



Building Resilient Communities

Comment from the Talwrn network;

Talwrn is a network of Welsh voluntary organisations who cooperate on a common goal of supporting communities to become resilient and prosperous. Our members include local organisations with a focus on specific communities as well as some operating county wide and some nationally. Our members' expertise includes community development, social enterprise, youth work, education, learning and employability and social care.

Overview

The Welsh Government's commitment to supporting the development of resilient communities is timely given the increasingly complex challenges that people, families and communities are facing across Wales, especially in poorer areas. The economic uncertainties arising from Brexit, the impacts of further austerity and welfare "reform", the changing nature of work, the impacts of climate change (unevenly experienced) and demographic and technological changes are all throwing up challenges and opportunities for people in Wales that will be experienced in both workplaces and communities.

Importance of Resilient Communities

Resilient communities, especially for people on lower incomes, whose social networks tend to be more localised, are critical for helping their residents both cope with life challenges and to prosper. Resilient communities are places where people access opportunities, support and leisure activities (themselves often a crucial form of support).

The key building blocks of resilient communities are usually seen as:

- Strong social networks which allow people to cooperate locally (horizontal social capital) and influence beyond their boundaries (vertical social capital)
- Diversified regional and sub regional economies which allows people to access work even as specific sectors rise and fall
- Strong local physical infrastructure – and plans in place to cope with shocks (though these mostly relate to impending environmental shocks and are not critical in most parts of Wales)

While resilient communities can be supported or undermined by government action they can neither be created nor destroyed (in democratic states) by Government: critical elements in a resilient community are the product of citizen action or of the state and citizens working together. This is even truer in our current environment where a mix of spending cuts and rising demand for acute health-related services are leading to a retreat by the state in other areas. A resilient

community is fundamentally one whose members can do things for themselves – and often for others in their community – and have the ability to react to shocks.

Welsh Government and Resilient Communities

The current thinking emerging from the Welsh Government offers important support to a number of the building blocks of resilient communities. In particular the focus on early years and on employment makes it more likely that people, especially young people, will be able to access jobs and further/higher education opportunities (which are mostly outside local communities). This is a critical element in ensuring that individuals and families are able to cope with changes to the wider labour market, although as we'll discuss below it has its limitations.

There is also at least a partial recognition of the importance of links between communities and public bodies in the ideas around empowerment, which is intended to ensure a stronger voice for communities in decision making – clearly in line with the principles of the Future Generations Act. However, there remain a number of gaps that need addressing if we are going to maximise our chances of building resilient communities. Empowered communities won't be developed only by asking Public Service Boards and local authorities to take a leadership role. Local authorities have always taken a leadership role and for PSBs taking one will feel fairly natural.

However, that in itself will do little to empower communities, and public bodies will need community bodies to work with if this idea is to have any meaning. In some areas of work, voluntary sector bodies representing “communities of interest” can and do play this role – albeit often with limited input from service users. But for geographical communities there is too often no one with such a role (barring local elected members). To empower geographical communities will require having organisations that can provide that voice either directly, via elected members or through both working together.

And that is where possibly the biggest gap in the Government's initial thinking about resilience becomes clear, which is the recognition of the importance of local networks and relationships (called “horizontal social capital” in the jargon). Filling this gap would have major advantages. Mobilising social capital, in other words encouraging local people to do things together, can bring real concrete benefits to communities and to service providers who work with them. Any Government strategy on resilient communities needs to recognise and build upon what communities already do for themselves, in social settings and through citizens and service providers working together.

Economies and Resilient Communities

The two biggest building blocks of individual and family resilience are good health and an adequate, sustainable income. The focus on resilient communities is often undertaken as compensation of the absence of one of those, usually income, which is usually closely linked to health anyway.

This doesn't mean that discussion around resilient communities should assume and accept that low incomes will be normal but it does have to recognise how likely that will be. Wales currently mixes employment levels higher than the UK average with the second highest levels of poverty in the UK (from JRF's latest report on Poverty and Social exclusion in the UK). This clearly signifies that many jobs are not paying enough to provide a decent standard of living and that an exclusive focus on employment has significant limitations. And a recent study by NEF, New Start and CLES has shown that in many parts of the UK, “traditional economics is not working. While a minority of people

experience increased affluence, many are struggling to get by. The benefits of economic growth are not being spread evenly around the country, or within places”.

But responses to economic challenges may not be most effective at the most local community-level: access to local training is important but if the expected outcome is employment, it needs to be linked to economic development strategies at a district level, local authority-wide and across regions. And to make these strategies work in local areas with rationally weaker economies will require new ways of thinking which retain more of the public spend within communities; thinking on Foundational economies and circular economics are attempts to do this and link strongly to the principles of resilience.

Linked to this is the increasing evidence that a focus on local procurement – ensuring that more work goes to local contractors – genuinely retains wealth within localities (the work in Preston documented by Centre for Local Economic Strategies underlines this) more effectively than simple local recruitment clauses. The former approach is more likely to retain or create permanent jobs while control remains with people who have a clear interest in local prosperity.

And we can't limit ourselves to employment support which just focuses on entry level jobs. Work to develop skills needs to be more ambitious. In addition to focusing on young people without skills, there needs to be support for skills progression to aid individuals to develop resilience when faced with economic uncertainty and change.

Social Capital and Resilient Communities

One of the key elements in communities developing resilience is the quality of relationships between individuals and organisations within a locality and the range of social activities. The degree to which local residents have access to community-based support (such as foodbanks, befriending services, informal childcare – which are critical to the many people's coping strategies), depends entirely on the level of social activity within that community (even if some also involve a degree of external support). Equally important are community-provided leisure activities of all types, which make major contributions to wider well-being and people's sense of happiness.

These activities are increasingly central to the Welsh Government's health and social care agenda (think about social prescribing, public health activities and social care initiatives) and also provide vital complementary activities to parental support programmes and to school-based learning. And the nature of that social activity is critical; the more fun, relaxed and informal the more likely people are to take part. Often the taking part itself brings significant wellbeing benefits but in relaxed settings the chance to offer wider information or services can in many cases become easier.

These activities allow participation by a wide cross-section of residents of any given community, often engaged in complementary or mutually supporting activities. Indeed traditionally volunteering has often been strongly driven by older members of communities (though this is changing), the very group who seem to be absent from the current Welsh Government vision of resilient communities. The initial policy thinking seems to be largely focused around the needs and ambitions of younger (reasonably healthy) people, but communities will be inevitably be stronger and more resilient drawing on the resources of their entire populations – and a resilient community is of more value to its residents if it is inclusive.

Of course Government can't *create* social activity but it can support its development and provide for its nurturing once underway – and it is utterly fundamental to having resilient communities and it is a good in its own right.

If we wish to see communities taking on more responsibilities for themselves there needs to be a clear recognition of how that happens. Involving local people in thinking about what works will make whatever resource one has more effective as it is working with the grain locally not against it – but some resource is essential. These, however, remain public service agendas and need to be delivered as such, albeit with a more effective involvement of communities

This means taking steps to nurture the development of networks and relationships within communities, that can build social networks and ensure that people know each other. Clubs, groups, social events and community activities are not luxuries, but the essential tools for association and social networks. You start with these and resilience can follow. But they need resourcing, they need people to lead them (not necessarily paid but supported), finance to cover buildings/overheads etc. In particular this means supporting organisations who are acting as community 'hubs' or 'anchor' organisations.

These are organisations which understand and can implement asset-based community development approaches to:

- Provide open, accessible and welcoming venues for the whole community to meet and socialise
- Incorporate a high level of volunteering
- Offer venues for different groups to meet
- Actively promote cooperation between different community initiatives and organisations through range of informal and formal networks
- Be willing to act as a 'broker' to support people to find out about and access public services
- Support service providers to work locally within their community (and support them in understanding specific needs within that community)
- Provide venues for community-based support, provided both by outside agencies and through mutual support (e.g. wellbeing groups, advice services, adult learning, food banks – community cafe/ bingo/dance nights/ youth club etc)
- Stimulate community activities (e.g. start by running an event, then support others to run it)
- Provide a quality assurance role in relation to services coming in

These organisations will also be offering flexible opening hours and a welcoming environment for local people so they want to use the facilities. In our experience it's vital that such places feel 'owned' by its users, so they are comfortable dropping in.

Organisations offering this function are already present in many communities (Annex A contains a number of examples of such organisations and their work) but some are in financially vulnerable positions and others, funded largely on contracts, lack the financial freedom to play the wider role described above. A relatively small core funding grant, attached to the roles described above, would allow organisations to ensure they are contributing strongly to making activities and services accessible locally and promoting the links between local groups and outside bodies. Many will also take advantage of the stability that core funding offers to lever in additional funding, and there is clear evidence from the work of the Talwrn network, the Association of Charitable Foundations and the Wales Funders' Forum that there are many UK organisations wishing to invest more in community-based bodies in Wales. Having the guarantee of a small but stable amount of core funding provides a vital platform to expand.

Co-Producing Community Wellbeing?

In Rhondda Cynon Taf public services are working with the third sector to develop a local community wellbeing approach based on the 'Leeds Model', using asset-based community development where most activities are volunteer and community-led. Central to the thinking at present is the long-term support and development of community facilities, which are able to provide information, advice and guidance (including IT facilities) to everyone living locally, as well as specific focus on social services priorities, such as care for older people, learning disabilities and mental health.

Core funding to anchor organisations is intended to promote neighbourhood networks, using asset-based community development approaches to develop a board volunteer 'workforce', supported by a small number of paid staff – a pattern recognisable in many of the successful community hubs existing across Wales at present (see appendix for more examples).

Within this approach, locally-based community coordinators work with public services to develop early intervention and prevention services in local communities that are open, accessible and well promoted.

Commissioned services will add value to the local offer, supported and coordinated to address local needs through the local community facility.

This function, and the huge contribution it would play to the development and nurturing of social capital locally, is central to the development of resilient communities. It also contributes strongly to the community elements of the recent proposals set out in *Prosperity without Poverty* from Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Of course, organisations with the capacity to play this role do not exist in every community that needs them, and in some places similar roles are played by local authorities. However, there are limits to what local authorities can do compared to independent community bodies (for example around facilitating working between local community groups or helping people influence services) and more bureaucratic working practices can also hold them back from being as open and flexible as many independent-run facilities.

Supporting capacity in local communities will enhance local activities for residents, link communities and external service providers, and help unlock volunteer potentials. The types of actions that strong 'anchor' organisations support or facilitate contribute strongly towards helping the same people that Government programmes are targeting for a modest investment.

And many such organisations are also well placed to effectively deliver local services, in areas ranging from social care to elements of family support and employability, as well as hosting their provision by others. This offers the scope for more locally sensitive services delivered in appropriate venues, but is likely to need a shift towards smaller scale, more flexible procurement or commissioning arrangements than are widely used at present.

Welsh communities may not be as tight knit or as active as nostalgic stereotypes suggest, but there is still much to build upon in many areas that offers real value to local residents and could offer more.