

# Communities First – Discussion with Newport Communities First staff

Date: 23 March 2017

## Introductory remarks

01. Staff from Newport Council provided an overview of Communities First activities and developments since the announcement by the Cabinet Secretary to close the Communities First Programme. Key points included:

- Working with 12,500 people across Newport in the past year;
- Communities First had dealt with the challenges faced by communities on both a practical and a strategic level;
- It has played a key part in the development of Newport;
- As a result of the announcement there will be a significant budget cut (between 30–45%) and as a result the Council is currently negotiating with contractors; and going through a voluntary redundancy programme. The closing of the programme has broader budgetary implications, for example additional costs of servicing voluntary or compulsory redundancy schemes;
- It is still unclear exactly what the Welsh Government wants to see delivered, and therefore how new programmes should be shaped. While the ‘resilient communities’ approach is providing some direction there are very mixed messages coming from Welsh Government;
- The timeframe to put together new plans is very challenging;
- Criticism of how the announcement was made. Most staff found out on the evening news, and the Council were provided with very little information to help staff understand the implications of the announcement.

## Discussion with staff

02. There were a range of issues highlighted by staff which included:

## Consultation process

- There was not a full and proper consultation process and the online consultation was not meaningful.
- There was that there had not been discussion with the communities about what they value.

## Developing relationships

- Relationships have been built over the past 13 years, and in some cases it is only now that this trust has been cemented. This will evaporate.
- Communities First staff are trusted, and respected within the communities. Developing these relationships, means that instead of signposting people to services (e.g the Job Club) you signpost them to people that they know.
- Examples were given of Communities First staff attending social services conferences, and being the only people who know the family under discussion.
- Communities First can be more responsive to immediate crisis' and are seen as less threatening than more formal services.
- Building up these sort of relationships can only be done in a small geographical area. It was suggested that you needed one team per estate.
- People have been developed through the communities and now work for Communities First. They act as role models for others in the community.

## Education

- Communities First acts as a bridge between the primary and secondary schools. There has been a focus on developing relationships with primary schools to help with the transition between primary and secondary schools.
- The cyclical nature of problems and considering this when making decisions about support services was emphasised. People cited the impact of the decision to cut funding for internal referral centres, which means that children with disruptive behaviour will go back into the classroom and impact on other children's ability to learn.



- It was highlighted that the WG’s new emphasis on Adverse Childhood Experiences and the importance of the first 1000 days is work that CF have been doing for a considerable time.

## Employability

- A lot of Communities First clients are a long way from employability, and need time and support before they are at the stage to support them in finding work.
- Staff who work on employability, highlighted that they couldn’t do their job effectively, without all of the preparatory work that has been done by their colleagues. Examples given included the development of a ‘Parents Project’ which built up confidence in parents; all of the participants have gone onto sign up for Communities for Work. There was also an example of an Over 50s Men’s Group which also helped build up confidence and skills before signposting them to specific employability programmes.
- Concerns were also raised about the rigidity of eligibility criteria for some employability programmes and that as a result people weren’t able to access support that was needed.

## Social inclusion

- Communities First has enabled the specific needs of the diverse communities across Newport to be supported. For example engaging with the Romany community, which focused on building relationships with key figures within the community.
- Significant concerns were raised about the lack of police presence on Communities First areas. The impact of substance abuse and the resulting problems were also highlighted. Communities First staff are often dealing with anti-social behaviour directly.

## Finances and structures

- For every £1 invested in Communities First, £4.74 is saved.
- To develop resilient communities longer term funding is needed. At best funding has been provided on a three yearly basis, but this has been reduced to annual funding. To tackle poverty, funding needs to be more sustainable and offered on a much longer term (e.g 10 years).



- [Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods approach](#) has been adapted and used in Duffryn successfully, it is being rolled out across Newport. The evaluation report is available [here](#) and more information is available [here](#). The Committee was invited to visit Duffryn to gain a better understanding of this approach.
- The importance of aligning programmes and having a more holistic approach was emphasised. Concerns were raised that there can be duplication of services and that Service Leaders needed to be more lateral and strategic in their thinking to ensure effective use of resources.
- It was acknowledged that Communities First may have failed in some areas, but not in Newport. It was also highlighted that some successes don't fit into performance management frameworks or datasets.

### Impact of the closure of Communities First

- There was some confusion as to why the scheme would be closed down without a clear direction of what will replace it.
- People were concerned that the skills of staff will be lost to Newport, as people have to look for alternative employment, and highlighted the broader impact this will have on Newport.
- “I don't understand why the Welsh Government aren't terrified of what will happen.” [When the programme closes].



# Communities First – Visit to Newport East Cluster

Date: 26 May

Member: John Griffiths AM (Chair)

Sites visited: Moorland and Hope Centre

During the visit the Chair met with staff, service users and volunteers. A wide range of issues were covered including; Flying Start provision; transitional arrangements; the shift in focus to employability and examples of how the Communities First provision has had a positive impact on individuals and families.

## Impact of the decision to close Communities First programme

- In Newport, there has been a £720k funding reduction. This has resulted in 21 FTE posts being cut; with 8.5 FTE leaving Newport Council through voluntary redundancy; and 6.5 FTE compulsory redundancies at Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations and 6.5 FTE vacant posts not being filled.
- The old programme will be phased out by the end of June. Some programmes are being moved to other services, for example the Aspire Programme (which aims to identify, and support young people who are not engaging in education) will move to the Youth Service. Flying Start will take over play provision.
- It has been easier to transition services, because all the relevant services sit under one Directorate (Regeneration) within the local authority.
- The local authority is taking a collaborative approach to ensuring continued delivery of services, with improved alignment of services.
- There has been a great deal of uncertainty for staff, which combined with a lack of guidance has made it more difficult for staff to understand what the changes will mean.
- Projects have been transitioned to other services, where possible, and budgeting for this year has focused on ‘chunky’ investment in project delivery. In line with the Welsh Government’s emphasis on employability, the projects will focus on:



- Health and Well-being. The support services a client may need to help support them into employability.
- Skills development. For clients who need additional skills development such as digital, literacy or language skills.
- Employability Support Services. Any specific training a client needs to get into employment.
- Staff have been centralised into one building; which has generated approximately £25k of savings per cluster across Newport; however all community centres remain open.
- The work of Communities First volunteers equates to approximately £70–80k of staff costs (calculated at minimum wage).
- Annual funding makes it difficult to plan for the future. Employability Support is funded until 2020, but it's difficult to make decisions when the guidance isn't yet available. Families First funding is only guaranteed for another year.
- In terms of the programme, most of the projects have been focused on target areas, 'softer' projects have only received funding if they fit with community involvement.
- In the past CF in Newport have funded food banks, but this funding is no longer provided.

### Varying eligibility across schemes

- At the Flying Start scheme at Moorlands, concerns about the postcode restrictions were raised.
- The scheme isn't currently running at full capacity, despite budget being available, because of postcode restrictions. This is despite staff knowing of people living close to the centre, who would benefit from the service. However, they are ineligible because their postcode is not covered by Flying Start.
- The lack of consistency across support programmes was highlighted; Families First has no postcode restriction, but Flying Start and Communities First do operate on a postcode basis. There will be difficulties aligning the services because of the different approaches to eligibility.



- It was flagged up that postcodes that are prominently sheltered housing are eligible for Flying Start.
- Staff felt that better engagement by the Welsh Government with those delivering the front-line services would help address some of these issues.

### The shift in focus to employability

- The Welsh Government hasn't yet provided any guidance on the Employability Plan.
- Concerns were raised that the focus on early years and employability will impact the level of support that can be provided for young people of secondary school age. Programmes like Aspire, have had a significant impact on ensuring young people leave with basic qualifications, and there is a risk that opportunities will be missed to intervene pre-16. We heard of one person's experience of the programme, how they gained qualifications, that helped lead to a StreetGames placement and then employment by Communities First.
- It was highlighted that successful interventions are much more difficult once young people have left school.
- Concerns that the seamless level of support that is available from early years – school – post education will be lost, with families and children falling away after Flying Start.
- Digital skills are a particular issue for the over 50s, and this will become a more significant issue when Universal Credit is introduced in Newport next year.
- Benefit sanctions are often imposed on people, not because they are not willing to engage but because they don't have the basic skills needed to apply for jobs. This can be a particular issue when people do not have the requisite language skills. Examples were given of clients taking ESOL lessons, where they are learning basic language skills but at the same time are expected to fill out application forms.
- Concerns were also raised about the impact of insufficient number of ESOL teachers being available to deliver ESOL lessons.
- Communities First have often picked up people who the Work Programme class as those furthest away from the employment market, and the support that is provided is wide-ranging and can have a significant impact on individuals and their families.
- People do not want to go to the JobCentre, but will visit Communities First centres. It was highlighted that a lot of resources go directly to the JobCentre, but they rely on



Communities First to deliver a lot of the necessary support needed to get employment ready.

- There is some concern that the Employment Support programme won't necessarily deliver support such as ESOL, basic skills and job clubs. It is more focused on intensive 1:1 support, but that the wider support is an essential first step to getting people ready for employment.

