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Active communities: resilience and renewal

A Strategy for Community Development
in the North West of England

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Summary

Embedding, spreading and safeguarding community development in the NW

Community development (CD) will make an important practical contribution to building the 'big society' in this region. Over the past two years we have developed a report and a strategy to show how CD values and skills are being used in practical ways to improve life for communities.

This document sets out our vision of how this experience can be taken forward over the next ten years. It is based on discussions with key players working with communities in the North West.

The policy context has changed recently but the main proposals remain important. A number of organisations can work together to take forward the proposals (suggested partners are indicated in brackets):

Championing the approach

(Suggested partners are indicated inside the brackets)

- Take the report to the NWIEP, Partnerships Commission, sub regional groups, CDX/CDF, strategic leads in Local Authorities for neighbourhoods (NNW/NWTWC)
- Ascertain possibilities for networking around CD and CD type approaches (CNW; CDX)
- Promote the strategy among community activists (NWCAN, NWTRA, CNW)

Education and training

- Identify and promote training in CD practice for people working with communities in the North West (Universities, colleges, independent trainers and consultants, FCDL, CDX, NNW/NWTWC)
- Promote CD-type skills that can be used for empowerment and to improve services (HCA)
- Link CD skills into learning and support for community organisers and community activists (NWCAN, CDX, FCDL)

Evidence and efficiencies

- Promote understanding of existing frameworks for evaluating the impact and value of CD, notably the ABCD and Social Return on Investment models (CDF, CDX)
- Demonstrate the CD contribution to Productive Place (NNW/NWTWC to action)
- Explore possibilities of shared services through city regions and sub regional basis (promoted through NWIEP structures)

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England

VISION

In twenty years' time, communities across the region will be empowered, healthy, resilient and cohesive. The community sector will be thriving and there will be widespread recognition of its fundamental place in the third sector and in society as a whole. Poverty and disadvantage will have been substantially reduced through the enterprise and creativity of communities. Services will be improved through communities' influence on public authorities and the private sector. The regional economy will be at the forefront of ecological progress. This will be achieved through the support of a thriving community development occupation, well networked across the region, recognised by authorities as having a key role in their engagement with communities, and adequately resourced to carry out this role.

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the great engines of the industrial revolution the North West has played a major part in the evolution of modern Britain. By the same token it has also had to undergo the most strenuous adaptations in the past one or two generations as heavy industry has given way to the knowledge economy and globalisation. Equally, the NW has been one of the regions in the forefront of every new wave of migration during the 20th and now the 21st century. Parts of the region remain extensively rural and have undergone the very different kinds of change that affect such areas. The challenges facing people working in dispersed rural communities contrast highly with those faced by urban workers.

Community development (CD) has been and remains an intrinsic part of social and economic development. By its nature, however, community development works largely behind the scenes, out of the glare of political and media headlines. But it is fundamental to overcoming poverty, spreading prosperity, coping with social change and invigorating democracy. CD's cross-cutting role, working simultaneously in several policy areas, means that its impact can easily be lost amongst these prominent themes. One consequence of this is lack of recognition and resources in high profile programmes; another is a sense of isolation and 'invisibility' amongst those who are dedicated to carrying it out. These are among the conclusions of *The Community Development Challenge*¹, the only direct analysis of CD produced by the last government, which is proving of equal if not even greater significance after the 2010 election. Created by a working party drawing on a variety of perspectives, the report issued a dual challenge:

- to government and authorities to use CD better, and
- to CD practitioners and champions to be more visible and effective.

It concluded with a raft of recommendations about improving training, management, co-ordination and the evidence base. The present strategy is about taking forward its recommendations in the North West.

The work of devising this regional strategy, begun under the previous administration, has become if anything even more pertinent after the establishment of the Coalition government. The issues addressed by community development are fundamental to the life of the nation, and the Government's programme to reduce the national deficit will inevitably put additional strain on communities in terms of unemployment, housing, amenities, education and health. The Government's 'big society' theme recognises the crucial role of local community activity, neighbourhood groups and community organising. There is an urgent need for the proponents of 'big society' to enter into dialogue with community development, with its long-term perspective and in-depth experience of how all the major issues interact in the real lives of local communities.

¹ *The Community Development Challenge*, Communities and Local Government, 2006

This strategy is therefore relevant to two audiences.

- Firstly, 'outward facing', to those who, whether as policy-makers, public service managers or simply as citizens, are concerned with ensuring the best future for the north west, who may know little about CD and need to know more in order to make decisions about what role it should play in the region over the next five, ten and twenty years;
- Secondly, 'inward facing', to those who are directly concerned with CD, familiar with it and need to decide how they can best promote and implement it over this period.

A common vision for community development, as set out at the head of this document, should link these two perspectives.

What would be the practical components for fulfilling such a vision? CD would be playing a key role in each of the major policy areas: health, cohesion, housing, education, environment, employment, safety. These in turn would be contributing resources to strengthen community life, both in financial terms and in the form of staff time. A wide variety of front line staff in different occupations would contribute to community development and empowerment², guided and coordinated by dedicated and experienced CD workers. Evidence of the impact of CD, both qualitative and quantitative, would be systematically collected, analysed and reported. This evidence would provide public authorities with important insights and intelligence about the concerns, aspirations and capacity of their populations. The culture of statutory bodies and major voluntary organisations and authorities would reflect an understanding of community perspectives. Each local and sub-regional area would be drawing on all these ideas and information to meet its particular needs and priorities.

² As set out in *Empowerment Skills for All*, HCA, 2009

Part One:

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT FOR MANAGING CONTINUING TRANSITION IN THE NORTH WEST

Definition

Community development is a movement, a method and an occupation. It supports the creation, development and sustainability of independent local community groups. CD is the only occupation which has this as a core purpose and method. It also creates the conditions and capacity for more effective and inclusive community empowerment and engagement by strengthening local 'belonging' and addressing inequalities.

The Community Development Challenge³ defines the scope of the occupation in terms of six cumulative functions:

- helping people find common cause on issues that affect them
- helping people work together on such issues under their own control
- building the strengths and independence of community groups, organisations and networks
- building equity, inclusiveness participation and cohesion amongst people and their groups and organisations
- empowering people and their organisations to influence and help transform public policies and services and other factors affecting their lives
- advising and informing public authorities on community needs, viewpoints and processes and assisting them to strengthen communities and work in genuine partnership with them.

There is a fundamental link between CD and the vitality of the local community and voluntary sectors. Without CD there would be fewer and less effective local community organisations. CD helps communities of interest or identity to organise groups which meet regularly, improve life in particular localities and influence the agencies that deliver services for people living in these areas.

³ *The Community Development Challenge*, Ibid, p5

The word 'independent' should be emphasised: most other occupations work with people as individuals or, if in groups, as groups organised by a public agency, whether as pupils, patients or in some other way. Only CD works to support groups which define and pursue their own goals. This is a sophisticated role which is usually performed behind the scenes and therefore receives little recognition. The aim is that the groups themselves become more confident and empowered so that their actions reflect what local people want. This is one of the reasons why CD is not as widely visible and understood as its importance warrants.

Another under-valued aspect of CD is its work in assisting public agencies to engage with and respond to the complex inner workings of communities. Formal consultations typically capture only a tiny (and often atypical) proportion of responses. Citizen panels can be more illuminating but the dynamics and diversity of local communities can only be properly understood through [long term] direct contact with those key groups which build social capital and take up local issues.

Finally it should be acknowledged that whilst CD has a number of techniques that can and should be used by many occupations, it needs a skilled and dedicated profession to apply it in areas of multiple disadvantage, gather and disseminate expertise and guide its more general use.

Investment and evidence

The CD workforce has been significantly depleted by the ending of Neighbourhood Renewal and New Deal for Communities. It faces further cuts at the present time. About half its number work in the voluntary and community sector and half in public services. Both local authority teams and voluntary sector contracts will be at risk. Lack of visibility and voice is a critical problem. A business case is needed.

Major strides have been achieved over recent years in beginning to pull together, from both new and long-standing sources, compelling evidence of CD's indispensable role in enabling society to tackle social exclusion, cope with change and solve socio-economic problems. Examples from within the region are featured in a companion paper to this strategy⁴. Amongst the most vital forms of evidence, at a time when many communities are facing a decline in jobs and resources, are those which show how CD has revived people's capacity for positive action and co-operation on a whole-neighbourhood basis. Long-term evidence of the ability of CD to 'turn around' whole neighbourhoods emerged from Birmingham and elsewhere over the past

⁴ Alison Gilchrist, *Challenging Community Development in the North West*, NWTWC, 2010

generation⁵, while evidence from the US shows that an entire city can be reinvigorated in this way if CD is implemented consistently from a pivotal position within the local authority⁶.

Newer forms of evidence have emerged from the inclusion of community perceptions in the national indicators (NI) established in 2008. An in-depth analysis of results by a team including Liz Richardson of Manchester University⁷ shows that feelings of influence are affected by whether people feel their views are listened to and acted on. This will be crucial during the inevitable stresses of the coming period, and community development is essential to achieve high quality community participation in decision-making and local initiatives.

Ensuring capacity

There is a plethora of evidence that can be drawn on to make a business case for CD, and there are relevant new initiatives of this kind emerging. IDeA's 'Network of Empowering Authorities' had a hub on making the business case for empowerment⁸ and the DH-sponsored Health Empowerment Leverage Project ('HELP'), hosted by the NHS Alliance, is gathering evidence on the economic value of CD in the health sector.

Making a business case for 'investing to save' is one thing. In present conditions the case for CD rests even more strongly on the necessity to boost the capacity of individuals and communities to confront increasing economic stress, and to ensure that people feel they have some say in how difficult decisions are made. Every regional strategy for the coming ten years should include CD to improve the involvement of communities in the design and implementation of policies that are likely to affect their lives.

This means ensuring that CD expertise in the region, gained over many years and through various programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal, the New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Management, Community Led Planning and initiatives by individual local authorities, is retained and reinforced. The 'Total Place' initiative – which began as an experiment in Cumbria and has now become part of mainstream government thinking – started out with an intention of 'putting the citizen at the centre' but has yet to bear this out. With its special link, the North West should be the first to find a way to inject a genuine element of community participation and values into the Total Place framework.

We propose therefore that public bodies in the North West should:

⁵ *Civil Renewal: Mending the Hole in the Social Ozone Layer*, Dick Atkinson, Brewin Books, 2004
www.brewinbooks.com

⁶ Jim Diers, *Neighbour Power: Building Community the Seattle Way*, University of Washington Press, 2004

⁷ *Citizens and Local Decision Making: What Drives Feelings of Influence*, Rachel Newton et al, Urban Forum and others, 2010; www.urbanforum.org.uk/research-reports/citizens-and-local-decision-making

⁸ see www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/15649001 and MacDonald and Barnes, *Business Case Tool for Community Empowerment*, IDeA, 2010

- reaffirm the principle that local populations must be supported by community development to assist them to play an active part in continuing socio-economic change over the next ten and twenty years
- recognise that some communities need particular forms of support due to the preponderance of older or younger people and levels of population turn-over
- consolidate levels of CD resources within city-regions and public authorities at all levels, coordinate resources across authority boundaries and ensure availability of grants and contracts for communities and voluntary organisations
- 'community proof' policies to ensure that they do not inadvertently have an adverse affect on community life and involve communities in helping to resolve shared problems through innovation and negotiation
- map the provision of CD across the region and take steps to fill gaps and raise standards where it is weak, especially in areas of multiple disadvantage
- engage in friendly critique of holistic initiatives such as Salford's 'Life Chances' to ensure that they integrate the value of community life and community development
- draw together both qualitative and quantitative evidence of community development impacts from both long and short term initiatives, and demonstrate their economic, social and environmental value
- work with networks of community development advocates and experienced staff to advance the above objectives.

Part Two

ACTION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FIELD

Any regional strategy at this time is necessarily a combination of external factors such as the threat to CD jobs from public service cuts, and of internal factors such as how the community of CD staff and champions can maximise their skills, efforts and impact. This section describes some of the actions by CD practitioners and champions that will be necessary to achieve the vision set out at the beginning of this strategy.

Evidence and business case

Evidence of the impact of community development will be particularly important in the coming period, both in terms of CD's intrinsic objectives and in terms of its contribution to health, mental health, education, social welfare, employment, environment and other issues.

The way that objectives are set and evidence is collected should show a clear focus on outcomes - what CD can achieve, and how you measure success. This is how it can demonstrate its value to government, local public agencies, programme managers, funders and communities themselves. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁹ has demonstrated that community development does not need to be resource intensive. A 'light touch' approach, by which a skilled CD professional is available to help community groups at crucial stages in their development, to 'trouble-shoot' and to help them link up with others in similar positions, has been found to be successful and extremely cost-effective.

CD is a necessity, not a luxury, especially in disadvantaged areas. Its value is understood well by its direct beneficiaries but there is a need to demonstrate to councillors and other decision-makers that it is cost-effective, leads to efficiency savings, makes a real impact and has positive benefits, for example in reducing complaints and improving services for marginalised communities. CD champions need to be equipped to make the business case so that colleagues can be persuaded to use a CD approach. Without being too rigid or bureaucratic it ought to be possible to indicate scale of outcome for a certain level of investment, for example how many community groups you could expect to support by deploying one CD worker.

CD urgently needs to be able to demonstrate how it can influence service delivery and effectiveness, including how it can help to save resources for the public purse. CD evaluation should include making use of relevant government indicators, especially those on cohesion,

⁹ Taylor, M. et al. (2007) Changing neighbourhoods: lessons from the JRF Neighbourhood programme

influence, volunteering and whether public bodies are helping the local voluntary and community sector to thrive. New techniques for demonstrating value, such as the Social Return on Investment¹⁰ could be used, and CD should engage in vigorous debate on supposedly holistic models of public resources, showing how much they miss by including so little of the value produced by communities with CD assistance.

Promoting and growing the occupation

It may seem unduly optimistic to think that the CD occupation could grow at a time when nearly all publicly-funded occupations face potentially substantial cuts. However, the occupation can still grow in breadth through its influence on other roles so long as a sufficient cohort of experienced core workers remains. To counter the risk that area-based grants will be cut, entailing major losses of CD jobs, resources for CD should be mainstreamed via sub regional and city-region multi-agency partnerships as well as through LSPs, and CD across a locality should be co-ordinated through area-based teams, multi-agency frameworks or neighbourhood management partnerships. A model for coordination should be piloted and then rolled out across the region.

Experience and research have shown potential for many other occupations to make a bigger contribution to community development and empowerment through some aspects of their own work¹¹. What has to be forcefully conveyed to decision makers is that whilst these CD contributions can be widely extended, they depend in turn on the guidance of a certain minimum core of experienced CD workers. Job titles and descriptions should be clear about how core practitioners should work with others - volunteers, activists, councillors and other front line workers, whilst keeping a central focus on supporting the community sector's ability to maximise its own forms of collective self-help and to engage with public services and decision-making.

CD practitioners and champions should set up networks at sub regional and city-region levels, and a set of CD workers in each local authority should be deployed through the LSPs, working as teams on the priority themes, and using a multi-agency approach. These should help to avoid duplication and competition for resources, as well as encouraging cross-professional working, for example with health trainers, regeneration officers, tenant participation officers and others. Existing sources of mapping information, such as the recent CDF/CDX survey of people working in community development¹², should be consulted to ensure a good overview of the occupation across the region, sub regions and localities. Action should be taken to ensure that communication and dialogue about CD

¹⁰ Developed by the New Economics Foundation with IDeA and the Office of the Third Sector

¹¹ Research from the Homes and Communities Agency looked at this – see www.hcaacademy.co.uk/empowerment-skills-for-all

¹² This reference should be added when the report becomes available.

draws in the diversity of people using CD as an approach without it necessarily being in their job title.

It should also be reaffirmed that the activist role can be an important stepping stone into the profession, and it is part of the professional role to pass on the necessary skills to those who seek to take this route. The CD networks should help to negotiate with universities and training bodies to ensure that experiential learning is fully valued and that there are accreditation and apprenticeship schemes to build on this.

CD practitioners also need to do more work with elected members, for example in relation to their roles as community leaders, committee chairs, members of scrutiny panels and indeed leaders of the Council.

Training and networks

All the above factors imply some rethinking of CD training – both its content and its accessibility. Again, mapping the existing availability of training would be a necessary baseline. It is not clear at present where in the region one would be able to obtain CD skills at various levels. A central directory of training opportunities and resources in the region, regularly updated, would be essential. This would be likely to reveal many gaps in present provision. At present there is a yawning gap between short basic courses, such as taster sessions, and foundation degrees. This needs to be filled by a number of intermediate steps, including in-service, work-based training, and there should be guidance for different progression routes. There is a major problem of knowing where to go to get suitable qualifications as people move through from activist to worker, to manager and possibly on to other roles.

Advanced skills would be needed for a greater focus on joined-up working through inter-agency partnerships, especially where these involve community-run organisations. Community representatives and CD workers should be equipped to claim and use a 'place at the table' in inter-professional planning such as might follow from sustainable community strategies or Total Place. There should be experiential and peer-exchange opportunities for learning, possibly through on-line modules leading to validated qualifications. And there should also be training in CD for other people concerned with working with communities – councillors, policy makers, managers and front-line staff in other occupations.

Occupational Standards for community development are a useful instrument for showing funders and employers that CD is an authentic occupation with verifiable standards. Ways may need to be found to develop existing standards to provide in-service training and support for career progression. CD managers should have direct experience of fieldwork, and practitioners should be encouraged to grow into managers. There could be exploration

of organising joint training and learning with related fields which share similar concerns and challenges.

There are already a number of third sector networks, but it would be helpful to have a dedicated CD network that could facilitate exchanges and learning across the region and sub-regions, linked perhaps to FCDL, CDX and NAVCA. Links to existing regional and national networks should be encouraged, e.g. via NNW, TWCNW, VSNW and the empowerment practitioners' forum.

Conclusion

In the region's readjustments over recent decades, community development has played a much greater part than most people would realise. Now in the face of yet another wave of economic, social and political change, it is vital that the skills, values and knowledge of this occupation are once again mobilised to help people cope with, and so far as possible control, the changes that affect them. But this time, given the extreme financial pressures and social and political volatility, it is important that the role of community development is more widely understood. 'People must be at the heart of our Regional Strategy, as ultimately it is the people of the region, their health, talents and quality of life who will define our region, our businesses and our communities'¹³ We would add: people not just as individuals but as groups, networks and communities. In isolation, people are powerless. Together they can solve problems, exert influence and build a common future. That is the simple but decisive difference that community development makes.

¹³ 2.3 RS2010, Regional Strategy for England's North West, Principles and Issues paper, 2009 (undated)

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