

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Response of the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations, in partnership with the Housing Associations Community Development Network, to the Policy Review of Community Regeneration the National Assembly for Wales' Local Government and Housing Committee.

The invitation to write and submit a response to the Local Government and Housing Committee was discussed with the Housing Associations Community Development Network at a meeting held at Newydd Housing Association's offices, Rhydyfelin on 5 September 2001.

The Network raised issues of concern in addition to the ones listed in the invitation to contribute to the policy review dated 9 August 2001.

Firstly, while the resources of community development work are enhanced via the Communities First budget, care needs to be taken to ensure that the focus on the 100 communities does not detract from the identified needs of other communities falling out of other budgets. There is a risk that the existence of fewer but larger pots of money will skew funding away from smaller focussed projects in non-Communities First communities.

Secondly we consider that a pivotal point of People in Communities was that local people are the most effective people to drive community initiatives. This has become lost in the two consultations that generated Communities First. Local people are drawn in People in Communities as being from communities that are identified by their community boundaries rather than local government wards or county borders. An outcome of the Communities First arrangements is that they are prescribed by local authority needs before local community needs. The important issue here is that of "ownership" by the "grass roots" community.

An example of the issue is illustrated by the constriction, now lifted, that the local authority rather than another partner employ the project co-ordinator. The Network is pleased to note that a participating partner other than the local authority can take on the role of co-ordinator.

The Network considered the list of questions posed in the letter of 9 August 2001.

1. What are the roles of the National Assembly, local authorities, and the voluntary sector and community groups in the community regeneration process?

The Community Development Network considers that community regeneration works best in partnership. The second general point above illustrates that what has come out of the Community First arrangements is not partnership but something rather less. The issue should be revisited before Communities First gathers pace on an inappropriate basis.

We suggest that the National Assembly for Wales should monitor the use of funds and issue guidance on partnership working.

It would be useful to clearly include the role of housing associations in their different organisational structures separately here. The listing above seems to include them as the voluntary sector. While housing associations have voluntary boards of management they are a different partner offering skills and experience that supports the voluntary sector and should be distinguished as such.

2. Are these roles adequately defined and appropriate?

Neither the roles or community regeneration is properly defined. These definitions need revisiting to refine them.

Awareness of the day to day problems and limitations of people living in their communities are not appropriately identified by statutory bodies that have their own priorities to work to, e.g. health, local or police authorities. Both the elected/appointed members and staff of these organisations have much to offer the community and, therefore, for effective community development these organisations will have much to offer. However the work calls for work to be in partnership, with the community centrally involved in the management of both the process and the outcomes. Establishing the community as the client partner of the partnership would help establish partnership working.

3. Is money being targeted effectively? (Are people clear on what money is available for community regeneration and from what sources?)

It is too early to tell if the financial targeting has been effective.

Nonetheless It is felt at the that the management of the large sums of money that are being made available for Communities First needs to be able to identify the appropriate scale of the finance called for on a project by project basis. There is a risk that smaller scale projects will get lost in the larger context.

4. Is the money reaching the targeted areas?

The point made at 3 above indicates a need for a number of different and various "pots" of money that can be managed to focus on different and various communities. Some of these communities will be geographic some will be interest groups, for example the disabled and ethnic groups.

5. Is the service being delivered in the right way by the right organisations?

We consider that its too early to tell. Funding has not been available long enough to identify and learn from appropriate or inappropriate service. Outcomes are the best way of identifying success or failure. Ongoing review and evaluation will identify problems and initiate corrective action. What is needed here is a review and evaluation mechanism that will identify wrongly delivered service. This will need to operate for the duration of the Communities First programme.

The existing audit/monitoring process is not robust; a more vigorous process should be established.

There is a need for community development "good practise" to be written and disseminated.

6. Is there clarity about the support and services that are available for community development and community regeneration?

It would be useful if both the available provision and best practise standards could be made available to both the communities and practitioners. The WFHA / University of Glamorgan website goes some considerable distance in responding to the needed service. However it should be reviewed in the light of experience.

7. Who should be responsible for administering the funds?

At present the local authorities administrate the funds. Local authorities are not the best "safe hands" for community development work. In many cases community development

organisations or their partner housing associations are able to offer a financial administration in an independent manner. This would help the local authority establish a partner role by isolating it from financial power in the relationship.

8. Is funding inadequate?

The issue of adequacy relates not only to the budget available from year to year but also to its longevity. It is essential to the nature of effective community development work that there is effective commitment to the real life of the project. For many projects, probably the majority of them, there is a need for long term commitment to core funding capacity building. Capacity building requires human resources secured by contract in relation to the delivery of well developed and thought through projects. One of the Network members advised that he had confidence in the long term funding for supported housing, in so far as it is possible, in the delivery of Supported Housing Revenue Grant. The Supported Housing Revenue Grant model is suggested as a model for Communities First funding administration. Submissions for funding would then be made by partnerships involving the community groups, housing associations and local authorities.

It is too early to tell if the annual budget is adequate.

It will be important that the mechanism for drawing down finance for projects is timely and administratively straightforward. The experience of some Network members in drawing down European funding has been frustrating. Our experience of People in Communities funding suggests that this was a better model.

9. What are the most effective mechanisms for distributing the funds?

See 7.

The most effective mechanisms for distributing the funds are made effective by transparency. Communities First will work by collective faith in its probity. If one or more element of the partnership is seen to be privileged, partnership is lost.

10. What lessons have we learned about community regeneration and how it is funded

See 8

Past community regeneration work has often failed to be sustained due to the project being brought to a point where its project objectives are seen to be complete rather than at a point where it can be demonstrated to be sustainable. Demonstration of project sustainability should be a project objective.

11. How can existing funding arrangements be improved?

Have we learnt the lessons of projects failing to succeed due to short term inadequate funding? Confidence in the ongoing success of community investment needs to be sustained by evaluation of both quantitative monitoring and, perhaps more importantly, qualitative monitoring. In this way the case for maintaining, changing or ceasing project work can be spoken for and justified.

12. What can be done to ensure effective participation and involvement of residents in local communities and local voluntary bodies in the regeneration process?

We make the point that it is the communities themselves that are best placed to identify their needs and manage the process of regeneration. However it is not always the case that communities are sufficiently skilled to carry this out. However many organisations working with them have these skills. Ensuring that the ownership of the project by the community is sustained is essential to ensure effective participation.

The process of identifying the work to be done should include an element to identify the skills needed and how they are to be provided. Capacity building should be anticipated and funded in relation it being an ongoing skill. While there is a case for fast tracking much needed projects the sustainability of fast tracked work needs to be supported by community ownership of the process and the development of appropriate skills within the community to sustain it. People living in the communities will be able to contribute to the project at different levels according to their interest and ability. It is important that these different levels of input are managed with sensitivity and respect.

13. Are there any other comments that you would like to make in relation to the issues that the Committee is considering?

We need to accept that some of our communities face irreversible decline. In some cases community economic development will be unable to reverse much greater global factors. We need to address the management of decline positively. Managed decline can aspire to ward off marginalisation of the declining communities.