

Communities First – report to NAW Audit Committee

23rd October 2009



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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, and four police authorities are associate members. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
2. The WLGA welcomes the opportunity to submit comments on the Communities First programme. From the minutes of the Audit Committee meeting on 16th July and discussions with Committee staff, it would appear that the main interest is in local authorities' views on, and responses to the idea of **'programme bending'**.
3. The main finding in the WAO report on the issue of programme bending were that:
 - WAG did not have a clear idea of how CF would deliver its ambitious objectives or how community development work would lead to changes in mainstream funding for public services, even though it was a core aspect of the programme. However, programme bending was clearly seen as important in this regard
 - The WAO found limited evidence of programme bending, but its report acknowledges that public services, broadly speaking, already tend to be targeted at CF areas.
 - Attempts to achieve programme bending have been left to partnerships – or more specifically to the co-ordinators - but they do not have the authority to tell service providers to change
 - The Outcomes Fund is relatively small in terms of its ability to influence programme bending
 - LSBs, who could play an important role in terms of the 'top down' response to community requests for programme bending tend not to have well-developed links with CF areas/partnerships
 - There have been weaknesses in the Assembly's monitoring of the programme and, despite recent improvements, risks remain
4. The report concludes with recommendations that include the Assembly giving clearer direction to public services to bend their programmes and deliver outcomes for people living in CF areas.

WLGA COMMENTS

5. In response to the above, four main questions can usefully be addressed:
 - First, and most fundamentally, is 'programme bending' really the 'solution'?
 - Second, why has there been limited programme bending by local authorities (and other public bodies)?
 - Are there, in fact, successful examples of programme bending and/or signs that the situation is changing?
 - What is being done by WLGA to improve the situation?

Is programme bending the solution?

6. At the Audit Committee's meeting on 16th July, The Wales Audit Office representatives made the point that, in planning their services, local authorities "have their own objectives of social inclusion or engagement with communities". Since CF areas tend to be the ones with the highest levels of need, it would be expected that some degree of spatial prioritisation would be reflected in service delivery plans. Indeed, to quote Jeremy Coleman: "That seems to be, if not a flaw in the concept of programme bending, then an oddity because you are bending something that is supposed to be that shape already".
7. Moreover, another flaw in the first phase of the CF programme was the assumption that the solutions for an area's problems lie within the area itself, leading to a very inward-focused approach. Partnerships were established and expected to develop plans for their local geographic area that would lift them out of deprivation. However, in reality, many of the potential opportunities lie beyond an area's boundaries. Many children will travel to a school outside the CF area, many of the job opportunities will be further afield and many of the facilities, services and activities that impact on individuals' quality of life (e.g. hospitals, leisure centres, town centres) do not lie in the CF area itself. Investing resources to enhance these opportunities can therefore be just as important as investment in a CF area. The latter will often focus on environmental and community safety improvements which, whilst important, cannot by themselves provide the economic and social opportunities needed to tackle deep-rooted deprivation.
8. Undoubtedly there will be cases where bringing services to a community (especially those that are relatively isolated) will bring real benefits for the residents. Pressure

from local partnerships can encourage providers to respond and make services more accessible for such communities. However, in many cases this will be considered a sub-optimal solution – resulting, for example, in economies of scale being lost, increased costs being incurred for premises, travel etc. There may be a case for such initiatives, though, if undertaken as a temporary measure as part of a clear strategy of developing a community's capacity. Indeed, it is possibly this sort of scenario where CF can work at its best – forcing public service providers to amend their delivery plans for a period - at a cost, but with clear (and measurable) intended benefits.

Why has programme bending by authorities been limited?

9. Paragraphs 6-8 above provide an important part of the answer to the question of why there are relatively few examples of programme bending. In questioning whether programme bending is 'the solution' it forces consideration of other approaches, which could include improving links between areas of need and areas of opportunity (e.g. through physical links such as cycle routes and walkways; improving access to and frequency of public transport; ensuring broadband availability and training; publicising job/training/volunteering opportunities outside the CF area).

10. However, the WAO made some additional points that are worth repeating. They noted directors of Regeneration will be aware of the CF guidance because it is seen as falling within their remit, but that CF may not have made it on to the radar of directors of other services. This is a significant issue. All large organisations are susceptible to dealing with issues in 'silos' but, at the same time, someone has to be responsible (and accountable) for receiving the guidance and developing a local response. When issues are described as 'cross-cutting' and seen as everyone's responsibility, there is a danger that no-one takes the lead and accountabilities become blurred. The fact, though, that CF has not featured strongly in guidance issued by other service areas of WAG has made it difficult for those involved in regeneration to convince other service areas to change their plans in any radical ways. If their performance appraisal (collectively and individually) contains little or no explicit assessment of how well their service has changed to respond to the needs of CF areas they are unlikely to do other than follow their professional assessment of service need. Moreover, they will see the elected members they report to as having a democratic mandate to represent residents in contrast to the unelected partnerships in CF areas.

11. The WAO also noted that the concept of programme bending is problematic for those authorities with large concentrations of CF areas.
12. Looking ahead, in terms of the potential impact of the Outcomes Fund, the point has already been made about the relatively small size of the Fund. In addition, it will be vitally important to establish mechanisms whereby partnerships can engage in discussions with authorities at the time budgets are being set. Once budgets have been determined it will become more difficult for services make significant changes to their expenditure patterns. Given the financial situation facing public services in general, and local government in particular, it will become increasingly hard for authorities to identify match funding. The flexible attitude adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government (including acceptance of match funding in kind) is welcome in this respect.

Any successful examples or signs of change?

13. The above comments do not, however, mean that authorities have not responded to the challenge of programme bending. There are numerous examples of authorities that have taken positive steps. To give three examples where a corporate approach has been adopted towards CF, integrated as part of the wider community strategy:

Carmarthenshire

14. Carmarthenshire County Council has conducted training in all departments to ensure greater understanding of the Communities First process and to help improve service delivery. Each year, the Council holds a conference which all Directors and Heads of Services are asked to attend. The conferences are designed to explain how Communities First works in the county and how their individual service areas could have a positive impact. The issue of programme bending has been covered extensively and the Council has stressed to staff that it is not only about funding but also about being sensitive to the needs of residents.
15. Examples of programme bending in Carmarthenshire by the Council, directly or working with partners, include:
 - Street scene – officers attend community meetings to ensure responses to local concerns

- Pride in Our community scheme prioritised Felinfoel and Glanymor Communities First areas, working together with the community to reduce fly tipping and to encourage community pride
- Morfa in Glanymor / Tyshia was prioritised for the Welsh Assembly's Flying Start Programme helping to address the needs of young community members, focusing from birth to pre school age with additional support for families
- CCC's Road Safety unit has supported residents of CF areas to work in partnership with local schools to launch a walking bus in May 2006
- Substance Misuse Campaign focusing on substance misuse in Glanymor / Tyshia, delivered by Communities First and partner agencies, supported and funded by Community Safety Partnership and Communities First

Caerphilly

16. Caerphilly CBC and its partners have targeted CF areas where these align with priorities in their community strategy, which covers the entire county borough. New Tredegar was identified as a priority as the most disadvantaged ward in the county borough while Graig y Rhacca stood out as an area in need of a focused social inclusion campaign in the Caerphilly Basin. In this way, the CF programme has reinforced an existing commitment to a form of programme bending providing, in particular, additional resources to enable the local residents to help shape and influence the regeneration initiatives.
17. In New Tredegar, for example, the council agreed to elevate a highways scheme way above its 'normal' highway status because it was identified as the catalyst required to unlock the entire regeneration initiative. The county borough's museum service was relocated to New Tredegar to give a boost to efforts to draw more tourists to the renovated winding house museum. In Graig y Rhacca the housing department brought forward a programme of overcladding to tie in with other regeneration works, the urban renewal section bent grants into the area to support the upgrading of the commercial centre and the highways department bent resources to the estate to provide road humps, requested by the residents following development of a play area on the other side of the estate's outer ring road.

Cardiff

18. Cardiff's Local Services board has sought to mainstream neighbourhood management through its 'Transforming Neighbourhoods' model. It involves high level partnership

commitment to joint problem solving through co-ordinated action. Priorities for action are based on community intelligence and CF partnerships are playing an important role in this respect. Whilst the initiative is still at a relatively early stage there are already examples of the youth service responding to requests to enhance services in CF areas.

What is being done by WLGA to improve the situation?

19. The WLGA has been taking action to improve the connections between the CF programme and local authority planning and service delivery. The main areas of work have included:
 - Promotion of increased cross-partnership working between local government and CF partnerships – including co-ordinated regional meetings to look at ways of facilitating links with other local strategic partnerships
 - Improved liaison and collaboration between WLGA, the Welsh Assembly Government and the CF support organisations (Empower and WCVA)
 - Training and information for CF partnerships and local authority officers and members – including training on programme bending working with WCVA

20. Within the WLGA itself, the Member Development Framework has been adapted to include information on community leadership and working with CF. The WLGA's skills adviser is working with WAG's Communities Directorate and the voluntary sector to provide the Social Inclusion Learning Programme for local government members and officers (currently running in Conwy, Wrexham and Carmarthenshire).

Concluding comments

21. To summarise, there probably *has* been a limited amount of programme bending as a direct result of the CF programme. However, first, this is because some programme bending is already 'built in to the system'. Second, it is important that programmes also focus on opportunity areas *outside* of CF areas, and efforts are made to establish links between areas of opportunity and need. Third, and notwithstanding this, there are some good examples of the CF programme making a difference, influencing expenditure plans and adding value and community benefit. Finally, efforts are being made to improve understanding in local authorities and CF partnerships of how the CF programme can add value, in particular by incorporating the ideas of CF partnerships into mainstream and strategic approaches by community strategy/LSB partners.

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