

Weathering The Storms – The hidden value of Community Anchor Organisations in Wales

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Executive summary

This report is based on previous research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council¹ which bore witness to what happened to two established community organisations², who delivered the Communities First programme³ locally, from the announcement of its likely closure in October 2016 to its actual termination in March 2018. As well as documenting what happened to the two community organisations as they lost staff and income and tried to re-establish themselves, the research looked to the organisations themselves. What made them different to other voluntary sector organisations, what do they do, and what do they see as their value? We concluded that much of what they did and valued was beyond the gaze of formal evaluations and was often at odds with the unrealistic and sometimes damaging expectations of, and process set by, Welsh Government, as well as the local state. We also started to use the term ‘Community Anchor Organisations’, as they are part of a social infrastructure which responds in a multiplicity of ways to emerging community concerns and ambitions. When their existence is threatened, so too are a web of productive relationships and partnerships which link individuals and small community groups to each other, and to organisations that have the potential power and resources to improve people’s living and working conditions.

This report turns its gaze to Anchors from other parts of Wales with differing longevities. Whilst recognising the dangers of using the term Community Anchors too readily, as a catch-all phrase and to ignore the complexities of communities themselves, we felt that it was important to understand what they are, what they contribute to the wellbeing of communities, and how they challenge and influence the development of policy, public services, and the economy of Wales as a whole.

We think this paper complements other grassroots and networked community developments in Wales: the nascent Community Movement Cymru; the Talwrn network; the Building Communities Trust manifesto. Taken collectively, and with the upcoming Senedd and local elections, there is scope to influence and reinvigorate a post-pandemic vision for Welsh communities.

Key Insights

Central characteristics of Community Anchor Organisations

- Community Anchor Organisations see themselves as serving communities that are locally meaningful and recognisable, though may not map onto formal administrative boundaries. Their buildings, and their operation, are important symbols of identity and resources for community living.

¹ <https://productivemargins.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/projects/community-anchor-organisations/>

² The 3Gs Community Development Trust in Merthyr Tydfil and the South Riverside Community Development Centre in Riverside, Cardiff.

³ Welsh Government’s regeneration/anti-poverty programme from 2002-2018

- They are independent of the state and are run for the community, by the community (as much as possible), and (ideally) accountable to the community. They can be partners with, and challengers of, the State, as well as be under contract to it to deliver commissioned services.
- They are quite distinct from, and should not be mistaken for, Local Authority led hubs.
- They are values led. Though explicit to different degrees, their mission shapes everything they do including strategy, income generation, governance, staffing, use of buildings, and working practices. A commitment to inclusion and diversity is driven by a sense of fairness and justice.
- They hold contextual knowledge and expertise nurtured over the years and developed through practices that focus on the dynamics within the places in which they are located. Asset based community development is usually a core (professional) practice and they see the capacities of local people as the most important asset in driving change.
- Longer established Anchors tend to have a mission that has broadened and diversified widely beyond the single cause or issue that prompted their initial set-up.
- The knowledge and trust that they have built enables them to respond swiftly, effectively, and appropriately to local concerns. This has been particularly important during Covid-19.
- They are central to a web of relationships, internally between people and local groups, and externally to other third and public sector organisations.

How they operate

- Most organisations derive income from multiple sources. Apart from grant programme and project funding, other sources of income include opportunistic funding, local giving, donations, legacies or are self-funded through service agreements or trading. They all face challenges regarding sustainability and in holding true to their core mission in the face of funding requirements.
- Although the organisations vary in terms of structure there is usually a blending of roles with managers also taking on frontline activities. There is often a strong culture of delegation and dispersed styles of decision-making. Capacity building is critical at all levels of involvement (board, staff, and volunteers), though time consuming.
- Leadership is seen as key to a successful organisation. However, there was caution levelled against individual heroic leadership and an emphasis on dispersed leadership and recognising and nurturing leadership skills throughout the organisation.
- Overall, there is an effort to employ local people meaning commutes are shorter and greener; people's caring responsibilities are accommodated better; and people buy and shop locally.
- Buildings and their ownership provide the organisations with a visual sense of local identity, a safe place to gather, a sense of local ownership and a means to consolidate a sense of independence. However, the COVID-19 lockdowns have presented a challenge to find alternative spaces and activities to achieve similar ends.
- Community organisations play a key role in developing confidence to participate in society and there was a resentment that these outcomes are seen as 'soft'. Examples were provided of projects, and core community development practices, where the development of confidence and learning, by stealth, led to people taking on leadership roles or taking on forms of formal education, training and employment which would not otherwise have happened.

Relationships and Networks

- Experience of working with public sector partners is mixed, often depending on the nature of individual relationships developed over time. Social prescribing is currently an area where there are productive relationships being forged with primary care and Local Health Boards.

However, many Anchors felt that local authority staff fail to understand what they do, or where they are commissioned by public bodies to deliver a service, are considered subservient in a hierarchical client-contractor relationship

- The potential for Anchors' ideas to be 'colonised' – a cuckoo effect – is an 'occupational hazard' of working with the public sector. Co-production could mitigate this hazard, but public bodies still lack understanding how to engage with genuinely co-productive approaches.
- Any power that Anchors retain is largely because of their independence from the state and distinctiveness to how public bodies operate. Many Anchors' individual identity has been shaped by this contrast with what/whom they are *not*.
- There is a weak sense of collective identity with other Anchors in Wales, which accounts, along with a lack of resource and time, for why this distinct sector currently lacks a strong collective national voice.

Future Directions?

- Analysis of the role of Anchors in, and their value to, civil society from a Scottish perspective appears to be further developed than in Wales.
- Consider Community Anchor Organisations in foundational economic thinking and innovation alongside other anchor institutions. In particular universities, as anchor institutions, have a potential role to play in developing a genuinely co-productive research agenda with Community Anchor Organisations across Wales.
- That the Scottish Community Alliance can find "no examples of sustained community empowerment without some such locally embedded [anchor] organisation" is a powerful statement and one which demands further scrutiny and application in a Welsh context, irrespective of the seeming demise of Welsh Government's Empowerment strand in post-Communities First community policy.

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