

Working Together for a Better Wales

Maximising the impact
of action in communities



A report on the national open meeting
Yr Egin, Carmarthen, 19th September 2024

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Together for a Better Wales: Meeting summary

Overview

The *Working Together for a Better Wales* open meeting gathered 70 representatives from statutory, third and private sector organisations and community groups and organisations dedicated to community development across Wales and as far afield as New Zealand and the US.

Hosted at Yr Egin in Carmarthen, in collaboration with Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the purpose of the meeting was to discuss how we can enhance community action and impact through collaboration and resource-sharing. It was organised by Together for Change (TfC) in partnership with Cardiff University's Third Sector Research Partnership, Swansea University's Local Challenges Research Office, and Aberystwyth University's Cymru Wledig Local Policy and Innovation Partnership (LPIP), with funding from The National Lottery Community Fund.

The report summarises the content of presentations, breakout thematic sessions and open forum discussions. It highlights the requirements for impactful, sustainable and inclusive community development across Wales.

The meeting addressed three core questions:

- **Identifying gaps:** What might be missing in our support structures in Wales, that, if addressed, could better support community organisations?
- **Securing resources:** What are our collective resource requirements to strengthen impact?
- **Collaborative impact:** Could a 'better together' approach lead to greater impact?

Beginning with a presentation on the *Better Together* research findings, which highlighted critical gaps in grassroots support, the meeting included a cross-sectoral panel discussion on enablers and challenges, followed by thematic breakout sessions. In the final open discussion forum, participants distilled key messages and explored the value of a resourced alliance to promote engagement and collaboration.

Executive summary

The following insights and priorities emerged from the whole meeting :

1. **Amplifying community voices**

The participants stressed the value of community input and local knowledge as the cornerstone of impactful development. Enabling communities to share their insights, understand their assets, and co-produce solutions with organisations and academia, was repeatedly cited as a critical enabler. This included tailoring engagement to meet communities in their geographical space and by creating an atmosphere that welcomes diverse community voices.

2. **Data accessibility and community-led research**

Data were identified as powerful tools for understanding local needs, securing funding, and measuring impact. However, gaps in data accessibility and resources for relevant community-led data collection and analysis emerged as significant barriers.

Strengthening community access to data resources, improving data-sharing, and creating data champions within communities, were seen as essential steps for evidence-based action.

3. **Building capacity through lasting, cross-sector collaboration**

Participants emphasised the importance of robust, long-term partnerships across sectors. HEIs, statutory bodies, third-sector organisations, and community groups each bring unique resources and perspectives that, when pooled, can lead to transformative change. Nevertheless, the need for stable staffing, adequate funding, and trusted points of contact to manage partnerships effectively was noted as essential for continuity and impact.

4. **Overcoming barriers through flexible funding and supportive policy**

Sustainable funding models were a central concern, with calls for funding structures that support long-term engagement, skill development, and flexible resource allocation based on community priorities. Participants also highlighted the importance of a shared cross-sector policy framework that prioritises collaboration and innovation to reduce duplication and streamline efforts across organisations and localities.

5. **Nurturing a culture shift toward co-production and community-led solutions**

Moving away from a “top-down” approach to one where communities are genuinely engaged as partners was a recurrent theme. This includes asking communities, “What can we do for you?” and providing clear paths for their input to shape projects.

Participants saw cultural change as essential for greater inclusion, with an emphasis on

training, mentorship, and co-production as ongoing practices rather than isolated activities.

6. Urgency in addressing climate and social challenges

The pressing need to address climate breakdown, social inequality, and economic resilience underpinned many discussions. Participants highlighted a need for scalable, adaptable models that consider climate impact and social benefit as interconnected aspects of community development. This urgency called for more coordinated actions and stronger alliances to tackle these shared challenges effectively.

7. Effective communication and accessible information

Improved communication structures across sectors were identified as vital to achieving effective collaboration. Accessible, centralised platforms where partners can share project information, resources, and outcomes would help reduce information silos and allow for greater participation and knowledge-sharing. Ensuring accessible points of contact and streamlined communications between organisations were seen as crucial to creating sustained and meaningful impact.

By addressing these cross-cutting themes collectively, communities and partners can create a sustainable foundation for wellbeing. The insights gathered from the *Working Together for a Better Wales* meeting highlight the need for continued commitment to collaboration, flexible funding, and community-led action. Moving forward, creating stronger connections and more coordinated approaches across organisations will be pivotal in enabling communities to tackle future challenges and embrace new opportunities for working towards a fair and just society in Wales.

Meeting sessions: Presentations, thematic sessions and open discussions

The following sections provide an overview of the presentations and discussions of the meeting. The cross-cutting themes identified in the executive summary were synthesised from the content of the sessions. Collectively they offer valuable insights into systemic gaps in Wales and how they could be addressed through better linking policy, research and community development for impactful change. These insights illustrate a strategic path that could frame a policy and delivery agenda enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

Presentation

Better Together – Research on perspectives on gaps in the system

Presenter: Babs Lewis (Babs Lewis Consulting)

Babs Lewis set the scene by presenting *Better Together*, the research project designed to explore gaps in the support structures for grassroots organisations in Wales. The research, commissioned by TfC, involved in-depth interviews with 17 individuals employed by national and regional statutory and third sector organisations in Wales. The project addressed the following questions:

- **Current support:** How do organisations currently support grassroots community organisations to maximise their impact on wellbeing?
- **Improvement areas:** What additional support would help increase the impact of this work?
- **Gaps in structures:** Where do participants see gaps in the existing support structures in Wales?
- **Strengthening support:** How could these gaps be bridged to enhance outcomes?

The respondents offered candid insights based on personal and organisational perspectives, highlighting both barriers and potential areas for improvement. Their responses show that:

- There is a lack of national community development policy and vision that all organisations can coalesce around
- All organisations are experiencing considerable financial pressures
- There is little or no time to reflect and share learning

- Support is lacking to forge more effective relationships around a platform for change
- There is a lack of evidence on what works and what doesn't as there is a lack of community-based data collection, research and evaluation.

Any solutions should be mindful that:

- This is a crowded space with potential for further duplication
- We need to work within systemic pressures
- Time and effort is needed to build strong and enduring relationships capable of forging partnerships at all levels
- We need a clear future focused vision that all can understand and get behind.

Babs Lewis also presented the findings of an [Evidence Study](#), which involved semi-structured interviews of user-led individuals from 30 community groups across Wales that are addressing wellbeing and its wider determinants through their work.

The project explored the following questions:

- How do community groups feel about the environment in which they are operating?
- Do they reflect on progress, if not, why not?
- What would help, if anything?

The respondents showed that:

- Local hardship is increasing and pressure mounting on those supporting people to have better lives
- There is a danger of burnout but there is strong energy, determination and commitment to community action
- All reflect on progress informally and recognise the importance of research and evaluation, but barriers stand in the way
- The demands of funders for management data, and the lack of coproduction, capacity and capability act as formidable barriers to evidence based approaches
- All want to do more, but with support in place to address the barriers that stand in the way.

Thematic Sessions

Insights from the thematic sessions

The meeting explored three themes identified through TfC's research. Each thematic session, reported on below, combined case studies and presentations with open discussions focusing on specific barriers, enablers, and actions needed to achieve more effective and sustainable community-driven outcomes.

1. People Power through Research

Chair: Michael Woods (Aberystwyth University)

This session illustrated how communities and academics can collaborate effectively to build local capacity and create community-led solutions. Through these partnerships, community members and researchers address local challenges while building a shared knowledge base to guide future initiatives.

Presentations:

- **[Community-led Action Research](#): Jessie Buchanan (TfC)**
Overview: The *Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales* initiative demonstrates how community knowledge and priorities can shape solutions to economic hardship, social injustice, and environmental challenges. The programme empowers communities across rural Wales to investigate pressing issues through action research, share insights, test ideas, and collaborate with academic partners.
- **[Community Research Network for Tourism](#): Jess Silvester (People's Economy)**
Overview: A 15-month community research project explored tourism models that benefit Gwynedd's slate valley communities. This initiative engaged three slate mining communities to envision an equitable tourism economy, resulting in a model that addresses infrastructure needs, enhances community control, and considers environmental impacts.

Enablers:

- Early involvement of people with local knowledge accelerates project initiation and improves sustained engagement.
- Informal, accessible settings (e.g., school gates or youth clubs) encourage participation, making it easier for diverse community members to join and share their views.
- Meeting people where they already gather helps support engagement beyond traditional meeting structures that may feel inaccessible.

Barriers:

- Going in with a formal academic approach too early can be off-putting for community members and limit participation.
- Limited resources or time constraints can hinder sustained community involvement, particularly in rural areas where logistical challenges are more common.

Future considerations:

- Building mechanisms to maintain community engagement over time supports the shift from consultation to true participation and co-production.
- Further involving communities in the research process allows for a more in-depth understanding of local challenges and needs.
- Tailoring training and support to the specific needs of community groups and organisations will enable more informed decision-making and equitable outcomes.

2. Data to Support Place-Based Action

Chair: Andrew Flynn (Cardiff University)

This session highlighted the role of data and community asset mapping in strengthening local decision-making and resilience. By providing communities with data access and analytical skills, they are empowered to better understand their needs and resources, enabling targeted actions that support community wellbeing.

Presentations:

- **[Data and Asset Mapping in Wales: Prof. Scott Orford \(Cardiff University\)](#)**
Overview: WISERD's research in mapping community assets across Wales showcases how projects by TfC, AHRC, and ESRC are advancing data access for local communities. The presentation included mapping platforms that identify local assets such as libraries, parks, and community centres, all of which play critical roles in the foundational economy.
- **[Measuring and Building Community Resilience: Eleri Williams \(Building Communities Trust \(BCT\)\)](#)**
Overview: BCT's development of a Community Assets and Resilience Index for every small geographic area in Wales combines traditional socioeconomic data with community-specific indicators. This comprehensive tool helps identify gaps in community resilience and guides targeted interventions.

Enablers:

- The provision of support for communities to access and interpret data helps them to develop a holistic understanding of local needs and opportunities.

- Community-led research can fill data gaps and highlight connections between local assets and improved community wellbeing.
- Data can serve as a powerful tool for securing funding, as they provide evidence of local needs and priorities that can support grant applications.

Barriers:

- Data gaps and silos present a significant barrier, as missing or inaccessible data reduces the reliability and usefulness of findings.
- Many communities lack the capacity or skills to fully utilise data, which limits their ability to make data-driven decisions.

Future considerations:

- Encouraging local champions to promote data use within communities can improve understanding of the benefits of data-led decision-making.
- Increasing accessibility of data across organisations, including government bodies, would allow communities to better leverage this information for planning and funding purposes.
- Providing training on data collection and analysis skills for third-sector organisations will support wider and more effective use of data for community benefit.

3. Building Capacity through Collaboration and Support

Chair: Christala Sophocleous (Swansea University)

This session examined successful collaborations between HEIs and community organisations. HEI-led initiatives provide communities with resources, knowledge, and relationships that enhance local capacity and drive impactful change.

Presentations:

- **[Third Sector Research Partnership \(TSRP\)](#): Anna Skeels and Dave Horton (SPARK, Cardiff University)**

Overview: TSRP offers pro bono research support to small grassroots organisations in Cardiff, addressing the needs of some of the city's most disadvantaged communities. This model demonstrates the value of partnerships between academia and third-sector organisations, building local capacity through shared resources and expertise.

- **[Transport and Health Integrated Research Network \(THINK\)](#): Amy Nicholass (THINK Cymru)**

Overview: THINK Cymru connects members from diverse sectors to address health outcomes related to transport, focusing on both rural and urban needs. The

presentation highlighted the challenges and successes of sustaining a collaborative network across various sectors, sharing best practices applicable to other community-focused partnerships.

Enablers:

- Allowing time to build relationships and trust supports effective collaboration, especially in disadvantaged areas where communities may feel disconnected from formal organisations.
- Having known and trusted staff members to manage network logistics, particularly around finances, can smooth coordination between groups.
- Safe, welcoming spaces for engagement enable participants to speak openly and contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

Barriers:

- Short-term funding for posts often limits the development of sustained relationships and continuity in partnerships.
- A lack of consistent buy-in from senior staff can prevent long-term commitment and hinder collaborative momentum.

Future considerations:

- Regularly scheduled connections with community and collaborative partners outside of day-to-day operations support stronger, sustained relationships.
- Increased senior leadership commitment is crucial to ensure that projects are adequately resourced and can achieve their full potential.
- Flexible internal systems within HEIs are essential to adapt to community needs and facilitate effective, long-term collaboration.

Open discussion sessions

Key messages

- **Positivity and optimism:** Participants expressed a sense of progress and optimism regarding community-driven and environmental initiatives, along with a desire to build on others' successes.
- **Funding models:** Sustainable funding models are needed to allow organisations to focus on action without the constant pressure of securing short-term funds.
- **Importance of connection:** Regular, cross-sectoral connections are essential to foster relationships, enhance knowledge-sharing, and maintain community engagement.
- **Coordination and collaboration:** While many organisations have successful approaches, a lack of coordination can lead to duplication and missed opportunities for mutual support.

Ensuring and accelerating impact

- **Shared vision:** Developing a shared vision and principles at all levels will ensure cohesion while allowing for local creativity.
- **Co-production:** Ensuring communities can actively participate in and shape initiatives will improve impact and sustainability.
- **Policy influence:** Sharing community successes and challenges with policymakers will help align local needs with broader strategic goals.

Collaboration for greater impact

- **Training and capacity building:** Widespread training on key topics such as data usage, co-production, and community engagement will support more effective and sustainable collaboration.
- **Cultural change:** Driving cultural change at decision-making levels is essential to fostering community involvement and achieving broader impact.
- **Local investment:** More local investment is needed to support communities and strengthen local economies.

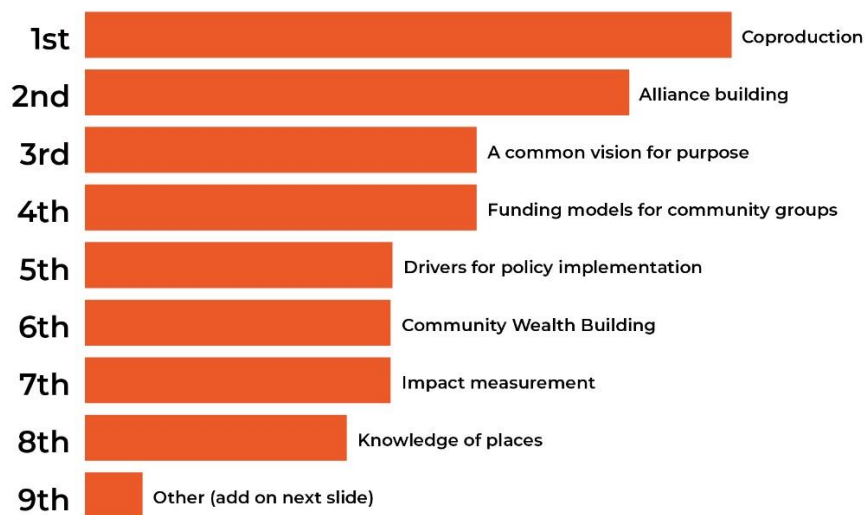
Alliance-building pledge cards

During the meeting, attendees had the opportunity to express their interest in joining a resourced alliance to strengthen collective voice, avoid duplication, amplify impact, and build resilience. Over half of the 70 attendees completed a pledge card; of these, 100% were personally interested, and 41% indicated their organisation's interest as well. Since the meeting, an additional nine attendees have reached out to express interest.

Priorities for maximising impact

In the final portion of the meeting, attendees used a Mentimeter survey to rank priorities, with 33 participants responding.

The results can be seen below. They underscore a collective emphasis on coproduction, alliance building for sustainable support, and a close alignment of what we are all setting out to achieve.



This survey also provided an opportunity for participants to suggest further areas for focus.

Key suggestions included:

- Improving access to information on projects, outcomes, and shared learning,
- Greater recognition of anecdotal evidence,
- Re-energising courses and community development in colleges, universities, and lifelong learning spaces,
- Emphasising passion and creating spaces that facilitate connections,

- Establishing a national mission to make social enterprise and community wealth-building core to Wales's economy, supported by anchor institutions and public engagement,
- Designating clear points of contact to streamline collaboration,
- Providing dedicated funding for alliances and resources to enable communities to directly commission academic research for social and environmental benefit,
- Creating scalable models that address climate urgency and foster cross-sector communication and collaboration,
- Breaking down political barriers and fostering facilitation skills to bridge gaps in thinking, and
- Shifting focus to community needs by asking, "What can we do for you?" with clear, supportive options.

These suggestions reflect a strong commitment to creating connected, responsive and strengthened communities across Wales, with collaboration and cross-sector alignment at the core.

Conclusion

The *Working Together for a Better Wales* meeting underscored the importance of cross-sector collaboration in addressing challenges facing Welsh communities. By focusing on the gaps in current support structures, the need for sustainable resources, and the potential for a unified approach, participants identified several critical areas for action.

The meeting highlighted the importance of enabling community voices, supporting data accessibility, and building capacity through strong, long-term partnerships across sectors. With a flexible funding model and supportive policies in place, Welsh communities can move from a “top-down” approach to one that genuinely involves communities as partners, enabling them to shape and lead initiatives that affect their wellbeing. Discussions also emphasised the urgency of addressing interconnected social and environmental challenges through adaptable, scalable models.

Moving forward, the commitment to shared communication structures, streamlined collaboration, and accessible resources will be essential to creating sustainable foundations for resilience and social cohesion. Participants agreed that a collective vision and clear coordination mechanisms, supported by both anchor institutions and local leaders, will position communities in Wales to better navigate future challenges and seize new prospects for growth of opportunity, wellbeing, and inclusivity.

The insights and priorities that emerged from the *Working Together for a Better Wales* event will serve as guiding principles in Welsh community development, shaping future initiatives and partnerships. Together, Welsh communities and their partners have the opportunity to build a stronger, more connected future.

Note of thanks

With thanks to our partner organisations TSRP, Local Challenges Office and Cymru Wledig LPIP for planning and running the meeting with us and to SGEMA for additional support.

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Drafted by Together for Change and SGEMA

Gyda'n Gilydd
dros Newid



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