

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Social research

Number: 12/2015



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

www.cymru.gov.uk

Communities First: Process Evaluation Final Report - Executive Summary

Process final evaluation report executive summary: Communities First

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of Welsh Government

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Welsh Government Social Research, 26 February 2015

ISBN 978-1-4734-2901-7

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Executive Summary

Context to the evaluation

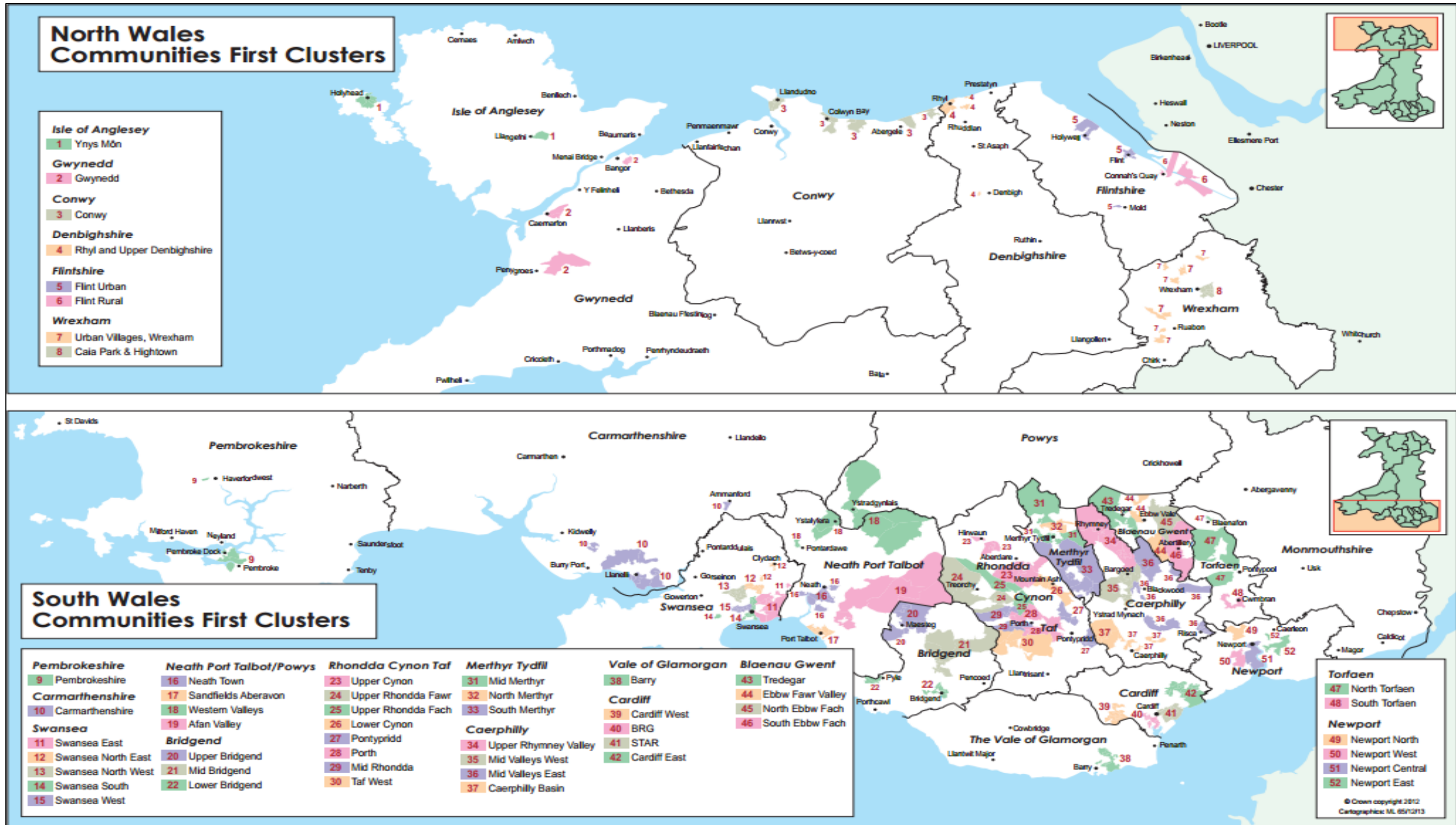
- 1 In January 2014 Ipsos MORI and Wavehill were commissioned by Welsh Government to undertake a process evaluation of the most recent phase of the Communities First Programme in Wales. The final evaluation report provides a thorough assessment of the Communities First Programme; analysing the implementation progress to date, reviewing its design, delivery and effectiveness, and offering recommendations and improvements for the Programme going forward. This Executive Summary provides an overview of the Evaluation's findings.
- 2 Communities First is a community-focused tackling poverty Programme which supports Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan (TPAP). The Programme focuses on creating Prosperous Communities, Healthier Communities and Learning Communities¹. The Communities First Programme concentrates on the most deprived communities in Wales with an emphasis on ensuring that the most vulnerable individuals, families and groups in those communities are supported.
- 3 The Communities First Programme dates back to 2001, however, in light of recommendations made in a series of evaluations² of the original Programme, it was re-focused as a tackling poverty programme, and re-designed in 2012 so that it is now:
 - based on a smaller number of larger areas. Figure 1 shows a map of the 52 Communities First Clusters across Wales, managed by 19 Lead Delivery Bodies (LDBs)³;
 - delivered and monitored against a nationally consistent Outcomes Framework aligned to the principle of Results Based Accountability™.

¹ Funding for the latest phase of the Communities First Programme (running from 2012 to 2105) will total £75 million.

² Wales Audit Office (2009), Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) and National Assembly Public Accounts Committee (2010)

³ This compares to over 150 target areas under the previous phase of the Programme.

Figure 1: Map of Communities First areas across Wales



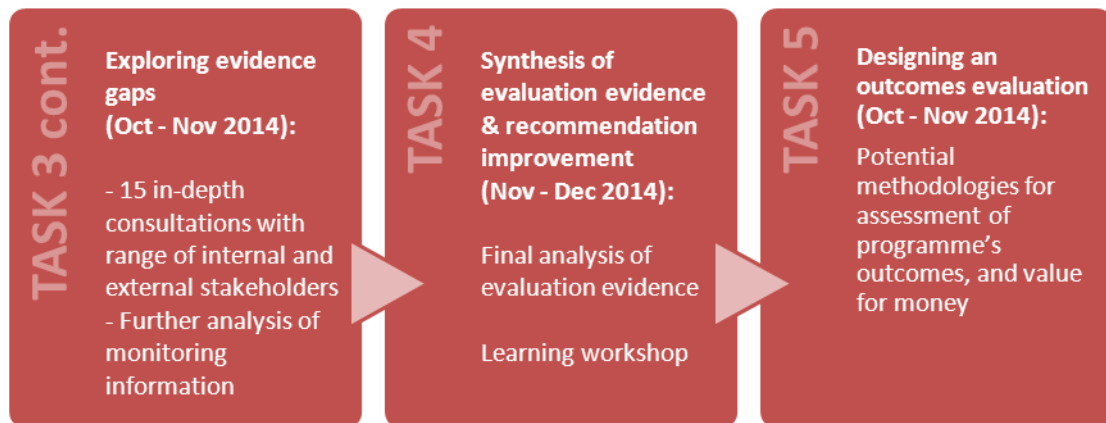
Source: Stats Wales, <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Communities-First/Cluster-Maps>, accessed 24th November 2014

Evaluation scope and methodology

- 4 This evaluation focuses on the design and delivery of Communities First since 1st April 2012.
- 5 The overarching aims of the evaluation were:
 1. To set out the logic model underpinning the Communities First Programme;
 2. To assess performance in implementing the new phase of Communities First and the extent to which there is fidelity to the Programme's logic model;
 3. To identify which aspects of the Programme's design and implementation need improvement and why and which aspects of the Programme are working well and why;
 4. To propose recommendations on how the Programme might be improved;
 5. To produce proposals a research design for a potential future outcomes evaluation of the Programme;
- 6 To answer these objectives, the evaluation involved five key strands (see Figure 2). Further detail on each is available in the main evaluation report.

Figure 2: Summary of evaluation approach





7 The evidence collected and analysed across these five strands has been triangulated to offer as robust an assessment as possible on the Programme⁴.

Performance assessment

- 8 Communities First is regarded as a valuable Programme by many of the stakeholders involved in its delivery, as well as local beneficiary communities. It sits within a strong policy context and it is clear how its aims fit within the wider tackling poverty agenda of Welsh Government.
- 9 The changes made to the design of this latest phase of the Communities First Programme (starting in April 2012) have, on the whole, improved the chances of the Programme successfully meeting its aims, and that progress against these can be effectively monitored. Challenges levelled at previous iterations of the Programme have largely been addressed. For example, this evaluation finds evidence of:
- stronger central control through the establishment of LDBs and the requirements placed on reporting monitoring information;
 - a clearer focus on outcomes among the wide range of teams and organisations involved in delivery; and an effective balance generally being struck between collective working towards national strategic goals and ongoing flexibility in how this is achieved at a local level.

⁴ It should be noted that some evidence was not available for the evaluation and so has not been reflected in the assessment of the Programme. This includes access to the software system used to upload monitoring data, and access to final Delivery and Community Involvement Plans (although draft versions from all but one of the 52 Clusters were available for analysis).

- iii. The redrawing of the geographical boundaries of Communities First has delivered upon the aim of focussing resource, through reducing the number of Clusters and LDBs through which Communities First is delivered at the local level, although the varied geography of Clusters (particularly more rural areas) does present challenges for delivering activities.
- 10 Overall, the Communities First Programme is displaying a high-degree of fidelity to its intended model of delivery, which is articulated in the logic model. For the most part, the Programme's key influencers play a positive role in shaping its delivery and the opportunities identified in the Programme's Theory of Change have been realised, such as: setting tackling poverty as a high priority within Welsh Government; establishing a Shared Outcomes Framework with other related Programmes; and maximising the existing knowledge and relationships of local organisations.
- 11 From the evaluation evidence available, the activities being locally designed and delivered through Communities First are generally in line with the intended overarching national programme design. Indicators such as the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) have been usefully employed at a local level to help identify priorities and inform the design of activities. Some improvement is still possible here by encouraging LDBs to place firmer requirements on community and Third Sector delivery partners to improve the alignment of their activities to the desired outcomes (where this is possible in the wider context of external funder requirements). This will help tackle the interpretation by a small number of local stakeholders that Communities First is a "funding pot" to extend the delivery of existing services. Also, while a range of approaches to designing and delivering activities at a Cluster level has been identified, to date it would appear that the inclusion of community members and local Third Sector organisations has not been as widespread in this process as was envisaged by Welsh Government.
- 12 Indeed, the evaluation has highlighted that some significant challenges do remain for the effective delivery and monitoring of the Programme. Some of these are the realisation of challenges set out in the Theory of Change

(such as austerity measures restricting the recruitment of external staff by local authorities), some test the feasibility of the assumptions on which the Programme was based (such as effective involvement of local communities in the design and delivery of the Programme), while others result from the culture shift demanded by the requirements of the new Programme design. The most critical role for Welsh Government going forward will be to encourage a more consistent approach to monitoring activities, which is currently highly varied across Clusters. This is needed to ensure comparability in the quality of outcomes recorded across activities and areas.

- 13 While the Programme is largely being implemented as intended, this does not mean that the intended model for delivery should be free from critical examination. The Programme is aiming to significantly improve the characteristics of an area by trying to influence individual-level outcomes in areas with concentrations of problems. However, this is based on the key assumption that through changing individual-level outcomes this will significantly impact on area-level characteristics. The testing of this assumption would be a key aim of any future outcomes evaluation.

Summary of good practice in implementation of Programme

- 14 Partnership working is a definite strength of Communities First. The Welsh Government has encouraged and facilitated partnership working, both between Communities First and other Welsh Government Programmes, and with the Third Sector in local areas. While there is still some perceived overlap between Programmes in the services they are seeking to deliver, the finalisation of the Shared Outcomes Framework (to cover Communities First, Families First and Flying Start) should provide the additional clarity needed to ensure the potential for close, effective and efficient co-delivery is always realised. Beyond this, many Clusters are demonstrating good practice through making the most of established local partner organisations' existing networks and trust within the community to both find efficiencies in delivery and in targeting hard to reach groups.

- 15 Collaboration with statutory services, such as health and education, is also important in enabling the effective delivery of Communities First. This evaluation found many examples of schools, in particular, working closely with Communities First teams. Links with health services were also evident, although perhaps less well developed than those in the education sector. The 'health seminars' which are now being facilitated by WCVA are likely to be effective in helping to further foster these relationships. These seminars provide a platform for third sector health agencies to inform Communities First teams of the expertise and services they offer and represent a networking opportunity.
- 16 The approach to delivering training taken by Welsh Government, and training delivery partners such as Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), has benefitted the Programme. The model which was adopted (which involved a combination of cascading support through workshops but also one-on-one sessions and follow-up consultations) is effective. Positive feedback was received about the impact of this training from the Clusters and LDBs.
- 17 The Outcomes Framework is also a key example of good practice to be drawn from the redesign of the Communities First Programme. While the Programme itself is complex (leading the number of outcomes chosen to reflect this complexity being greater than ideal), having a set of overall outcomes has contributed to a better understanding of the Programme externally, and helped focus the design and delivery of activities within the Programme.

Summary of areas for improvement and lessons learned

- 18 The introduction of LDBs within the governance structure of the Programme strengthens the level of accountability of the Clusters by providing the necessary management and financial expertise that underpins their operation. However, while the model is effective, the way in which LDBs are delivering this role could be further improved. Firstly, LDBs should firmly lead dialogue with Welsh Government and be responsible for cascading information up and down from the 52 individual

Cluster teams and secondly, by taking responsibility for shifting budgets when necessary to ensure funding allocations are spent and directed in the most effective way. To encourage this, further guidance is needed from Welsh Government on the extent of LDB's autonomy, particularly over flexible budgetary decisions.

- 19 The skillsets of the staff responsible for Communities First at Cluster level are fundamental to the efficacy with which the Programme is implemented. Given external pressures such as recruitment freezes, it is essential that more job-specific training and tighter performance management processes are in place to help maximise the value of existing staff in the roles now required of them. This need is particularly acute for staff without previous experience of monitoring and reporting, which is now fundamental to the management and delivery of the Programme.
- 20 Guidance on the production of Delivery Plans and Community Involvement Plans provided by Welsh Government⁵ is drawn on heavily by LDB and Cluster teams. The quality and accessibility of this is crucial in driving the successful implementation of the Programme. This evaluation highlights user concerns with the guidance issued initially, and while improvements to this have been made, it is critical that guidance is subjected to continual review and improvement. Responsibility also sits with LDBs and Cluster teams to ensure lessons from the initial round of Delivery Plan drafting are effectively passed on. The phasing of information is also critical, with guidance documents ideally released at the same time as monitoring frameworks and definitions of outcomes.
- 21 A key ongoing challenge for the Welsh Government is obtaining robust, and consistent, performance monitoring data for the Programme. Not all Cluster teams have the expertise to design effective monitoring processes and the approaches taken are currently highly varied. Given the complexity of measuring some of the desired outcomes⁶, guidance

⁵ Including both formal guidance for the production of Delivery Plans and Community Involvement Plans, and ongoing advice and support throughout the course of implementation and delivery.

⁶ This may be due to the nature of the outcomes, the nature of the participants, or the ways in which activities are attended (e.g. voluntary, periodical etc.)

around this is critically important if the Welsh Government is to truly understand what the Programme is achieving. Without this, there is a risk that it will not be possible to robustly demonstrate the impact of the Programme and how comparable the quality of outcomes will be across different activities and areas.

- 22 While it was reported, by those responsible for delivering Communities First at a local level, that Results Based Accountability (RBA™) offers a lot of advantages in helping to link activities to outcomes, there was some evidence uncovered in the evaluation that the emphasis on results may be encouraging Cluster delivery teams to target the easiest to reach and treat within a community in order to achieve a green status on a Red, Amber, Green (RAG) dashboard, due to the perceived emphasis on achieving a 'Green' status. Consideration therefore needs to be given to how progress towards outcomes can be monitored and recorded, and communication needs to be clear on the extent to which distance travelled measures, as opposed to final successful outcomes, are acceptable outputs to record for this Programme.
- 23 While Communities First has retained its ethos of encouraging community involvement in the design, delivery and monitoring of the Programme, genuine community participation is not always being achieved or is not being facilitated in a way that is of benefit to the implementation of the Programme. There is a need to pool knowledge and experience of achieving this and to communicate more effectively why it is still considered important despite the top-down setting of outcome measures. Indeed, the reinforced focus of delivery and outcomes for the Communities First Programme, following criticisms of earlier phases not being sufficiently strategic, led to Clusters ensuring they had staff in place to focus on these important Programme elements. However, Welsh Government note the importance of also retaining community engagement workers in order to meet all three of the Programme's key principles; good governance, improved outcomes, but also strong community involvement. Communication from Welsh Government is needed to remind LDBs and Clusters of the equal importance of community involvement with delivery, but also to help staff understand

what this means in the context of needing to provide monitoring data on outcome measures.

- 24 While it is widely understood by delivery teams that activities should be aimed at those most in need, Clusters are not always clear on who these audiences should be. Some Cluster delivery teams are also struggling to conceive how they can effectively target these groups within the confines of the Programme budget, staff resources and requirement to provide outcomes data. Monitoring is again an issue here, with a lack of monitoring of participants to understand the extent to which Clusters are indeed reaching the target groups they are aimed at.
- 25 Clusters reported a high level of awareness and understanding of the Welsh Language Strategy with examples of contributing to the development of the Welsh Language. However, challenges are faced delivering activities and services bilingually and Welsh language resources were often made available only upon request. Encouraging Clusters to undertake more formal assessments of Welsh Language needs would help move the Programme to make a more proactive contribution to the development of the Welsh Language than is currently evident.