Resilient and empowered communities:
A discussion paper
This report was written by Sarah Lloyd Jones, for WCVA and Talwrn.

Head office: Baltic House, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff CF10 5FH. 
**Tel: 0800 2888 329** (calls are welcomed in Welsh and in English). 
**Email:** help@wcva.org.uk

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**Introduction**

In February 2017, Welsh Government announced that it will be developing a Resilient Communities programme\(^1\), to begin in April 2018. The programme will have three elements - early years, employment and empowerment. The context for this is the ongoing need to tackle poverty and disadvantage in Wales in a time of great uncertainty and when resources are being cut back. It comes as Communities First closes, and also as existing European programmes come to an end in 2020.

The third sector, including over 6,000 community groups, has a wealth of experience of what has and hasn’t worked in communities across Wales. It also has a wealth of ideas on innovative approaches for the future. It’s important that the sector now pulls together its own ideas and insights for creating more resilient communities and to help shape Welsh Government thinking on the role that it, and other public bodies, can play in promoting community resilience and empowerment.

This paper sets out a series of discussion points to help stimulate thinking about resilient communities. It draws on a review of literature about resilience, empowerment and communities. It also draws on initial discussions WCVA has had with third sector networks - including BAME Alliance, Children in Wales, CWVYS, DTA Cymru, Interfaith Council for Wales, Third Sector Support Wales, Urdd Gobaith Cymru and Wales Equality Group - and that Talwrn has had with its members.

We hope it will support third sector organisations to develop their own thinking on the new programme and feed into a third sector position paper which will be used to stimulate thinking and planning across the sector, and will be presented to Welsh Government in October.

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We hope this paper will be useful to stimulate discussion, whether you agree or disagree. We’d love to hear your views, insights and examples of ways that communities in Wales are taking control. Please send any comments to: 

**talwrn@peopleandwork.org.uk** or **anicholl@wcva.org.uk**

Visit [www.wcva.org.uk](http://www.wcva.org.uk) for more information on resilient communities, and join the discussion on Twitter using **#ResilientCommunities** or WCVA Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/walescva](http://www.facebook.com/walescva).

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**What do we mean by resilience?**

Getting the language right is important. Terms like empowerment, wellbeing, self-sufficiency and resilience can be conflated but there are important differences. The terms may mean nothing to some community members and to others they may convey meanings that are unintended.

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\(^1\)[http://www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/pages/rop.aspx?meetingid=4083&assembly=5&c=Record%20of%20Proceedings&startDt=14/02/2017&endDt=14/02/2017#458397]
Resilience is usually viewed as the capacity to cope with shocks and setbacks. It is seen as being a protective factor that helps people cope with adversity. Much of the thinking about resilience has been about individuals but there is a growing interest in the role of people's social and cultural context and the extent to which it nurtures or inhibits resilience\(^2\). This suggests that individuals are more resilient when they are part of a resilient community.

The UK government's [Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience](#) states 'Community resilience is about communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency, in a way that complements the response of the emergency services\(^3\). We have seen lots of evidence in the responses to recent tragedies on how this works. However, the capacity of a community to come together after a shock or crisis cannot be assumed to indicate its capacity to tackle the long term problems, like poor employment or health, that disadvantaged communities in Wales face. Also, the concept of resilience is more one of maintaining the status quo, coping, than developing new strengths; it suggests the ability to ‘bounce back’ after a crisis rather than moving forward.

Should the concept be broader than this, focused more on long-term sustainability than just withstanding ‘shocks’? The initial three areas of focus set out by the Welsh Government seems to be promoting the model of community as a nurturing environment for children and families; an environment that promotes ambition and learning that can lead to employment; and an environment within which people feel able to make decisions, shape services and work collectively. Such a community would, it could be argued, be better able to cope with the uncertainties and pressures facing the economy, the health service or social care.

Questions:

*What do you think ‘resilience’ should mean in the context of communities?*

*What should the Welsh Government’s support for communities be focusing on? Is the focus on early years, employment and empowerment right? What’s missing?*

*What do you, and the communities you work with, want the programme to be about?*

What do we mean by community?

The term community is used to describe a group of people who are bound together by some common thread. They may all live in a geographical location, or they may share an interest, faith or ethnicity or other common characteristic (for example, the deaf community).

However, there are real complexities in understanding community. People may belong to multiple communities, and their belonging to any one is not fixed. Even within locality based communities there are different groups of people and each of those people will identify themselves as coming from a family, a street, a

\(^2\) Herrman et al., 2011; Unger, 2008; Seccombe, 2002; Gilligan, 2001

\(^3\) Cabinet Office 2011
neighbourhood, a town or village, a county and a country. There are corresponding programmes that have sought to address poverty at each of these levels: those that have worked at neighbourhood level (valuable for supporting individuals and families); others that work at town level (more effective for local economic development and reviving town centres); county level strategies (supporting and promoting local enterprise and employment); and Wales level economic development work.

If the aim of a programme is that members of a community do more to help themselves and each other, then focusing on very local areas and supporting ways for community members to get involved in activities is helpful. If the aim is that people broaden their social networks, work with services to change provision to better meet needs or improve the local economy, then working across a town or collection of villages may be necessary.

There has been a lot of thinking around area or place-based work, prioritising geographical communities and exploring ways of bringing people, services and policy to work together. Given the vulnerability of Wales to economic shocks - job losses, and the potential impact of Brexit on a country that relies disproportionately on exports - it could be argued that place based work that focuses on the local, regional and national economy and how it impacts on communities, is essential. At the very least we need to be clear what type of work, at what size of community needs to be done in order to create the changes expected.

So we need to be clear what community we need to focus on when we are aiming to promote the wellbeing that underpins resilience. Wellbeing involves a holistic approach that is about tackling poverty, supporting public services, building a vibrant local economy, developing friendships and support networks, improving the local environment and supporting good health. Government programmes may, typically, tackle one or two of these issues (such as early years or employment) and may work in a neighbourhood, town or region to do it. For community empowerment to work, however, those programmes need to form a part of an overall process of community involvement, contributing to, but not damaging, its development.

Questions:

Do you have examples of how communities can work together to create change? For whom? How does this work in practice?

What role does the third sector have in achieving community change?

How do place-based approaches link to regional, national and international drivers?

How do communities become more resilient?

Just building tight social networks is not enough. Whilst close social networks within communities can help tackle some aspects of wellbeing, such as isolation, they can also reinforce disadvantage by ‘normalising’ some of the impacts of poverty such as

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4 See Turnaround Towns. Carnegie Trust 2016
poor educational achievement, low income or chronic health problems. The evidence shows that local communities can both facilitate and restrain resilience\(^5\).

It could be argued, therefore, that work that helps community members adapt and develop their social networks effectively outside the community (for example, encouraging and supporting people going from community based learning to a course in the local college) is likely to have more impact on tackling poverty and disadvantage than work that is exclusively community focused.

A more positive model of a resilient community is one that focuses on how the community can adapt and flourish through change, rather than merely surviving it. This model draws on people’s strengths (asset based approaches), rather than their weaknesses or ‘needs’ and is more aligned to ideas of sustainability and self-sufficiency\(^6\). We think this fits better with the idea of community empowerment, which suggests thriving communities taking control of what happens, leading their own programmes of activities and, where appropriate, working in partnership with public services and businesses. There are some powerful Welsh examples of how this can happen.

**Questions:**

*What does a resilient community look like? How is it different to non-resilient communities?*

*Are you aware of examples of how positive community led action has made a positive difference?*

*What are the factors that support the development of resilient communities and how can these be supported?*

**Empowerment: central to building resilience in communities?**

Models that help build resilience within a community involve empowerment. There are debates about whether a person, or agency, can ‘empower’ others, but it is very clear that they can disempower people and, at its core, empowerment means a shifting of power from those that have it to those who do not. It is a two way process - power and control have to be given up so that it can be exercised by others.

Empowerment focuses more on *how* things are done, and who does them, than on what is done. Models describe local people creating opportunities and reasons for other local people to come together, to do things collectively and to make a visible difference. They often start with community members getting involved in responding to, or averting, a crisis (such as the closure of a local school, or building flood defences) which encourages local leaders to come forward.

For empowerment to happen, though, involvement needs to go further than encouraging local leaders. Communities are diverse and a key challenge is around how to ensure that different groups, such as older people, young people, disabled people, people from different ethnicities and others can be involved. The policy

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\(^5\) The Young Foundation 2012

\(^6\) Allmark et al., 2014: Chanan 2003
response in the past to this challenge has been to target programmes at particular groups in the community (such as the unemployed, or families in poverty) but this can be seen to work against empowerment and resilience at a community level since it does not work with the whole community.

Evidence suggests that there needs to be effective leadership which promotes engagement across the community, and social networks that work inside the community but which also lever in resources, contacts and support from outside the community.

The extent to which it is possible for an outside body to promote this kind of local action is debateable. A recent Carnegie UK review of ‘Turnaround Towns’ (towns that had successfully reversed their decline) identified that in each case the initiatives that made the difference were thought up and led by local people, albeit drawing in support from outside as needed.

Whilst it may be difficult for outside agencies, including local authorities, to engender community empowerment, they can create the conditions that can let it develop and, at the very least, not inhibit or even stop it happening. Research has shown that local organisations that have control over local decision making or resources are important for converting the networks that develop within a community into a resource that can have a broader influence. Such groups can be seen as community ‘anchors’ can provide a platform for community members to engage with and shape public services.

**Question:**

*What examples do you have of an empowered community? What difference do they make to local people?*

*Are there examples of leadership approaches in communities that have been successful in involving diverse groups of people?*

*How can the third sector contribute to more empowered communities?*

**What difference would a resilient community make?**

A problem for Communities First was that it was being measured on outcomes it could not achieve. Working at a small community level, its capacity to tackle levels of poverty would always be limited. We need to learn from this and clarify thinking about what we mean when we talk about community and what can happen at different levels of community.

If the core feature of a resilient community is community engagement, people who come together to do things together, to get to know each other and support each other, then the key outcome is likely to be improved wellbeing. Wellbeing has been shown to have an impact on health and, generally, in improving people’s quality of life.

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7 Turnaround Towns, 2016 Carnegie UK
8 Chanan 2003
9 SCDC 2011
Some of the commentary behind the programme suggests that resilient communities would be more able to avoid and alleviate the impacts of poverty by meeting their own needs, leading to savings in public services. We cannot assume however, that wellbeing, or community involvement, automatically equates to people being better able to look after themselves or others, or to making savings to public services. It could be, for example, that by becoming more empowered, people make greater demands on services as they have higher expectations of their quality of life.

**Question:**

*How can community-based initiatives realistically contribute to bigger policy objectives - including the Wellbeing Goals under the Future Generations Act?*

*Is it reasonable to expect that community level empowerment and resilience will result in communities and those who live in them being more self-sufficient and less demanding of public services?*

**Measuring success**

It is important to know if work being done with communities is making a difference. It is also important to be clear about who we are measuring success for and why. Community members, community activists, paid staff, funders, service providers and policy makers may all have different objectives and indicators of success, and in capturing the impact of work we have to prioritise and balance these competing needs.

Measuring success may help justify funding, or validate a policy direction, but its role is, arguably, primarily to inform and shape the work. A criticism of Communities First has been its failure to capture and share learning. How can we better capture learning on what works for community resilience and feed it into better practice?

In order to measure success it is vital to be clear about what any programme or activity can realistically achieve. There is a range of models for capturing ‘community wellbeing’ but little information available about the most effective ways to measure impact and success in an unobtrusive way. This can lead to community organisations failing to effectively capture change.

**Questions:**

*Do you have examples of how change has been measured? How have these balanced the priorities of policy, funding and community?*

*How can communities best identify and measure success?*

*What would an empowered community look like, sound like, act like?*

**What should and shouldn’t government do next?**

Arguably national policy on supporting communities to date has not always been helpful in developing resilience or empowerment, and there are examples of how
communities and the third sector organisations that work in them have been disempowered by the Communities First programme. To avoid repeating mistakes it is important to clearly identify what role central and local government can play in promoting empowerment. At the very least we need to be clear on avoiding doing harm to communities as they become more empowered (such as ensuring that policy and decision making don’t get in the way). We also need to be clear about the role of the third sector and, crucially, to add to experience in Wales by looking at other parts of the UK and what works there. Finally, the third sector needs to be clear about the conditions within which community empowerment can flourish, in order to promote them.

Questions:

*Can a Welsh Government programme support place-based activity across Wales?*

*Should the new Welsh Government programme be based in some communities and not others? If so, on what basis should communities be chosen?*

*What should be the priorities for the Welsh third sector for empowered and resilient communities?*