Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb, Llywodraeth Leol a Chymunedau/
Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee
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Talk Communities: The future of Communities First
A submission by Cytûn on behalf of churches in Wales

Introduction

1. Cytûn – Churches Together in Wales brings together 16 of the principal Christian denominations in Wales, which between them have about 172,000 adult members and meaningful contact with many thousands more children, young people and adults in every community in Wales, together with a number of other Christian organisations. (Full membership list: www.cytun.cymru/us.html). Our member churches maintain congregations in every community in Wales, including all Communities First areas.
2. Most Communities First partnerships have involved participation by local churches. This may have included providing partnership Chairs, committee members and other officers; hosting CF offices and projects; receiving CF funding for church-based projects; and engaging in community consultation. This response draws on detailed responses from local churches who have participated in seven different clusters in every part of Wales, as well as more general reflections by our member churches.

The conception and organisation of Communities First

3. Churches generally welcomed the inception of Communities First in 2001. The emphasis on helping individual communities craft their own solutions to problems is consonant with, and to an extent derived from, Christian practice:
    a. Two of our member churches (the Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church) seek to serve each community across Wales through the parish system, and many ward boundaries still derive from traditional parish boundaries. Wales is still in many ways a nation of villages, and the emphasis on local communities in the original CF programme built on this cultural inheritance.
    b. Some of early CF practice was, we understand, inspired by the approach of Paolo Freire, who also influenced the base communities of South America, which were in the late 20th century a key part of the ministry of the Catholic Church.
    c. The Penrhys Partnership in the Rhondda, founded by Llanfair Uniting Church, (sponsored by eight Cytûn member Churches), preceded CF by several years, and its pattern was perceived as good practice and an inspiration to many CF partnerships – and the Penrhys Partnership itself became a CF partnership in 2001-12. The story of its foundation is told in Revd Dr John I Morgans's book, A Journey of a Lifetime, and we submit that the relevant chapter still repays careful study by Welsh Government.

d. The Penrhys Partnership succeeded in employing mainly local people in all paid roles, and seeking local contractors and partners wherever possible, in itself increasing capacity in the local community. Sadly, this was not always replicated in other CF partnerships where staff travelled in from more prosperous areas, meaning that much of the funding leeched out of the areas targeted.

4. One church officer involved in a local CF partnership from the beginning says:
   The involvement with Communities First was a major step forward for this community. As the first chair of Communities First, I had close experience of the working out of the process and my impression was of an excellent new way of helping communities. While it helped deliver services for the community, it had a wider objective of bringing the community together in decision making and planning. The CF committee had good local representation and the annual meetings were among the frequent successful community events. The briefing from Welsh Government was that cohesion in community was a major objective, and we were ready to be involved.
   ...The local councillors were part of the CF process and this made for a good working relationship. Similarly, financial accountability was sensibly maintained by the willingness of the local authority to promote and maintain the financial systems.
5. One church summed up its long-term relationship with CF as follows:
   Most of the programmes for health and employment in socially deprived areas can obviously be delivered in a different way, but the case for Communities First is that it was planned to be an integrated provision but locally based so that the community knows and can see those working for and with them. In addition, the early special element with Communities First was the local participation in the direction and decision making of programmes. We would ask that as social cohesion is as important as ever, this flagship provision has the experience and should be renewed and provided here and where ever in Wales the need exists.
6. In 2012 the CF programme was reconfigured into 'clusters'. In some areas, these were clusters of contiguous areas and this reorganisation enabled greater co-ordination between overlapping partnerships and in some cases better use of resources. In other cases, they were scattered clusters of disparate groups which in practice continued to operate separately. For example, it was suggested that a cluster including wards in Bangor, Caernarfon and Talysarn is unlikely ever to work.
7. The evidence we have received suggests that the loss of local ownership of programmes was in some cases critical in reducing local support and effectiveness for CF and its work. Some felt that the new arrangement was bureaucratic and distant, that communities no longer came *first* and that the initial effective work in building capacity and confidence in communities to seek their own solutions was thereby undermined, reducing engagement since 2012. One area says:
   I suspect that the change of emphasis to clustering and service delivery had much to do with the general descent into public service austerity.

Communities First projects

8. Each of the 52 CF clusters arranges its programmes in a different way, as each cluster of communities is different. We support this variegated pattern of delivery, while recognising that this makes generalised assessments difficult.
9. Several clusters have operated a pattern involving 'open days' to promote healthy and lifestyles, lifelong learning, etc. Churches are often involved in hosting, providing refreshments or participating as stall-holders. Their experience is that these days are useful in enabling a user-friendly access point for large numbers of local people, but that engagement is superficial and measuring outcomes is impossible.
10. Some clusters have focussed on providing projects through their own staff rather than using existing community organisations. One local church reported:
    When we consulted with Communities First, they didn't seem to take on our views and we felt they planned what they wanted and organised projects sometimes on the days we … were running activities. We think there could have been better communication and engagement with local people and those already working in the community…. We're pleased with the two workers who have run a series of 8 youth sessions at the church during the autumn term and will be continuing in January. They have fully consulted with us, engaged well with young people and are paying for the use of the room. However, in general we feel that they take too long to organise something that is needed and should be sustained in the community. By the time they get the trust from the community and young people, the project/programme ends or is run by different workers.
11. Other clusters have made funding available to existing community organisations. One church had hosted outreach sessions for the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Job Centre on an estate distant from their town centre offices. This had improved engagement with the community, enabled them to help people who could not easily travel to the office, and the location in a church well accessed by the community made crossing the threshold easier. A church-based Foodbank in another area had benefited from CF funding for advice workers to be placed in the Foodbank to offer immediate help and support to clients facing difficulties with debt, unemployment, benefit withdrawals, low pay, etc. Although Foodbanks, CAB and Job Centre services are not CF funded, the outreach workers are, and their loss would be keenly felt.
12. A number of other church-based projects have benefited from CF cluster funding. The amounts involved are often small (as little as £200), but make a huge difference to volunteer-led community based activity, whose effects in terms of community development run well beyond measurable outcomes. For example, one church says:
    The areas that they have primarily assisted in are grant funding applications to help our groups such as Parent and Toddlers and Sunday School and also with training such as First Aid and Food Hygiene.

First Aid and Food Hygiene training not only benefit the project concerned, but also increase the employability of the individual volunteers involved, giving them transferable skills when they apply for paid employment.

Another church in a different area reported it was involved in a range of CF funded projects locally:

- *A project providing work experience for people trying to get back into the workplace and people with learning difficulties who may never be able to work, but can increase their self-esteem and build up confidence.*
- *Help with funding courses in our Community Hall when the Community Education placements that we had came to an end. These courses were a help to people in the poorest part of the Community.*
- *Support for the Food- Co-operative that enables poorer families to have an affordable source of fresh fruit and vegetables.*
- *Help with publicity for our Churches Together Film Club for the elderly and socially isolated.*

This provides a snapshot of the range of work in a single community which is wholly or partly dependent upon Communities First funding.

13. Some other projects in which local churches are partners have received much larger funding through Communities First, often to fund the provision of Community Centres and Family Centres. This has involved the commitment of substantial sums of public money in these buildings, and there is fear in these communities that if the CF funded programmes run in them close, then the centres themselves will become unviable. One project in which the church is a key partner said:

All our staff have been issued with potential redundancy notices until we know what is happening. Everything the Welsh Government wants to do – build resilient communities through community hubs, tackling poverty, children's zones – we already do and have done for some time now. We have the buildings, we have the staff, we just want to be able to continue to do the work that we are passionate about, making a difference to the lives of children and families. Our family centre services grew so big that we have had to extend the church building. If the funding stops, what will happen to that? We could face the situation of being handed the keys to the building and then losing our funding to deliver the services within.

Several churches commented that an emphasis on measurable outcomes, especially since 2012, sometimes skewed the CF programme in an undesirable way, as capacity building in a community is measurable only across a generation, and not across a single financial year. Attention was drawn to pp 5-10 of the RCT Homes *Open Space Audit Penrhys Neighbourhood Appraisal* dated May 2011 [not available online], which shows that after 10 years of Communities First work in the community, while levels of poverty might have reduced only slightly, levels of community engagement and satisfaction were remarkably high. Such 'soft' outcomes are difficult to measure, unless a survey of this kind is carried out in each of the 52 CF clusters, but we submit

that they are nevertheless highly significant to the communities concerned and therefore to Wales.

14. Communities First partnerships which work well provide not only funding but also expertise. One church said:
    Because they know the area well and have researched its needs, they appreciate our work and have been willing to share advice about good practice. It is partly through their support and involvement that we have been able to continue to provide:
    - *Free Work experience and training opportunities*
    - *Volunteer opportunities/Social inclusion for vulnerable and isolated residents.*
    - *Help provide placements for Young Offenders and ex prisoners*
    - *Placement for recovering brain damaged patients, and from Social Services*

Consultation and continuity of funding and community engagement

15. It is a matter of deep concern to Cytûn and its member churches that the Welsh Government engagement on this matter is continuing until 15th January 2017, with an announcement only after that date, while current funding ends on 31st March 2017. We note the statements by the Cabinet Secretary that funding for the relevant budget line is not being reduced for 2017-18, but also note the reports from local projects of staff being notified of potential redundancy. Inevitably, this means that the most experienced and best qualified staff are already seeking alternative employment and may well be lost to their local communities.
16. Some churches have reported that core CF staff have been told that funding for their posts will continue until 31st December 2017, but we can find no official confirmation of this. The Welsh Government, like the churches, has drawn attention to the uncertainties caused to EU funded projects by the referendum result on EU membership and we have welcomed the guarantees of continued funding for most such projects until at least 2020. We believe that a similar guarantee should be offered to CF partnerships for 2017-18 to allow a fuller consultation on proposed changes and a gradual phasing of those changes.
17. As the examples given earlier in this submission illustrate, a complete transfer of Communities First funding to other programmes would involve the wholesale closure of services and community centres in the most deprived communities of Wales. We cannot believe this to be the Welsh Government's intention, and it would clearly not be in the interests of the communities concerned.
18. That any changes should be gradual rather than wholesale is desirable also because of the long-term nature of community engagement. Trust builds up with an institution on a generational rather than an annual basis. We know from our own work that a new church planted in a community can take 20 years to put down deep roots and achieve a level of mutual trust with the people nearby. Most of our member churches have roots which go back centuries. However, trust can be lost almost overnight if a community feels betrayed by such an institution. Communities First partners, with

community links in most cases no older than 15 years, will lose trust very quickly if they have to withdraw services without local consultation in April 2017, and it will be very difficult for Welsh Government and intermediate institutions to rebuild trust with those communities for a long time. **We would urge the most careful consideration of this aspect of any change.**

Families, children and tackling adverse childhood experiences

19. We are aware that the Cabinet Secretary wishes to see a greater concentration of resource on tackling poverty amongst families and children. We have sympathy with this aim, and many church-based programmes within and beyond Communities First areas contribute already towards these goals. The Faith in Families programme of the Diocese of Swansea & Brecon of the Church in Wales is a striking example, which is 79% CF funded. Another church in a different area says:
    A small number of church members are developing a Parents and Toddlers group, using seed money from the church and funding from Communities First. The group has received all kinds of toys and activity materials from friends and, for example, parents have had tutoring in using sewing machines while crèche workers have helped with the children. There were several lovely trips this summer and some in-house activities, such as a bouncy castle, which the toddlers loved. These were all funded by Communities First.
    The ability of such programmes to tackle child poverty and adverse childhood experiences depends in part on the length and depth of community engagement which has been built up (see para 18), and we would urge that any change to the CF umbrella **allow continued funding for programmes with such a proven track record of success**.
20. We are aware also of the Public Health Wales report on tackling adverse childhood experiences, and would affirm from the experience of our members the links between such experiences and poor health and also (as the Police & Crime Commissioner for South Wales has noted) on involvement in crime. We agree that such issues need to be tackled and that this requires public funding. We would, however, caution against the use of this research to suggest that adverse childhood experiences *cause* poverty – a claim which the report does not make. It is just as likely that poverty in many cases causes adverse childhood experiences, and that therefore focussing on tackling ACEs would be to focus on symptoms rather than causes.
21. As the Cabinet Secretary noted in answering questions in the Senedd on 14 December 2016, *the very stubborn effects of poverty are very hard to move into a different space*. We would urge that in reviewing and reconfiguring the spending currently going to Communities First that priority is given to **ensuring the continuity of those projects – large and small – which have proven worth to their local communities**. This will require extensive evaluation and engagement with each of the 52 clusters, and will therefore take some time.

22. We would therefore urge that **funding be continued for 2017-18 while this in-depth research is carried out**, with a view to **changes being phased in from April 2018 in a way which does not undermine what has already been achieved**, but rather spreads good practice to those communities outside the current CF scheme. As one church says: *Part of any CF exit strategy should include a detailed plan for the support of the community provision that has built around the presence of Communities First in the area itself.*

23. We would welcome any opportunity to discuss these matters further with the Cabinet Secretary and the Welsh Government.

24. This response may be published in full.

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