

Ymchwiliad i dlodi yng Nghymru: Cymunedau yn Gyntaf – yr hyn a ddysgwyd

Inquiry into poverty in Wales: Communities First – lessons learnt

Ymateb gan: Dr Eva Elliott

Response from: Dr Eva Elliott

1. I am a Senior Lecturer and researcher based in the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD)¹ at Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. I have worked in the field of health inequalities and, in terms of interventions, the relationship between health and regeneration for many years. This includes the evaluations of the Big Lottery Fund's Health Living Centre programme (UK wide) and the Communities Food Co-op pilot. I have also been involved in systematic reviews in related fields. One on interventions of *resilience*, coping and salutogenic interventions in relation to health outcomes² and another reviewing theories and interventions related to strengthening communities.³ Inevitably therefore, in my research and evaluation activities, I have had contact with (and often worked alongside) people living and working in Communities First areas.
2. I am also the Wales representative on the Board of Trustees of the People's Health Trust (PHT)⁴ which, in the last five years, has invested over £80 million in grants to support, resident-focused approaches, as a means of addressing the underlying structural causes of health inequalities. The emphasis is on the collective control of neighbourhoods (and in some cases communities of interest) to make change. Of the three programmes PHT hosts Local Conversations is probably the most relevant to this enquiry. Local Conversations is a flexible funding model which is led by what local people in terms of the priorities they develop and 23 have been funded to date, four in Wales. They have a defined population of around 4,000 people and fall within the 0%-30% of English, Scottish or Welsh Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The Local Conversations programme is currently being evaluated by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and I sit on PHT's evaluation committee.
3. As an academic member of staff at Cardiff University I am currently involved in two major Research Council funded projects which are working in partnership with two Communities First areas (North Merthyr Tydfil and Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown)⁵ ⁶and lead one of five flagship engagement projects in Cardiff University (Strong Communities, Healthier People – SCHeP⁷) which works with these and with ACE who deliver Communities First activities in Caerau and Ely. These Communities First clusters have the particular characteristic in the programme of being delivered by *community anchor organisations* that have a

² <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph6/documents/behaviour-change-review-on-resilience-coping-and-salutogenic-approaches-to-health2>

³ <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/connected-communities/a-review-of-theories-concepts-and-interventions-relating-to-community-level-strengths-and-their-impact-on-health-and-well-being/>

⁴ <https://www.peopleshealthtrust.org.uk/>

⁵ <http://representingcommunities.co.uk/>

⁶ <http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk/>

⁷ <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/strong-communities-healthier-people>

community profile and relationship above and beyond the programme itself. My particular interest therefore is in the value of these organisations in supporting the implementation of anti-poverty programmes.

4. In relation to the terms of reference I will focus on what worked and what didn't work but refer to the other two where relevant.

What has worked

5. What has been particularly valuable in the Communities First programme as a whole has been the development and deployment of community development approaches in building the confidence and skills of people over time to support their families, seek more formal educational opportunities, enter into employment and contribute to developments that improve living conditions for local people as a whole. Although health and wellbeing activities have also been developed, the learning and prosperous themes have also had an important impact on health as they are key determinants of health inequalities. Community development workers have been bridge builders in that they have enabled people to connect to each other and to other organisations.
6. Community anchor organisations have created a local base through which those community development skills can be embedded, focused and developed. They have been key to the development of wider local infrastructures that are locally rooted. They sit at the centre of elaborate networks that encompass different 3rd sector organisations, statutory providers and services, academic researchers, community groups and other people living in the local community. The Communities First programme has benefitted from these organisations and those occupying senior roles have become expert mediators of government anti-poverty programmes, local stakeholder organisations and communities.
7. Community anchor organisations have a presence and identity independent of government programmes. It is because the community organisations are known and trusted that Communities First activities have been taken up by local people. They also know how to develop activities and interventions that best meet the needs of communities and particular individuals. This also has provided positive opportunities, for instance, for rethinking how the physical assets in communities can be utilised in a way that is rooted in a sense of ownership and accessibility for local people. This is not a Communities First objective as such but demonstrates an important impact and resource that can emerge from the interaction with community anchor organisations.
8. The community anchor organisations have accumulated many years' experience of how Communities First activities (and other government programmes such as Communities for Work, Lift, Flying Start etc.) might be delivered in ways that are acceptable, appropriate and effective in relation to the local context. Another reason why local people have made use of Communities First activities in places where community anchor organisations deliver activities is because they can

access them in spaces where there are people they trust and where they feel safe. Note, for instance, a digital story told by two women talking about the 3Gs in North Merthyr Tydfil.⁸ With loneliness and isolation increasing being highlighted as a public health issue the resources and skills that community anchor organisations can contribute are key.

9. Community anchor organisations, throughout the Communities First programme, have played an important role in supporting people through times of increasing financial hardship and economic and social uncertainty and insecurity. At an individual level, changes to welfare provision have been experienced as judgemental and with rules and requirements that are difficult to understand and navigate. In the context of developing skills and opportunities for work the community-based support structures these organisations offer have provided non-judgemental spaces for people to look for jobs, develop their CVs and skills, and seek help with IT. In particular, job clubs have been a source of support to the people we interviewed as part of Representing Communities in North Merthyr Tydfil, who told us that they felt they could 'be themselves' and ask for help without feeling ashamed.
10. Because of their long established links into the communities, and with other partners, community anchor organisations have also been able to innovate. An example is a project focussing on working age men which has brought not only skills, structure, social connections, jobs and joy to the men involved, but has had wider impacts on their families and the community itself. They pride themselves on keeping the neighbourhood free of the litter (discarded needles and nappies) that blight many areas, tend an allotment and have plans for developing a local plot of land for community benefit. They have also led the development of history and heritage trails locally, with communities in Cardiff and along the Taff Trail between Cardiff and Merthyr. The latter has drawn in the support of history and heritage organisations as part of the Welsh Government's Fusion Programme aimed at addressing poverty and social injustice in ten Communities First 'pioneer areas' across Wales. All this would not have been possible without the Communities First community development worker who keeps the group together, motivated and resourced.
11. A similar example of an organisation that has made the most of innovative possibilities is the Forsythia Youth Centre, whose dedicated team are led by a truly inspirational youth leader. This provides a vibrant, creative and safe space for young people to find and develop their own talents through a varied programme of activities. Many of these activities have been developed through the partnerships that have developed. Young people at the youth club have won awards for films they have made with other artists, led campaigns on issues such as legal highs, and won recognition from the Welsh Assembly and from other European countries for the work that they do on a variety of health and social

⁸ <https://vimeo.com/130736601>

issues. Recently, with support from Cardiff University and Citizens Cymru and a group of young people from the centre, with some pupils from Bishop Hedley school won prizes of £500 (High Sheriff of Mid Glamorgan) £1K (National Crimebeat first prize⁹) for their contribution to their community. For this they successfully negotiated a number of environmental improvements with local authority planners to ensure that local people feel safe walking through the local area. This would not have been possible without the community organisation and the Communities First programme that has supported the funding of staff in this organisation. I am aware that there are similar examples of innovative approaches to skills development elsewhere. These often have a multiplicity of impacts at both the individual and community level.

12. Recognition of the value of community anchor organisations, and the people who have worked within them, should be key to thinking about the organisational support for projects after June 2017. They have the potential to support and sustain projects as well as adapt them over time as circumstances change. The phasing out of Communities First risks losing the valuable community development skills in Wales that have built over time. Decisions post funding needs to harness and consolidate those skills. Many of the front line community development workers in these organisations are also in a good position to recognise, harness and develop ideas and innovations to improve neighbourhoods that come from community members themselves. They are part of the delicate systems of resilience which Welsh Government are keen to build through the integration of public services in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. The danger is that they will have to start all over again to build 'empowerment' with whatever replaces the programme. It takes many years to build these relationships and it requires very particular skills to develop the knowledge about what works in the local context.

What has not worked

13. It is quite likely that there are many things that have not worked in the Communities First programme and it is not disputed that the programme as a whole has failed in addressing poverty in Wales. In this document I will only comment on the dimensions that I have observed in the context of CF areas where community anchor organisations have delivered activities locally. I will focus on the expectations, demands of, and untapped possibilities of learning from, the programme.
14. Particularly in the final phase what appears to have happened is that the responsibility, as well as the risks associated with delivering the programme, have been downloaded to the most local scales of governance (see research conducted by Pill, M. & Guarneros-Meza V, 2017¹⁰). The initial idea of the

⁹ <http://www.merthyr.gov.uk/news-events/latest-news/young-people-from-merthyr-win-first-prize-at-2017-uk-national-crime-beat-awards/?lang=en-GB&>

¹⁰ <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/pap/pre-prints/content-pppolicypold1600024r3> (accessed 12 05 2017)

programme appeared to indicate more of a vertical synchronisation and harmonisation of objectives. However, in the final phase, the focus appeared to be on the outcomes achieved by Communities First clusters and not the outcomes of the programme as it worked as a whole.

15. Evaluation is key to understanding how programmes work, for whom and under what circumstances. Whilst there have been many evaluations it has not been clear how these have been used as a form of knowledge exchange for community organisations, lead delivery bodies, wider stakeholder partners and Welsh Government. The excessive demands created by monitoring has resulted, to a large extent, in the more complex changes for local people over time becoming invisible. The opportunities for understanding the mechanisms of change (and how processes on the ground lead to particular outcomes) have been underutilised as a basis for adapting the programme over time. The Communities First programme, as with any major community based programme, created different stories of change across Wales and it is a shame that many of these will be lost.
16. Community anchor organisations themselves have been left vulnerable. In supporting government programmes there should have been better efforts to ensure that these organisations had the people and processes in place to sustain the organisations themselves. Whilst some will have business plans that will enable them to weather this particular storm, others may find it difficult to continue. This will mean that an asset will have been lost to local and national government as well as local communities, where the negative impacts could be felt for years to come.
17. It is clearly irresponsible of governments to invest in programmes that do not work. Many people working in local Communities First projects were aware that the programme could be phased out or changed. They are a workforce that has become used to uncertainty. However, the processes of disinvestment are as important as the implementation of programmes. The fact that this consultation is happening is to be welcomed but the way in which the phasing out of Communities First was announced and delivered has not only created stress for the workforce (similar to the impact of anticipation of major job losses in other sectors¹¹) but many highly skilled staff have already sought new employment. This means that a planned phasing out, with the protection of skills and successful projects, will be a challenge as projects that 'have worked' are already ending.

¹¹ See chapter 3 of a review of the health impact of economic downturns
<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/Documents/522/wp134.pdf>