

13 February 2017

TITLE OF REPORT: Gateshead Communities Together Strategy:
Shaping a Review of the Strategy

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SUMMARY

This report outlines a context and a set of suggested principles to inform a review of the Gateshead Communities Together Strategy.

1. Background

The Gateshead Communities Together Strategy was agreed by Gateshead Strategic Partnership Steering Group and Cabinet in May 2012.

The Strategy sets out how partners work together to address the five priority areas identified within the Strategy:

- Community engagement & participation
- Community capacity building
- Information & communication
- Involving children, young people & schools
- Supporting positive community relationships.

An annual review has been carried out since 2012 to look at how various actions and activities have been carried out to achieve these priorities.

The Strategy was agreed at a time when Central Government's deficit reduction programme was in to its second year; five years on and with reduced service provision, the need for strong and resilient communities has never been greater. The Council has though continued to prioritise its support for community groups and organisations in Gateshead, with the support provided to over 200 groups by the Neighbourhood Management & Volunteering team, the funding of services provided by Newcastle CVS to the voluntary and community sector in Gateshead, and funding organisations growth and development through the Gateshead Fund (both the Local Community Fund and the Capacity Building Fund).

It is therefore timely to review the Gateshead Communities Together Strategy, with a view to establishing a framework of principles that support the development of active citizenship, connected communities that make the most of the assets at their disposal, and through a growth in capacity and social capital enriching the life chances and quality of life of Gateshead residents.

A refreshed strategy will help address the following challenges:

- How can Gateshead's communities become more empowered, resilient and vibrant?
- How can Gateshead's communities identify and communicate issues and ideas for change, and be better able to take collective action?
- What needs to happen to bring about empowered and connected communities in Gateshead?

2. **The importance of resilience for Gateshead's communities, and its key features**

The communities residents live in and the relationships and networks they belong to are important features of resilience. To succeed, most people need supportive relationships and the ability and opportunity to link to a wider group of people with different knowledge, talents and resources at their disposal.

A resilient community is a well networked one, and one where there are positive social norms and challenges to negative and potentially destructive behaviour. Personal and community resilience are interconnected, because support networks are stronger when made up of resilient individuals, and forming meaningful relationships takes confidence and other personal capabilities.

The majority of residents in Gateshead are likely to have emotionally supportive networks already. These might be friends and family or community or faith groups. They know people they can turn to in difficult times for help, advice and guidance.

However for other residents these relationships may be weaker or less supportive, and are therefore more vulnerable to experiencing adversity and ill health. Structures and support networks that can help residents build the relationships they need are important for Gateshead.

Broad networks of weaker ties (contacts with people we don't know as well) can help residents to access a range of advice, skills, knowledge and connections. So for example in resilient communities people are more likely to know someone who can give them advice about how to apply to university, how to do some DIY or how to influence local decision making. The greater the level of interaction between residents, the more resources and potential support they have at their disposal.

Essential to building a resilient community is understanding the power of networks in spreading positive behaviours, knowledge and social norms, and challenging those that undermine this. Having a broad and diverse set of networks and relationships is good for individual well-being and life chances, but is also good for the community as a whole. A community with vibrant and diverse networks is better able to respond to local challenges that public services cannot, or should not, be involved in.

For example, residents are perfectly capable of organising the school run or helping out an elderly neighbour with the shopping, and it is better the council does not get involved. These relationships are the building blocks around which residents and communities can become stronger, more connected and resilient, and forms the starting point for giving communities the resources to be more involved in meeting local need.

3. **The importance of connected communities**

In a programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund, the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) has been working in seven different UK locations since 2010 to test how interventions at a local level might encourage deeper social connections that would help improve a community's resilience and wellbeing. Researchers found that:

- There is evidence that investing in interventions which build social relationships can improve employability, improve health (and thereby employability) and create savings in health and welfare expenditure.
- Social connectedness is the characteristic most consistently associated with wellbeing, rather than characteristics such as long term illness, unemployment or being a single parent. In a survey of 2,840 people found that the issue most consistently associated with having higher subjective wellbeing was 'feeling part of a community'.
- 60 per cent of the people surveyed could not name anybody they knew who had the power or influence to change things locally. But by facilitating connections between people and supporting them to feel like socially included citizens, supporting these connections can provide people with new skills and improve their employment prospects.
- Concentrating resources on networks and relationships, rather than on the 'troubled' individuals or groups most at risk as an end-user can have beneficial effects which ripple out through social networks, having positive effects on people's children, partners, friends and others.

4. **Tackling health and wellbeing inequalities**

According to the Report of the Commission for Health and Social Care Integration published by the North East Combined Authority (NECA), overcoming the entrenched health inequalities in the NECA area will require a strong, collective focus on key issues with greatest impact on health and wellbeing outcomes, such as:

- early resilience – providing a best start in life for all children
- greater control for individuals over their life and circumstances
- fair employment and good work for all
- health at work and play, action to address social isolation and loneliness, and concerted action to achieve an age-friendly environment for all ages
- strengthening the role and impact of ill health prevention, including through low-cost, community based approaches (secondary prevention).

The Marmot Review (2010) stated that health inequality could be narrowed by improving the amount of community capital, and reducing the level of social isolation.....strong and effective community organisations delivering local activities is a key requirement for this to take place.

5. **Pursuing an asset based approach to achieve empowered, resilient communities**

Assets can be described as the collective resources which individuals and communities have at their disposal, which protect against negative health outcomes and promote wellbeing. Although health assets are a part of every person, they are not necessarily used purposefully or mindfully.

According to the LGA publication “A Glass Half Full”, the asset approach is a set of values and principles and a way of thinking about the world. It:

- identifies and makes visible the health-enhancing assets in a community
- sees citizens and communities as the co-producers of health and well-being, rather than just the recipients of services
- promotes community networks, relationships and friendships that can provide caring, mutual help and empowerment
- values what works well in an area
- identifies what has the potential to improve health and well-being
- supports individuals’ health and well-being through self-esteem, coping strategies, resilience skills, relationships, friendships, knowledge and personal resources
- empowers communities to control their futures and create tangible resources such as services, funds and buildings.

Strong communities are built by recognising, celebrating and harnessing the community assets that are already present within communities. These assets can include:

- the skills, knowledge and connections of local residents
- the collective power of community groups and clubs
- the resources of public, private and non-profit institutions
- the physical and economic resources of local places
- the shared stories, culture and heritage of local places

The potential benefits of this approach for residents include:

- more control over their lives and where they live
- the ability to influence decisions which affect them and their communities
- the opportunity to be engaged how and as they want to be, and
- to be seen as part of the solution, not the problem.

This in turn may then lead to increased wellbeing for residents through a strengthened sense of control, increased knowledge, raised self-esteem and an increase in social contacts, giving skills for life and work.

Meaningful engagement and collaboration with everyone

Asset based activities ensure that engagement with individuals is meaningful and empowering rather than tokenistic and consultative. It helps the community identify what they can do for themselves, what they need a little assistance with, and what public services can do to improve the things that matter most to residents and their neighbourhoods. Asset based working also strives to engage with individuals who would not usually get involved, and values the contributions of everyone involved.

The Gateshead Communities Together Strategy will provide the framework by which Gateshead’s residents and communities can become stronger and more resilient, through enhanced local networks, communication and opportunities to get involved.

6. The approach

The Gateshead Communities Together Strategy will act as an open invitation and opportunity for residents, communities, public and private sector organisations to work together to explore how to improve Gateshead and to meet the aspirations in Vision 2030 and the Council Plan.

The Strategy will provide an overall context of Gateshead's values, what it does well, illustrated with case studies. It will set out a suggested way to support the establishment of community plans, based around the principles of an appreciative inquiry, and featuring 5 key questions:

- Thinking about your work, and your life within your community what difference are you making and what are you most proud of?
- What could help you to do more of the work you think is important – or do it better?
- What are your dreams and ambitions for your community / the community you work in?
- What things could get in the way of achieving positive change for your community / the community you work in?
- What are the most important messages for ALL those involved in communities? Research carried out in East Sussex in 2016 suggests these might include making it easier and “normal” to volunteer and that everybody has a responsibility for improving life in their community.

These questions help to shape how things could be done differently, and will also help identify how things could start to happen and reshape the nature of relationships and roles.

In many communities in Gateshead the foundations are already in place to kick start this approach. A number of community hubs, clusters of activity, and proactive organisations acting as “leaders of place” already exist to help grow asset based approaches. Examples of these organisations in Gateshead include:

- Big Local Gateshead
- Community Partnerships such as Birtley and the Low Fell Forum
- Kibblesworth Parish Council
- Bensham & Saltwell Alive
- Dunston Activity Centre
- Lobley Hill Community Centre
- Edbert's House
- Deckham Village Hall

7. Supporting the delivery of the Strategy

Delivering the Strategy will draw upon the learning so far from the work associated with Achieving More Together, the ABCD workshop sessions delivered by Nurture Development in 2016, and the Members' and Council employees ABCD training sessions provided by Asset Based Consulting over the last 18 months.

From within the Council, it should be quite straightforward to identify a group of 100 “early adopters” to act as a pool of in house employee champions to embed an asset based approach within services, and to help support communities with the implementation of the Strategy. In addition, there are a number of further resources that will help realise the delivery of the Strategy.

The Neighbourhood Management and Volunteering Team

This team will provide residents with advice and support on steps to put a community plan together, such as capturing and mapping assets, helping with the identification of ideas and ambitions for change, and support for new and existing community groups.

The Spatial Planning and Environment Service

This service offers advice and support to communities looking to develop a Neighbourhood Plan, which is a shared vision identified for their neighbourhood that shapes the development and growth of a local area.

Economic and Housing Growth Service

The Service can provide advice on employment and enterprising pathways that can arise out of asset based working within communities.

Support, advice and representation for community organisations

A CVS service will be jointly commissioned with Newcastle City Council from September 2017 providing technical expertise, advocacy and sector representation to complement the services provided by the Council. Gateshead Council currently contracts with Newcastle CVS for this role on an interim basis.

Ward Councillors as community champions

Councillors will be supported to further develop their understanding of the characteristics of their wards, the active community groups and organisations within them, identifying their key ward priorities and establishing a ward plan to address them. The role of ward visits will also be considered

Access to finance to support community groups' activities and facilities and capacity building The Gateshead Fund provides a valuable resource that supports the growth and development of Gateshead community groups and organisations. A revised Fund could be a single point of access for several funding components, including the Capacity Building Fund and the neighbourhood component of the Community Infrastructure Levy, and possibly shaped further by the research currently underway by the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. The Local Community Fund may also have a role as a source of microfinance for communities.

A funding and investment strategy for Gateshead's communities

The aim of this would be to look at developing a more structured approach to maximising funding and investment opportunities for Gateshead's communities, including coordinated dissemination of funding advice, funding training workshops, and approaches to securing investment through partnership collaboration. This would also include an assessment of commissioning and contracting activities, to ensure Gateshead organisations are in a better position to access such opportunities and that commissioning approaches actively consider approaches that maximise the potential for local delivery.

A volunteering support and advice service that is simple to access and helps maximise the impact of volunteering within the Borough's communities

By supporting the availability and delivery of a wide range of volunteering activities, and an effective volunteer advice and support service, the chances of an increase in active citizenship and the growth of social capital in Gateshead has a greater chance of succeeding.

Effective and viable operation of community facilities as accessible assets for communities and groups to use

The Council currently administers a Community Centre Network which provides an opportunity for learning and dissemination of best practice. This has the potential to develop further and could look at the benefits of a formal membership structure, becoming constituted and acting as a means to secure better deals on utilities, procurement, insurance etc.

The roles and responsibilities of these support services to help deliver assets based approaches and activities will be further outlined in the final Strategy.

8. **The Outcomes: measuring the impact**

Implementation of an asset based approach to community wellbeing is likely to lead to the following outcomes:

- More resident – led initiatives and activities
- Greater influence by residents over the delivery of Council services they receive
- Increased level and range of volunteering
- A voluntary and community sector that has greater capacity to operate effectively

An outcomes based framework will be developed to capture the impact and change that materialises as asset based approaches develop across the Borough under the auspices of the Gateshead Communities Together Strategy. The framework could include the following measures:

- Community organisations are flourishing in Gateshead
- Community networks are vibrant across the Borough
- Residents have access to a wide range of community groups and activities
- Residents are more active in their community
- The level of satisfaction and wellbeing expressed by residents

9. **Next steps**

It is proposed that under the auspices of the Place Board:

- An approach to embed an assets-based culture within the Council, supported by Organisational Development, is identified including the establishment of a pool of Assets champions to support the roll out of assets based work with communities
- A draft Strategy, adoption and implementation timeline and outcomes based framework are produced

A further report will be presented to Committee outlining progress on these steps.

10. **Recommendations**

Overview and Scrutiny Committee is requested to: -

- (i) Comment on the suggested principles and proposed next steps to implement a review of the Gateshead Communities Together Strategy

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