

Community Action

How can the Council best support residents to run services in their own communities?



The Building Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Inquiry Panel
City and County of Swansea - Dinas a Sir Abertawe



August 2016

Why This Matters



Foreword by **Councillor Terry Hennegan** (Convener)

The Council is facing significant budget cuts which mean that we need to take a radical look at the way things are done. This includes what services and assets we continue to manage and which we are unable to support. The Council's Sustainable Swansea – Fit for the Future Strategy is about transforming Council services, ensuring the financial viability of the Council, and improving outcomes for residents. This means finding new models of service delivery which are sustainable. Within this aim, Community Action and the relationship between residents and public services has been the focus of our scrutiny inquiry.

I firmly believe that a community can only be sustainable if all its members have an equal opportunity to participate fully in the life of that community.

Community Action is about placing more say and control in the hands of local communities to meet their needs, wants and expectations so they are more self-sufficient. To this end the Council has embarked on a journey to work with the voluntary, community, public and private sector in Swansea and the wider region to promote Community Action, build capacity and develop projects for communities to run services or manage assets.

We understand that the Council is at the beginning of that Community Action journey and we have welcomed the opportunity to be involved in developing the way forward through this report. We are pleased to see the progress made particularly around sports and leisure services. Our report draws a number of conclusions and makes recommendations focused on how the Council can best support residents to run services in their own communities. Many of these have a particular emphasis on communicating and working closely with residents, community groups and our third sector partners.

We need to be better at communicating and working with communities as well as at collaborating with our partners in the third sector to ensure that services continue and are of good quality. We recognise that Swansea Council for Voluntary Service is one of our key strategic partners and has an important role in preparing and supporting community groups and volunteers to take on more responsible roles within our communities.

We would like to thank all those people who have contributed to this inquiry including Councillors, Officers and those from community centres who attended a focus group along with all the survey respondents who took the time to complete our questionnaire.

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

How can the Council best support residents to run services in their own communities?

The panel believe this can be done by

1. Raising the profile of volunteers and community groups so that they feel more valued.
2. Ensuring that information and advice for potential applicants is readily available and easy to access.
3. Improving communication around Community Action projects and the Transformation Fund.
4. Supporting groups and volunteers to access learning and development opportunities.
5. Addressing barriers for groups who apply for Community Action projects.
6. Generating interest, commitment and involvement in volunteering.
7. Improving the sustainability of community groups by developing opportunities for networking and sharing of skills.

Recommendations for Cabinet

We recommend to Cabinet that the following recommendations are considered as part of the development of the third sector strategy and that these should be developed in conjunction with the Council's partners in the third sector in particular Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS):

1. Develop a communication plan which should include
 - a) Undertaking a campaign to promote the role of volunteers including celebrating and valuing the role and highlighting benefits of volunteering.
 - b) Publicity and promotion of successful Community Action projects more widely, using for example individual success stories.
 - c) Being clear about what assets and services are available for Community Action and communicating these proactively to communities and local councillors.
 - d) Holding an annual open day or community fayre for community facilities and community groups designed to improve communication, networking and to share information, good practice and training opportunities. This should include information and opportunities for Community Action.
2. Investigate the viability of having an annual Lord Mayor's Award for Community Work.

3. Ensure that the Third Sector Strategy includes an updated Compact agreement.
4. Undertake a mapping exercise to understand what advice, guidance and support is out there for community groups and volunteers across Swansea.
5. Conduct a piece of work that considers the information needs of Community Action applicants from the user perspective.
6. All information on Community Action, the Transformation Fund, training, advice and guidance for groups and volunteers is available from one place.
7. Involving SCVS in the option appraisal stage of future Commissioning Reviews, when appropriate.
8. Proactively link community groups, community councils and volunteers with the possibilities that are available for Community Action.
9. Encourage and support mixed economy applications (more than one organisations working together to make application for asset or service viable and accessible to smaller groups)
10. Develop peer to peer networks and mentoring programmes to help share expertise and support across community groups particularly around assisting new groups with their longer term sustainability.

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1 WHY WE PRODUCED THIS REPORT

Overview

1.1.1 This report focusses on the following question:

How can the Council best support residents to run services in their own communities?

Selecting the topic

1.1.2 The Inquiry into Building Sustainable Communities was proposed by the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference in May 2015 and was subsequently included in the scrutiny work programme by the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

1.1.3 This topic was chosen because:

- We need to build and support sustainable communities because this will result in better outcomes for people and reduce the cost of services
- Current models of service delivery are unsustainable and do not always provide the best outcomes for people
- Transformation of services is vital to meet the challenges of the future and this is made more urgent by the significant budget cuts we are facing.

The panel agreed to investigate the following aspects:

What does the Community Action strand mean in practice? What is the Community Action Strand and how does it help to Build Sustainable Communities?

What is the level of support? What level of support is provided?

How will transition work? How will the transition of services from the Council to communities actually work in practice and are the processes effective?

What finances are available? How will the transition and support be financed?

How are we working across the Council and other organisations? How do we/will we work across the Council and with others to deliver the Community Action schemes?

What are the views of Communities? How are we working with local communities to develop this strand?

Impact so far? What has been the impact of Community Action schemes to date?

What does Good Practice look like? Look at successful and unsuccessful Community Action schemes and good practice here and elsewhere

How can Sustainability be ensured? How do we/will we ensure continuity of the service provision?

The context of the inquiry

1.1.4 Community Action is about recognising that the Council needs let go of some of their responsibilities and devolve them to those local communities who want to take ownership of certain services.

- 1.1.5 The Council needs to build and support sustainable communities because it will result in better outcomes for people and reduce the cost of services. Current models of service delivery are unsustainable and are not always providing the best outcomes for people. Community Action is specific to delivering the Sustainable Swansea work for new models of delivery, as a means of sustaining present services despite financial reductions. Community Action relates specifically to current services the Council may no longer be able to provide.

Intended contribution

- 1.1.6 As a panel we believe that we can make a valuable contribution to this topic. We recognise that, while there are no easy answers, success will only come from a conversation that everyone is able to contribute to. It is in this spirit that our conclusions and recommendations are offered.

- 1.1.7 Specifically this report aims to contribute to this vital debate by:

- Drawing together some general principles for the development of Community Action and in building sustainable communities
- Offering proposals for improvement
- Providing a councillor perspective
- Pointing to good practice examples
- Sharing the views of different people involved

- 1.1.8 We are also happy to recognise the limitations of the inquiry. Given the complexity of the topic and the time that we had this report provides a broad view.

- 1.1.9 Finally, many of our conclusions are in line with the Council's current direction of travel and these are offered in order to provide reassurance. Others may be either additional or contrary to what has already been agreed. These are intended to offer challenge and to stimulate debate. Where we have made recommendations these are intended to help improve the service.

Use of key terms

- 1.1.10 There have been a number technical terms and acronyms used when looking at this subject. In the report we have tried to write for the layperson and have avoided acronyms whenever possible. There are, however, a few terms that we use throughout the report that should be clarified from the outset.

- *Community Action*: Council letting go of some of their responsibilities and offering them to those local communities who want to take on ownership of certain services.
- *Community Transformation Fund*: a fund available to community groups to help develop proposals to run Council services locally and/or to transfer community assets.
- *Commissioning Review*: reviewing the options for future service delivery
- *Community Asset Transfer*: when a public sector body, usually a Local Authority, passes on the management and/or ownership of a facility to a community group.

2 EVIDENCE

Evidence collected

2.1.1 Evidence was collected between January and June 2016. The evidence gathering activities undertaken included:

- a. Overview of Community Action
- b. Survey of public, councillors, community councillors and other organisations
- c. Overview of Transformation Fund
- d. Discussion with Head of Legal and Democratic Services
- e. Session with representatives of Community Centres in Swansea
- f. Two sessions with different people working within communities including SCVS, Communities First, Housing Tenancy, Community Connectors
- g. Session with Cabinet Member and Head of Service/lead for the Building Sustainable Communities Corporate Objective.
- h. The revised structure and delivery model for Communities First
- i. How Community Action fits with the reducing poverty agenda
- j. Meeting with Swansea Council for Voluntary Service
- k. Desk based research giving good practice examples

2.1.2 For full details of the evidence gathered including details of all of the findings from each session please see the evidence pack for this inquiry. This can be downloaded at www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutinypublications

3 CONCLUSIONS

This report considers how the Council can best support residents to run services in their own communities. Each of these conclusions, therefore, is a suggestion about how the Council's Cabinet might approach this problem. Specific proposals are identified throughout and listed separately in the recommendations section that follows.

We recognise that the many organisations that run groups and assets across Swansea are independent from Council control. There are, however, a number of ways that Cabinet can influence the work of these voluntary bodies such as through information, advice and training.

We believe that the Council can best support resident to run services in their own communities by:

3.1 *Raising the profile of volunteers and community groups so that they feel more valued*

- 3.1.1 There was a consistent message from our evidence gathering that many community volunteers and community groups do not feel valued either by their communities or by the Council.
- 3.1.2 The inquiry consultation included a survey of community groups, charities, councillors and community councils, along with a focus group with Community Centre representatives. It told us that some feel it is difficult for volunteers to cope with all of the things that they are being asked to do and that new responsibilities are being placed on them all of the time. Some of those consulted did say, particularly in the context of increased responsibilities in recent years, *why would anyone want to do it?*
- 3.1.3 Community Centre representatives, at a focus group with panel members, were asked about how we can improve the numbers of people volunteering. They said some of the ways to do this is by:
 - Annual showcasing of good work
 - Media stories and raising profile of work of volunteers
 - Improving appreciation of what volunteers do, make those volunteering feel valued by the Council and local communities
 - Recognition is important and goes a long way to motivating people
- 3.1.4 The Chief Executive for Swansea Council for Voluntary Service said that *the Council must show a strategic lead and that it values its third sector.*
- 3.1.5 We believe that recognition for the work of volunteers is important not just because this is the right thing to do but also because it provides encouragement and it lets them know that they have the support and backing of the Council and the wider community.
- 3.1.6 For this reason alone we felt that we should be publicly praising the work of volunteers and the vital difference they make to their communities. As a panel

we certainly want to record our thanks and admiration to community groups and volunteers who are working hard in our communities.

- 3.1.7 We will propose that Cabinet considers what extra steps might be taken to recognise the good work being done by volunteers and community groups. This might be through a media campaign or an award scheme of some kind. We recognise that this does not necessarily have to be done by the Council but rather by SCVS who are working with volunteers and community groups on a daily basis.

We therefore recommend to Cabinet that:

- R1 A communication plan is developed that will include:
- a. Undertaking a campaign to promote the role of volunteers including celebrating and valuing the role and highlighting the benefits of volunteering;
 - b. Publicising and promotion of successful Community Action projects more widely using individual success stories
- R2 We will also ask Cabinet to look at the viability of recognising the work of volunteers by having an annual Lord Mayors Award for community work.
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3.2 *Ensuring that information and advice for potential applicants is readily available and easy to access*

- 3.2.1 Communities and applicants are not always clear at the outset of an application what they want and what they can offer in relation to Community Action. It is essential that they are fully advised at this point, that clear information is available and easily accessed.
- 3.2.2 We identified that potential and current volunteers and community groups find information on community action and volunteering from a number of places, including from the Councils website and SCVS. We felt that it would be beneficial to have all the information available in one place even if the services provided are across different organisations.
- 3.2.3 We consider it essential to have a clear picture of what training, advice and guidance is out there for volunteers and community groups, including who provides what, recognising that a large number of groups exist that may not have contact with the Council or our partners but provide vital support in communities. We believe that the better the information we have the better the reach into communities will be. We would therefore like to see a mapping exercise carried out across the whole sector in Swansea to identify what community groups and services exist (we recognise that this can only be a snapshot but feel it would be beneficial when communicating and developing Community Action projects moving forward).
- 3.2.4 We are pleased that a protocol for Community Asset Transfer has been written and believe it will be extremely useful for both councillors and their communities. We found the Community Action and Transformation Fund

process to be complex and agree they should be simplified wherever possible especially in relation to smaller applications.

- 3.2.5 We would like to see a piece of work conducted that properly considers the information needs of Community Action applicants from a 'user perspective'. This would help the Council and our partners to understand the issues from the applicant's viewpoint and enable processes to be put in place that reflect their needs rather than imposing what the Council thinks they might need when using the Community Action process.
- 3.2.6 Finance, management, organisational skills and communication are seen as key by survey respondents when asked *what would help run and sustain community groups*. We therefore feel that information, advice and training on these areas need to be easily understood and readily available.

We therefore recommend that:

- R3 Ensure that the Third Sector Strategy includes an up dated Compact agreement.
- R4 A mapping exercise is undertaken to help us understand what guidance and support is out there for community groups and volunteers across Swansea.
- R5 A piece of work is conducted that considers the information needs of Community Action applicants from the user perspective.
- R6 All information on Community Action, the Transformation Fund, training, advice and guidance for groups and volunteers is available from one place.
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3.3 *Improving communication around Community Action projects and the Transformation Fund*

- 3.3.1 A popular response in the survey when respondents were asked about *how people can be helped to get involved in running a service or asset* was overwhelming 'publicity' letting people know what is going on and how they can get involved.
- 3.3.2 Survey respondents said the following when asked how the Council could help them to promote, increase and sustain services in their community work
- With the ward councillors and any current residents groups, work closely with the media. Listen to residents and take their concerns seriously.
 - Direct mailing, discussion forum, ongoing training and mentoring facilities
 - Hold open days, highlight where good things are happening
 - Education, information, training support.
 - Financial management guidance
 - Have a community hub
 - Marketing on the Council's website and community new letters
 - Advertise widely and use the Council's experience and contacts
 - Be clear and consistent about what the Council 'can' and 'cannot do'. Be much better at listening to communities and ward councillors
 - Partnership, events and social media

- 3.3.3 SCVS said that they are aware of asset transfer and the Transformation fund but have not been involved in it. We recognise that they do not need to be involved in the actual asset transfer process but it is important that they are kept informed and are linked to what is happening in order to help identify possible applicants, train and develop those making applications as well as helping to support and advise on issues like funding and longer term sustainability.
- 3.3.4 An equally important aspect is the involvement and inclusion of local ward Councillors in the process of Community Action especially when looking to communicate and reach out to communities. Councillors are in a good position to assist both community groups and the Council having a key role in signposting potential applicants.

'Important to be on the ground and developing what is needed inside communities, huge benefits to groups developing in the community and keeping it local. People in the community know what they want and what they need day to day.'

Local Area Co-ordinator

- 3.3.5 Front line staff working in communities (for example Communities First, Local Area Co-ordinators, Tenant Support Officers) should be informed of and understand Community Action so that they can signpost people as well as being able to inform individuals of what might be happening in their communities if they are asked.
- 3.3.6 We also highlighted the role of community councils in Community Action. They are already involved in many Community Action projects and may be in a good position to take forward further possibilities.

'Following the asset transfer of Graig Y Coed, the Community Council will run all the services in the ward. This including recreation grounds, tennis courts, bowls pavilion, football field and playgrounds. All these facilities are provided for individual and clubs within the area and the Community Council works in partnership in order to ensure as many people can enjoy sport and participate in activities.'

'Our services at Ty Croeso have won an award for service to the community from the Community Council. Although none of our activities are large, they receive strong praise from those who come: Swansea Foodbank, Welsh Learners Group, book club, bereavement support group.'

'De La Beche Association who have raised funding to refurbish Uplands market'.

'COBRA Bonymaen, Community House run by the community for the community: Credit Union, breakfast club, teenage club, over 50's and advice service.'

'If the Council wishes to transfer assets to groups within communities it must ensure that there are sufficient funds available to encourage interested parties and furthermore it should ensure that the transfer is done effectively and efficiently at no cost to the recipients.'

Survey respondents

- 3.3.7 Evidence suggests that communication is central to improving the understanding and reach of Community Action. We would like to see a

communication plan for all aspects of Community Action to include not only how we communicate with community groups and our partners like SCVS, but also internally across the Council.

- 3.3.8 There must be a co-ordinated approach to developing Community Action and its projects and this includes connecting more closely across Council departments especially those who are currently working with potential assets or services that may be considered for Community Action. One important way of doing this will be through the Council's Commissioning Reviews (each part of the Council will carry out a Commissioning Review over coming years and will identify potential areas for Community Action). Communicating these potential opportunities for Community Action out to communities and groups will be the vital next step. It will be important at this point to work with our partners, Councillors and existing networks to reach out to local people and groups. Whether this is SCVS, Council services or initiatives like Communities First; using all the avenues open to us to get the message out.
- 3.3.9 The next important step must then be how we support and assist applicants to make an application. This should include assessing their capacity to apply; given that they are often lay people who may not have detailed knowledge of what is involved in and the responsibilities of managing an asset or service. We need to help them assess their own capacity to take on an asset or service; identifying what knowledge or training gaps they may have and help them to address these.
- 3.3.10 We recognise the important role that SCVS has in developing and building capacity in communities and in communities groups through their different roles including training and development, advice on funding and guidance around setting up and sustaining a group. They also have a key role in developing the volunteering strategies in Swansea. SCVS said that they find some things that are done by community organisations are duplicated by the Council, particularly when organisations are funded to do things on its behalf, for example, the Council developing volunteering activities whilst funding SCVS to do the same.
- 3.3.11 The Council must work more closely with SCVS to ensure that both organisations are using all the resources available and to ensure effort is not being duplicated unnecessarily. The Council must use SCVS and their expertise and communication networks to get the message out to communities around Community Action projects and the Transformation Fund.
- 3.3.12 Community Action possibilities will be an important outcome of many of the Councils Commissioning Reviews where areas will be identified for potential asset and service transfer. We felt that it would be useful for SCVS to be involved in the Commissioning Reviews at the 'options appraisal stage'. Where they can give their experience on the potential for those asset transfer possibilities and help reach out and prepare community groups for these potential Community Action projects.
- 3.3.13 Representatives from Community Centres expressed their concerns about some aspects of Community Action and volunteering to us at a focus group. Particularly communities understanding that services are not all run by the

Council but some by volunteers. They felt that many people have an expectation that the Council run most services and that this will be a barrier which needs to be overcome before communities can understand they may need to take on some services or assets or lose them.

'Fear factor puts people off especially new volunteers. Taking the fear away so people feel confident and able to take on services, this includes providing back-up and support, will be vital to encouraging people to take on services and community assets.'
Community Centre representative

- 3.3.15 Community Centre representatives also felt that in some cases asset transfer has been seen as a threat rather than an opportunity. Some worry that their services will be taken over by someone else and then others are concerned about the level of service and the commitment provided if the Council are not involved. We would like to see better communication about what Community Action is and how it will affect those communities.

'Community centre volunteers give up their time for the benefit of the community but they also need support, they said they do not want to go it alone but wish to continue to be part of a bigger network with back up and support from the Council. They felt other Community Action applicants may feel this way.'
Community Centre volunteer

- 3.3.16 We would like to see successful applications publicised and celebrated and one way to do this is by using individual case stories. This will help to make it 'real' in communities who can then connect and understand what is involved in the process of Community Action and what a positive outcome can mean.

'Communities are beginning to realise that opportunities are there but we need to build on this with stronger communication.' **Cllr Mark Child, Cabinet Member**

- 3.3.17 We were keen to see the 'Compact Agreement' updated as part of the process of developing the new Third Sector Strategy. We recognise the importance of an agreement being in place for co-operation between our third sector partner SCVS, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board and the Council but also feel that this could potentially be extended further now that other organisations like community councils are running many of our services. This is only likely to increase given the current emphasis on Community Action and Asset Transfer.

- 3.3.18 Interestingly, results of our survey told us that 85% of the respondents understood the term Community Action and 42% had heard of the Transformation Fund, with 17% making an application to the fund. This indicates to us that the message is starting to get out for Community Action but there is less of an understanding of the role of the Transformation Fund.

We will therefore recommend that

R4 A communication plan is developed that will include:

- c) Being clear about what assets and services are available for Community Action and communicating these proactively to communities and local councillors;

- d) Hold an annual open day or fayre designed to improve networking and sharing of information. This should include information and opportunities for Community Action.
- R7 SCVS is involved in the options appraisal stage of the Council's commissioning reviews when possible assets/services are identified for Community Action.
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3.4 *Supporting groups and volunteers to access learning and development opportunities*

- 3.4.1 It is important to raise capacity in communities, to enable and encourage the development of skills and confidence to volunteer and therefore increasing our communities' potential to be involved in projects like Community Action.
- 3.4.2 We believe that, in order to be effective, volunteers involved in taking on an asset or service need to be trained, especially those who are responsible for managing it.

There are a number of essential skills that were identified by the survey respondents, some of these include:

- financial management and applying for funding
 - advertising and promoting service
 - business management skills
 - how to establish a community group
 - organisational and people skills
 - There were also a number of practical training needs highlighted including for example: health and safety, building management, digital skills and child safety.
- 3.4.3 It was also highlighted as part of the survey that it is not only the practical skills but certain personal attributes that are needed when being involved in the running of a service or asset. These include for example: listening and negotiation skills, empathy and compassion, patience and enthusiasm.
- 3.4.4 It is important that community groups have a business plan and that their income and expenditure is realistic. They must demonstrate they are a sound organisation that is able to take on and sustain a service and or asset in the longer term. Training and support in the aspects needed to manage an asset and run the service need to be available and easy to access.
- 3.4.5 The idea of mixed economy applications was raised (different organisations working together to make one application) and we were interested in the possibility of working with third sector partners to enable a more proactive approach to encourage this. The Director of SCVS said that there may need to be more mixed economy applications as smaller groups may not be able to take on an asset or service themselves fully but if they do it in combination with others it becomes more feasible.
- 3.4.6 We discussed whether we need to be more proactive in relation to Community Action more generally and felt that the Council could be more proactive in

targeting or approaching organisations who might be interested (with assistance from our third sector partner). Approaches could be made by asking questions like: Have you thought of this? Your organisation may be in a good position to consider this? Have you thought about doing this in conjunction with another organisation?

We will therefore recommend that

R8 We proactively link community groups, community councils and volunteers with those possibilities that are available for Community Action;

R9 Encourage and support mixed economy applications (more than one organisation working together to make application for viable)

3.5 Addressing barriers for groups who apply for Community Action projects

3.5.1 Some of the barriers and challenges experienced by communities when considering developing Community Action projects were identified in the our survey including:

- Lack of willingness to engage in active volunteering
- Belief that the Council are solely responsible
- General apathy and lack of local commitment
- Many community centres are run by aging volunteers and are struggling to survive due to the lack of younger people coming forward
- Residents often have little spare time to develop Community Action projects
- Transient student population in some areas so little commitment to community activity
- A parent child relationship between community and the Council
- Getting people who have the time, knowledge, capacity and commitment to run a service
- Finance is always going to be one of the major concerns, continually looking for funding, grants and sponsorship
- Finding people willing to take on the responsibility and who have the capability to develop the service
- Tackling the anxieties of local communities when taking on extra responsibilities
- Lack of will, community spirit, money, facilities and volunteers to take on what the Council wants to offload.
- Engagement and confidence of communities to get involved.

3.5.2 When asked in the survey *how the Council could help tackle the barriers faced*. Survey respondents said this can be done through training, advice, support particularly around legal, financial, health and safety, and promotion (particularly raising awareness, marketing, media).

3.5.3 We undertook a desk based research exercise where we looked at a series of good practice examples including community run services, social enterprise and community interest companies including:

The Muni Journey (Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Abercynon Paddling Pool (Rhondda Cynon Taf)
Cordale Housing Association (Scotland)
Community Volunteering in Alness, Ross-shire (Scotland)
Explore York Libraries and Archives
Harwich Connexions
Hammersmith and Fulham Membership Circle Social Enterprise

We concluded following this exercise that:

- Grants and funding have been crucial to all of the case studies mentioned in this report
- Partnership working is important to maintaining services. You can't do everything by yourself
- Volunteers are at the heart of running community services. Without them many of the examples outlined would not have got off the ground
- Building and maintaining relationships is integral when working together within a community/organisation to run a service
- All those involved in running the service need to have a shared vision/ aim
- Many of the authorities mentioned in this report have some kind of Community Action plan which empowers and supports communities and organisation and gives relevant information
- There is a lot of work involved in taking over a community service

3.5.4 We found that clear information needs to be available on what assets and services are available for transfer through Community Action. Members felt that *'we need to think about what we want from communities and then make that clear to them'*. A list of those assets and services available should be publicised clearly to communities, once they are identified as available for transfer rather than just a large list made available of all assets the Council owns (experienced by some panel members). Groups can then themselves explore and consider implications and the viability for them from what is available.

3.5.5 The Head of Poverty and Prevention said that *Community Action must be collective action across the whole Council*. We agreed with this and are pleased to see departments working together more closely in relation commissioning reviews and this cross department working should be used as an example for breaking down departmental silos. We did feel that working practices in many areas of the council still indicate that more improvement is needed to ensure cross departmental working and a seamless service to the public.

3.5.6 We would like to see the asset transfer process and applying for the Transformation Fund to be simplified; making it easier to access and understand. Council processes can be long and unwieldy; we need to change that culture being quicker and more responsive. We need to be less process heavy especially for smaller applications. We must do everything in our power to make the asset transfer process as straightforward and as smooth a process as possible.

3.5.7 We recognise that we are at the beginning of the Community Action journey and feel that the Council has made a positive start although we believe there does need to be more of a proactive push to move things forward.

3.5.8 Finance and access to sustainable funding was highlighted as a barrier. We recognise the importance role of SCVS in advising and assisting groups to apply for funding and in giving advice on sustainable funding sources.

3.6 Generating interest, commitment and involvement in volunteering

3.6.1 The main challenge or barrier to developing Community Action identified by survey respondents was a lack of volunteers and interest from the community including lack of longer term commitment. This issue also came through strongly in the evidence gathering; particularly the difficulty in the recruitment of volunteers; especially finding people who are willing to take on the responsibilities for running a service. Many people are willing to assist in a limited capacity but do not have the time or ability, for whatever reason, to commit to taking on the full responsibility of managing a service or asset.

'Need to have a core of people who have dedication and commitment to the centre or service in the longer term to ensure sustainability.'

'Many people are willing to be involved in the short term to run and be involved in groups but do not want or are unable to commit in longer term.'

'Often people do not want the full responsibility of taking on all that is involved in managing an asset/running a centre.'

'Time is a key element and barrier to taking on services, people have busy lives and do not or cannot commit enough time to be that involved.'

'Many of those running services/centres are elderly and as they are no longer able to do it there is no one coming up behind to take on/sustain these services.'

'Taking the fear away so people feel confident and able to take on services, including providing back-up and support will be vital to encouraging people to take on services.'

Community Centre representatives

3.6.2 We reviewed a question that had been posed by the Council in Swansea Voices earlier this year which asked:

Swansea Council is considering introducing a new initiative whereby local residents will be able to manage facilities and services on a voluntary basis.

Should this initiative be introduced in your local area, would you consider volunteering to help run the following services?

- Around half of respondents (51%) would not consider volunteering for any of these services.
- Around a third of respondents (32%) said that they would consider volunteering to help run the local library.
- Around a fifth of respondents would consider volunteering to help run the local community centre (22%) and the local park (17%).
- However less than 1 in 10 respondents would consider running local sports pitches (7%) or a local playground (6%).

- Respondents were asked if they had any other comments or suggestions relating to Community Action. Comments mainly related to a disagreement with the use of volunteers/ volunteers shouldn't replace paid staff, respondents who are unable/have no time to participate and comments that Council Tax should pay for these services.

3.6.3 Concern was raised about the longer term sustainability of services when many of the people currently in these positions are from the older generation and that no one is 'coming up behind' to take on those roles. We recognise the role of SCVS in building capacity and interest in communities as helping to address the need for ongoing succession planning. Succession planning can be a major problem for third sector organisations.

- *Community leadership is vital and needs to be embedded in local culture, not least amongst young people*
- *The next generation must be able to keep things going when pioneers start to run out of steam*
- *You have to build practical partnerships with other organisations – you cannot doing all on your own*

Good practice example: Cordale Housing Association

3.6.4 There is also a huge barrier around engaging people to become involved in community activity. It is vital to develop interest, the capacity and commitment in communities to take on important community roles. We understand that the Council does recognise the importance of this and do fund SCVS by approximately £100,000 (£50,000 core funding, £40,000 for community group development and £10,000 small group development).

'There are many people who want to get involved in their community, but don't know how. More promotion would be good including advertising and also linking in with local councillors who can help in the campaign to enlist volunteers.'

Survey respondent

3.6.5 The engagement of young people in community volunteering is seen as essential to the sustainability of services in the future. It was recognised that in order to engage young people into volunteering some things may have to do be done differently including

- considering the times and hours in which young people are involved, including for example;
- ensuring they are reimbursed for any expenses incurred for i.e. travel
- look at how to we advertise opportunities to young people,
- tailoring our medium of communication and language
- making opportunities interesting and having possibility of future benefit to young people (experience gained for future employment etc.)

3.6.6 The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Healthy City Cllr Mark Child said that one influence on this agenda is the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act. This puts a clear focus on increasing independence and recognising the individuality of communities instead of a one size fits all approach. Communities are

therefore more able to do what suits them. We need to empower communities helping to reduce demand on Council services.

3.6.7 The Survey also asked *how the Council can help to tackle barriers and challenges to communities taking on Community Action projects*. Survey respondents said:

- Ongoing support from Council until able to go it alone
- Put on some training and maybe assign a mentor to new groups. Have a link person available to help in the future should this be needed to develop new ideas, sustain existing initiatives and ensure succession planning of current initiatives.
- More publicity around Community Action. The community needs to stand up support services or lose them.
- Enhance working relationships with the Council and have joined up activities
- Raise awareness of what's available in an area
- Finding out what matters to the community rather than assuming or telling the community what it is important
- The barriers exist because residents feel that there is nothing to gain by being responsible for something, they fear that it would backfire and end up being sued for something that they would not have any control over.

3.6.8 It is important that we reach out more to communities to encourage interest in Community Action projects and we believe this can be done by using networks already in existence; by *piggybacking* on existing community relationships in partnership with SCVS.

3.6.9 Time is a key element and a barrier to some in becoming involved in taking on an asset or service. It was recognised that people have busy lives and find it hard to commit enough to be that involved. People have many demands on their time. Many survey respondents highlighted their concerns around the increased responsibilities that are involved in taking on an asset.

3.7 *Improving sustainability of community groups by developing networking and sharing of skills*

3.7.1 We were informed that the Transformation Fund has been created to support the delivery of the aims of the Community Action in particular funding being aimed at developing proposals to run Council services locally and/or transfer of community assets.

3.7.2 We looked at a summary of the applications that have been made to the Transformation Fund, which gave us an understanding of the different types of applications being made, particularly those that are suitable and those that are not. We found quite a number of the applications were not suitable and had been refused because for example savings were not apparent or the application did not meet the criteria. We believe that this indicates that more advice, information and support are needed at the pre-application stage.

3.7.3 One issue that arose from this discussion was how important it is for people who are looking to set up a new group or who may be considering making an

application to take over an asset to be able to access the knowledge and experience of others who have been through the process.

3.7.4 We were pleased to hear from the Cabinet Member Cllr Mark Child that more and more groups are recognising the benefits of doing things more collaboratively, pooling and sharing expertise for example, Friends of Parks.

3.7.5 Friends of Parks are a good example of groups working together. Friends groups come together on a regular basis to share experience. There is also a good relationship between Friends of Parks and the Council's Parks department. Although we did recognise that most parks are still managed by Council and they enhance the work of parks rather than managing them.

It is about linking people across the community rather than linking to the statutory service. It's about self-empowerment and feeling of worth. I think there is a vast amount of untapped ability in communities of all types, and it is not related to wealth or any other factor. There is also a huge level of satisfaction to be gained from providing a service, a kindness to another.

Survey respondent

3.7.6 Sharing information across groups would also be of benefit to all groups and services in the third sector especially when looking to sustain their services. Being able to contact someone who has the experience of aspects of running a group and or in maintaining an asset will help others to be more resilient in the longer term. This may include developing networking opportunities like for example peer to peer support programmes, mentoring, e-sharing across organisations.

3.7.7 We need to consider encouraging more mixed economy applications from community groups and others including community councils, charities and private sector. Some groups or organisations may not feel confident or able to apply themselves but would be interested as part of a wider application. Developing networks across organisations would help to encourage more shared applications.

3.7.8 We recognise that there is a wealth of skills and experience in many of the established groups in Swansea which could be tapped. Particularly those skills needed to run and sustain a community group. We felt that as community groups grow in experience it is important for them to share their good practice especially with those who are starting out.

We will therefore recommend that

R10 Develop peer to peer networks and mentoring programmes to help share expertise and support across community groups particularly around assisting new groups and with their longer term sustainability.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel commends Cabinet to consider all issues and ideas raised by this inquiry and, in particular, the recommendations set out below. The panel recognises that the Council

- (a) will need to ensure that any subsequent actions are legal and meet the requirements of any relevant legislation;
- (b) has a responsibility to make the best use of limited resources and that any additional costs will need to be considered carefully as part of the annual budget setting process.

The panel has kept these principles in mind in the course of its investigations.

Recommendations for Cabinet:

It is recommended to Cabinet that the following recommendations are considered as part of the development of the third sector strategy and that these should be developed in conjunction with the Council's partners in the third sector in particular Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS):

4.1.1 Develop a communication plan which should include

- a) Undertaking a campaign to promote the role of volunteers including celebrating and valuing the role and highlighting benefits of volunteering.
- b) Publicity and promotion of successful Community Action projects more widely, using for example individual success stories.
- c) Being clear about what assets and services are available for Community Action and communicating these proactively to communities and local councillors.
- d) Holding an annual open day or community fayre for community facilities and community groups designed to improve communication, networking and to share information, good practice and training opportunities. This should include information and opportunities for Community Action.

4.1.2 Investigate the viability of having an annual Lord Mayor's Award for Community Work.

4.1.3 Ensure that the Third Sector Strategy includes an updated Compact agreement.

4.1.4 Undertake a mapping exercise to understand what advice, guidance and support is out there for community groups and volunteers across Swansea.

4.1.5 Conduct a piece of work that considers the information needs of Community Action applicants from the user perspective.

4.1.6 All information on Community Action, the Transformation Fund, training, advice and guidance for groups and volunteers is available from one place.

- 4.1.7 Involve SCVS in the option appraisal stage of future Commissioning Reviews, when appropriate.
- 4.1.8 Proactively link community groups, community councils and volunteers with the possibilities that are available for Community Action.
- 4.1.9 Encourage and support mixed economy applications (more than one organisations working together to make application for asset or service viable and accessible to smaller groups)
- 4.1.10 Develop peer to peer networks and mentoring programmes to help share expertise and support across community groups particularly around assisting new groups and with their longer term sustainability.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The panel would like to record its thanks to the following people who came and gave evidence to us:

- Swansea Council for Voluntary Services
- Community Centre representatives
- Community Connectors and Local Area Co-ordinators
- Staff from Communities First
- Community Buildings Development Manager
- Housing Tenancy Support
- Head of Poverty and Prevention
- Head of Legal and Democratic Services
- Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Health City
- Head of Adult Services
- Head of Corporate Property Services
- Head of Culture and Tourism

We would also like to thank all the people that contributed to our Community Action survey.

6 ABOUT THE INQUIRY PANEL

The **Building Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Inquiry Panel** is a team of Councillors who are not members of the Cabinet. Their role is to examine a strategic issue of concern and to make recommendations about how policies and services can be improved.

Members of the panel, Councillors

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June Burtonshaw
David Cole
Chris Holley
Wendy Fitzgerald
Keith Marsh
Lynda James
Anthony Colburn
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