when there was not enough staff in post or sufficient recognition that there would be a steep learning curve. What the core team was able to deliver fell well short of the practical guidance many of the people who were involved needed. The local implementation teams were overworked, and had been able to give insufficient time to engaging directly with local partnership co-ordinators.

The way in which the WAG administration and indirectly the Minister have engaged with the action research process has been exemplary. This has allowed evaluation evidence of the impact of these shortcomings to feed directly into action for change, and has cut through the time lags that are normally associated with such processes. Swift action has been taken in response to deficiencies identified. Although these will take some time to impact, there is strong evidence of the ability of the WAG to learn and adapt.

It was not always the case that employers knew what the job entailed and so were unable to recruit suitably qualified staff. The co-ordinator role can be a difficult, stressful job and requires a wide variety of skills, such as management and mediation, to undertake the role effectively. It was important to have a competent Grant Recipient Body to help with managing the staff and the payroll and the Communities First budget. These three factors have contributed to quite high levels of staff turnover in some counties and some partnerships, particularly in the early days. Nevertheless, the majority of coordinators have stayed and developed the range and depth of their skills, becoming quite adept at fulfilling the coordinator role.

While many staff and organisations employing the staff have had to learn ‘on the job’, there were few practical alternatives to this approach: the scale of the programme outstripped the available pool of experience community development workers and there were very few courses giving a comprehensive package of the appropriate skills or bodies communicating and coordinating the required provision.

Nearly all partnerships have established a partnership. Among those that have, there is strong evidence that partnerships are developing at different speeds. Using a local government partnership health check, the ‘Smarter Partnerships’ tool, for the case study areas, for which a 100% score represents a fully functioning partnership, the average score was 58%, with four over 90% and a third below 50%.

Most of those partnerships that would now ‘qualify’ as fully functioning partnerships have taken a year to three years to get there. In the third round of case studies, we found that a higher proportion of the areas we visited than in previous years were on the cusp of maturity, with some having gone through an organic development process and others having been stimulated by a catalytic event or process. Revisiting the case studies assessed in the two earlier rounds showed that they had all made some progress, in some areas it has been considerable.

There is considerable evidence that the majority of partnerships have successfully developed small and large community-led projects across all dimensions of the Communities First Vision Framework (health and well being, environment, learning for growth, jobs and business, community safety and active community).

The Communities First Trust Fund has been hugely successful, despite some early administrative difficulties that have subsequently been addressed. However, there was a lot of criticism of Communities First Support Network. The voluntary organisations in the consortium were perceived as not accessible or providing specialist services when partnerships were looking for generic support for partnership development. This has been restructured following internal action research based on evaluation evidence, to provide more generic support and also to fund generic support workers between the WAG implementation teams and local partnerships. Similar concerns were expressed about the support from national organisations and their role in Communities First is currently under review.

Since the WAG has strengthened the support resources, both increasing the number and expertise of internal staff and restructuring CFSN, there has been a significant improvement in direct engagement with coordinators.

17. There is strong evidence of partnerships where conflict has impeded progress. There have been examples in all types of Communities First areas, however it has been more pronounced in Imaginative Proposal areas that are attempting to work with a number of different communities.

18. The 2006 guidance (currently in process) has drawn extensively on the findings of the evaluation and the outcomes of the action research process. We think this will provide a good foundation for the future development of the programme. It has the greater detail, together with examples, that individuals and organisations had requested. Furthermore, it addresses a number of issues that are currently blocking some partnerships' development.

19. After the announcement of Communities First, there was misinformation and misunderstanding about what Communities First was. Because of the innovative approach adopted, there was also limited expertise on which to build Communities First and to be able to respond to problems and issues as they emerged. These contributed to the slow and in many areas painful development over the first few years of Communities First. The Communities First Unit in the WAG, coordinators and local partnerships have developed organically by facing the challenges of Communities First and come out of the five years stronger and better placed to move forward. This is also true for several local authorities. The WAG has resisted the temptation to intervene and has retained its commitment to the original basic principles of Communities First.

20. That said, Communities First is still a long way away from producing the regeneration outcomes that were and still are its main aim. Nearly all areas have an established partnership, many of these are fully functional but there are a significant number who are not. There remain challenges for the future, key among which are community engagement and programme bending.