

Audit Committee

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3 G's Development Trust Comments on Wales Audit Office

Communities First Report of 9 July 2009

3 G's Development Trust (3G's) is a company limited by guarantee and registered charity. We celebrated our 10th anniversary this year. 3 G's has been the host employer and grant recipient body for the Communities First programme for the wards of Gurnos and Penydarren since the programmes inception.

As there was little or no service provision in the wards, 3 G's took the role of delivering or facilitating services in the area and as well as working with service providers to start or improve service delivery. We encouraged community members to volunteer and become involved in community activities and structures. The investment of Communities First funding has been vital for the regeneration of the area. We do recognize though that Communities First funding is not sufficient for what is needed in the area.

We have always leveraged our Communities First funding in order to bring additional funding into the area. In the last 3 years the average amount of additional funding has been £273,000. This of course will become increasingly difficult in this recession environment.

The amount we receive from Communities First with the additional amount we are able to bring in is not sufficient for the regeneration needs of the community.

That being said, I would like to draw to your attention to the great local benefits that have been achieved through the Communities First programme. Yes there are some weaknesses to the programme but there are many more strengths and these need to be celebrated:

Access to local health services. Up until 2009, the Gurnos only had 7 hours of GP services per week. Due to our work with Health Promotion and the LHB, there is now over 50 hours per week.

Information and advice and financial inclusion: Residents can access Cab, Credit Union, Jobmatch, JCP, Shelter Cymru, benefit take up advice, in their community

Support for families and children:

Initiatives to tackle child poverty. Because we receive core funding from Communities First, we have been able to bring in additional funds from the Lottery for our Reel Progress project to supplement our efforts to tackle child poverty

Initiative to widen access to further and higher education. We have led on research providing a model of adult community learning to the borough which leads to community members who left school with little or no qualifications accessing and succeeding in further and higher education

Initiatives to support young people and prevent them from becoming "NEET". Forsythia Youth project provides the social and personal support as well as opportunities for participation and development for hard to reach young people.

Initiatives to celebrate and promote Welsh heritage and culture. Glowing accolades have been showered on Iron and Steel and Behind the Stone

Environmental sustainability, support for those with mental health issues and ways to save money: A successful uniform recycling scheme has been developed with Hafal and local junior schools.

Development of Community Focus. We work in partnership with the Council and Bishop Hedley High School in the development of a Community Focus School. Our work was recognized by ContinYou and we were invited to share our example of good practice at a national conference

Crime and Safety: According to police statistics, youth annoyance has decreased where we provide youth services.

Transfer of community assets: Because of our great track record, community assets have been transferred to us to manage for the benefit of the community

Volunteering: We have over 80 volunteers. Volunteers serve the community and as well have received learning and training opportunities which have led to sustainable employment. Our volunteers have been recognized nationally and borough wide.

These are just a few brief snippets of what has been achieved by our Partnership due to Communities First funding. Each partnership could provide you with significant achievements. I could write a book about ours but I was instructed to keep this brief.

Comments on Programme Bending

The current Communities First policy vision is that programme bending will bring in all the resources needed for the regeneration of deprived communities in Wales. The difficulties of programme bending, however, have been sufficiently brought to the attention of the Communities First team by this partnership and many others. It is still difficult to influence the design and delivery of programmes and services as the real strategic decision making bodies are effectively closed to the community. Key strategic borough wide partnerships operate on a hierarchical basis and whereas they are populated by a variety of agencies, the inner core of real decision makers is open only to "senior managers" and excludes meaningful community representation and influence. Local Service Boards are supposed to facilitate the process of programme bending but it is still too early to see if these will be effective. To date, our partnership has no involvement with Local Service Boards as the membership is senior MTCBC heads of departments.

The Outcomes Fund is also designed as a tool to promote programme bending. It is still early days to see if this will be an effective tool.

That being said, 3 G's has been successful in achieving programme bending. We identified key areas where we wanted services redesigned to meet local needs but it must be said programme bending needs time and does not occur overnight. We have had to build and nurture relationships with key players as well as provide the necessary evidence and research. Some examples:

3 G's lead in an action research project funded by under the 2nd Round of the ESF EQUAL initiative, Theme A: "Helping People Access the Labour Market." The aim of the project was to identify the barriers that prevent individuals from the disadvantaged communities of Gurnos, Dowlais, Penydarren, Galon Uchaf and Pant to acquire and develop skills, knowledge and experience that will enable them to find sustainable employment.

Life Support (a supported adult community learning programme helping residents with little or no qualifications to gain the academic and social skills needed to access further and higher education) was piloted in the area in 2006 and the resulting evidence that was gathered and disseminated starting in 2007. The relationships developed with the council during and after the research project led to the council changing their Adult Community Learning programme to include intensive support for learners as well as a borough wide Life Support programme. It must be noted that it took 3 years for this to happen. It takes time to refocus budgets and service delivery even when a service provider is willing.

Childcare and crèche for those undertaking long term full day courses. Free childcare is available in the area if parents want to take up very short term training. If long term, Flying Start can provide childcare but for only 2 hours a day. As we learned in research above, to escape poverty and find sustainable employment, some parents will need to undertake longer term learning and for more than 2 hours a day. Free childcare in the area was not generally available for this thus creating a barrier to training and learning. We of course worked with our local Genesis programme, but as more and more parents wanted to take up longer training programmes, we put more and more pressure on their budget. As we were able to demonstrate the need for childcare for people wanting and needing more than short term training to improve their chances of sustainable employment, our local Flying Start initiative has undertaken to provide crèche facilities for Flying Start parents needing more than the 2 hours a day that they provide. They have started the renovations of a property in order to provide full day crèche for Flying Start parents undertaking training or learning programmes. There are some budget hitches but we hope this will be completed and available to our parents in 2009. Again it has taken over 2 years to reach this point.

We have also been given long-term leases with peppercorn rent so that we could develop in them services that meet community needs. Examples:

Forsythia Youth Centre (Premises and long term lease via Merthyr Tydfil CBC). Because we acquired the center, we are able to work with partners to bring necessary services and support to the community for young people. Examples of some of the agencies that provide services as required and requested by the young people: Drug Aid, Neighbourhood Learning Centre, Rathbone, Groundwork, Health Promotion Board, MTCBC, South Wales Transport Police, South Wales Police, Drug Aid. The core staff for the Forsythia Youth Project are Communities First funded. The council do provide statutory youth service but it is insufficient for the need in the borough.

Information Shop (Premises and Lease MTCBC, Funding to equip Shop from DWP). The Info Shop is our 1 stop Financial Inclusion Shop with services provided in the community for the community (CAB, Credit Union, Benefit Take up Advice, JCP, Shelter Cymru etc). Community members are able to access support and advice in the community.

Gurnos Flats (Premises and Lease Merthyr Valleys Homes) This is a new accomplishment and plans are still being developed.

Yes, there is more to be accomplished and yes there has to be more directives and incentives for service providers to programme bend. Each area in Wales will face their own sets of challenges. There are challenges to programme bending in deprived boroughs where the practically the whole borough is a Communities First area.

At the end of the day, regeneration needs to be properly resourced. If the regeneration of an area is not fully funded or given the proper resources, regeneration efforts will be slow, frustrating and impossible to achieve. More can be done within each Assembly department to promote and encourage programme bending and to have a more joined up approach to eradicate poverty and social exclusion in Wales. All Assembly Members and departments in the Welsh Assembly Government need to think how they can work together to end poverty and social exclusion in Wales. More needs to be done to encourage all departments in local authorities and health trusts to programme bend thereby strengthening the Communities First programme. We will continue to do our part on the ground and have achieved great results. We also know that with the recession and therefore budget cuts and restructuring of some services, programme bending will be hampered.

Comments on Monitoring and Evaluation

We have always been able to provide the monitoring and evaluation information requested. There are some inherent difficulties in Monitoring and Evaluation in the Communities First context. Communities First is not the only initiative working in our area. For example, we can report how many people we helped to find jobs or to take up the services of Working Links, Jobmatch, Want to Work, Job Centre Plus but we can not then tell you how that impacted the figures for unemployment in the area. There are too many other factors at work effecting the unemployment figures i.e. the recession and subsequent job layoffs, self referrals to job agencies etc. Same goes for health, child poverty, basic skills statistics etc. Our targets are a part of a bigger picture.

We feel that improvements have been made in the monitoring and evaluation forms. There now has to be a concerted effort to collect and write up case studies to capture the full picture and impact of the Communities First Programme. Work has started in this area with the publication of the Communities First Best Practice booklet.

Summary

There is a lot more to be achieved. The regeneration of Gurnos and Penydarren will not be completed by the end of this round of funding in 2012. It is our hope that a future commitment can be made well before the end of this funding stream so as not to lose the momentum gained i.e. the partnerships we are nurturing and the expertise we have gained.