

Helping People Find Work and Building Community Resilience

**Consultation
Focus Groups Report
25th September– 3rd October 2017**

**WCVA Communities First Support Service
on behalf of
Cardiff Council**

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1. Introduction

This report reflects on the key messages to arise in a series of focus groups held with service users, volunteers and community members in the current Cardiff Communities First clusters.

Cardiff Council is currently undertaking a wide-ranging consultation following the decision by Welsh Government to end the Communities First Programme. The rationale for the consultation is set out in Cardiff Council's briefing paper, "Helping People Find Work and Building Community Resilience".

This report is not a summary of discussions (full transcripts of each session are available) but a reflection of the fears and aspirations of communities, thus highlighting gaps as well as opportunities towards the building of resilient communities.

2. Communities First in Cardiff

Communities First was launched in 2001 as a long-term Welsh Government programme, aimed at the regeneration of some of the most deprived communities in Wales. It developed into the Welsh Government's flagship anti-poverty programme. In Cardiff, Communities First has been delivered through four third sector organisations known as clusters since 2012/13:

- **BRG** - Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown hosted by South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC)
- **STAR** - Splott, Tremorfa, Adamsdown and Plasnewydd hosted by Cardiff Community Housing Association (CCHA)
- **ACE** - Ely and Caerau, with Fairwater hosted by Action for Ely and Caerau (ACE)
- **ECLP** - Llanedeyrn and Pentwyn - Rumney, Llanrumney, Llanedeyrn, Pentwyn, St Mellons and Trowbridge hosted by Cardiff Third Sector Council (C3SC)

In October 2016, Carl Sargeant, Cabinet Secretary of Communities and Children announced that he was "minded" to phase out the Communities First programme. This decision was confirmed in February 2017.

A new approach to the building of resilient communities was announced by Welsh Government alongside the decision to close Communities First. There will be no new programme but a new approach focused on employment, early years and empowerment will be developed.

With the closure of Communities First, Welsh Government is making the following funding available to Local Authorities from April 2018,

- Employability Grant focused on providing the infrastructure for the continuing Communities for Work programme.
- The Legacy Fund focussed on developing new or maintaining the most effective aspects of the Communities First Programme to support the development of resilient communities.
- Community Facilities Programme – Third sector organisations can submit bids to Welsh Government for capital grant funding for facilities that contribute to the community

3. The Focus Groups

Focus groups were held in all four Cardiff clusters at dates and venues set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Dates Venues and Participant Numbers of Focus Groups

Cluster	Date	Venue	Participant Numbers
BRG	25/09/2017	Grangetown Hub	10
STAR	28/09/2017	Splott Communities First Office	8
ECLP	29/09/2017	Rumney Hub	3
ACE	02/10/2017	Dusty Forge, Ely	16
ACE	03/10/2017	Dusty Forge, Ely	5

All focus groups followed a common format around the following questions:

Question 1: Which Communities First project(s) have you been involved with?

Question 2: In what ways did the project(s) help you?

Question 3: What concerns might you have regarding the closure of Communities First?

Question 4: Are there services you feel you may need to access in future?

Question 5a: How are you currently involved in your community?

Question 5b: Are there ways in which you would like to be involved?

Numbers at each session were variable but represented a cross section of ages as well as sections of the community, involved in a wide range of activities.

The number of participants in Rumney was low. This group were the only ones who voiced some issues with Communities First but it is difficult to gauge, because of low numbers, whether these were general concerns in this part of Cardiff.

4. Key roles of Communities First

This section outlines the key roles people felt Communities First had in their areas.

4.1 Access to training, volunteering and employment

A major theme to emerge from all the focus groups was the importance of the low level, community development type activities used by Communities First to encourage, motivate and support people. There were many testimonials evidencing how this approach had benefitted individuals and how people had been engaged through for example litter picks, community murals or social activities.

“They suck you in” said one volunteer describing how popping in to a Communities First office had led to her accessing training.

- ***“I have been here for 12 years and over those years it has been wonderful watching people grow, seeing their confidence and self-esteem increase. People who could not read or write have now got government jobs and gone to college. It is a wonderful achievement! This is what spurs me on.”*** Ely participant.

Another Ely participant said, ***“You start off being involved in one thing but that leads on to being involved in others.”***

One participant in Grangetown described people as ***“blooming”*** through Communities First. This echoed similar comments throughout and a belief that the ‘growing people approach’ was important for accessing hard to reach groups.

- ***“They are steps towards accessing English classes, applying for jobs, being able to support your children with their learning.”*** Grangetown participant.

Being local was important to people.

- ***“One vital thing about Communities First is that it is local. If you move the courses away, immediately cost is involved, when it is local you don’t have to have bus fare or childcare expenses.”*** Ely participant.

There was concern about how people would access services without the Communities First presence.

- ***“How do we access it once you remove Communities First? Who goes and sits in that community for five or seven days a week and gets the customers?”*** Grangetown participant.

Even when people sought out support from other organisations, inconvenient opening times or limited appointment slots could be a barrier.

4.2 A joined up approach

Some people accessed Communities First via their use of other Projects, Services or Activity promoted but not led by Communities First Individuals spoke of their use of foodbanks, second hand clothing resources, cooking on a budget courses to name just a few examples. This was all part of the supportive flexible approach most people experienced.

It was not always clear from the discussions which elements of activity were funded or delivered directly by Communities First. There was however a sense that Communities First provided the underpinning by facilitating activity (even if funded from elsewhere) e.g. Providing accommodation for courses or activities and encouraging participation through promotion and signposting.

- **“I can’t say it was them that did it, it was probably the things they promoted helped me I suppose” Rumney participant.**

People seemed to be unclear on the suggested way forward in the absence of the Communities First programme.

- ***“They’re saying it’s going to be early years, empowerment and employment. So you can have as much help as you want until you turn eight and then from when you’re eight until you’re 16 you’re not important enough. But then when you’re 16 and unemployable there will be stuff for you.”*** Splott participant.

In Rumney one person felt that Communities First could work with other organisations, (Red Cross was mentioned) to maximise resources.

Time credits were an important bridging mechanism mentioned in four of the five sessions. These could then be used to enhance people’s lives. The benefits included enjoyment e.g. the ability to go on trips, visit the theatre as well as practical benefits e.g. getting a haircut.

4.3 Attitude and ethos

People felt that Communities First worked because it had a friendly, approachable, non-judgemental attitude.

- ***“The staff are like human hubs. The best thing Communities First did for me was gave me my identity back.”*** Splott participant.

Some people compared this to accessing other services in other spaces within their communities.

- ***“There not people in suits. They’re relaxed and nice and friendly.”*** Splott participant.

Simple things like the offer of a cup of tea when walking through the door, the time to listen to people and patience provided for many. The encouragement they needed to

volunteer or attend a course. As discussed above, this led to attending courses and training.

- ***“One gentleman came into the centre, lay down on the floor and said he wanted to commit suicide. A couple of months ago, about six months afterwards, he applied for a course. That’s massive. That’s an extreme example but would he have got that elsewhere?”*** Grangetown participant.

Rumney was the only focus group where the attitude and ethos was not a major factor. Here one participant felt that if Communities First were not there, another organisation would deliver the service.

4.4 Community cohesion

Communities First provides a space that is open to **all** in the community. Its services are not aimed at particular ages, backgrounds, employment status etc. Indeed, some of the most successful projects included a cross section of people e.g. the young man who attends the ***“knit and natter”*** session.

- ***“We worked on a local art project, but soon became involved with other projects and people came from other groups to join ours, lots of kids and young people.”*** Ely participant.

Communities First has given many a feeling of being part of a community.

- ***“Through volunteering we get taught community cohesion.”*** Splott participant.

People in Splott feared that the fragmentation of services in a local area, if aimed at specific groups, would undermine community cohesion.

People stressed the need for a base from which to get things going and small amounts of money for room booking etc.

Supporting local communication was an important role in building community cohesion. In Splott there was a concern about the loss of the Spotlight newsletter as an important way of accessing information. In Ely, the Grassroots publication was mentioned but this is not produced by Communities First. Several people said they had found Communities First by social media but word of mouth within a community was also important.

4.5 Supporting health and well-being (especially mental health)

People described how, before engaging with Communities First, they lacked confidence, motivation and experienced mental health issues.

- ***“I feel so much better about myself”*** Ely participant.
- ***“It’s given me a sense of worth, even though I’m not working”*** Splott participant.

Community based engagement activities helped to address lack of self-esteem and gives purpose to lives. How this led on to volunteering, training and employment and opportunities for people have already been commented on above.

The ability of Communities First to support wellbeing clubs and similar activity addressing stress, anxiety and confidence was a common theme in the groups. Losing the health aspect of any future approach was perceived as a major threat.

5. Priorities for local communities

In summary the priorities for people, to emerge from the focus groups included the need for:

- An approachable, friendly, non-judgemental interface with the community.
- An accessible service which is partly about where something is located, partly about the ethos discussed above but fundamentally about flexibility to see the potential of individuals and help them with their barriers.
- Recognition of the value of confidence building, addressing mental health and wellbeing needs in a supportive environment.
- A long-term commitment to a community in a way that is joined up, not just a series of project based interventions.
- A whole community approach.

Most focus groups spoke about the need for services aimed at all sections of a community. In Rumney, some specific groups such as young people and single mothers were perceived to be the most detrimentally impacted by the ending of Communities First.

In the short-term people have very practical questions about what to do following Communities First closure along the lines of, “where do we go for...?“, “who do we talk to?”

6. Community participation and engagement

Cardiff Council has said in its own research that it needs to reach out to people and engage them in services.

The focus groups shone some light on how people feel they can participate in their communities and engage in decision making.

People who attended focus groups were, in the main, already heavily involved in their communities ranging from running breakfast clubs, community history projects, school projects and many more. Their priority, following the closure of Communities

First, is to secure future funding, premises and volunteers to enable their initiatives to continue.

Some people had ideas for new initiatives, including new community activities to foster community cohesion, social events for the elderly and a new Parent Teacher Association (PTA). In order to pursue these ideas, people will need support with funding, regulation as well as skills to get organised and publicise new activities. Practical help such as support with a venue may also be needed.

Where organisations like ACE continue to exist, people will continue to seek help from these sources. Where offices are closing people are unsure where they can go and who they can talk to. In Rumney, there was an assumption that another organisation would fill the space left by Communities First. In the other groups, there was a feeling that opportunities for involvement will be reduced if the staff employed by the programme are lost.

The best method for engaging with communities it was felt was to support community events and simply come out and talk to people.

7. What this means for building community resilience

Cardiff Council has highlighted a need for a more coherent service across the City, while adjusting to the reduced funding that will be available. This report ends with some reflections on what conclusions can be drawn from the focus groups about the shape of such a service across the City.

- Firstly, the importance of people and local groups in communities with the right skills e.g. flexible, responsive and engage people through positive attitudes and a friendly face. Trust is an important factor in the successful engagement of the hardest to reach people.

This means supporting a culture and community networks to support people and act as a focus for the sort of cohesive communities on which resilient communities are built.

- Secondly to understand the value of social activity and small-scale action in the community e.g. litter picks. These have impacts of their own but have much wider significance in getting people into volunteering, training and employment.
- Thirdly and finally the need to keep talking to people through as many avenues as possible.

These three things underpin all the feedback from the focus groups.