Report to Place Scrutiny

Meeting Date –   28 February 2024
Key Decision –   Yes/ No
Public/Private –   Public

Portfolio –   Cllr Lisa Brown

Directorate – Public Health and Communities

Report Author – Paul Musgrave, Assistant Director, Communities and Localities

Title –   Community Power

Brief Summary:

This report describes the spectrum of community empowerment and community power from basic community engagement through to collaboration, participative democracy, co-production and devolvement of powers.

It sets out the journey that Cumberland Council is currently on and explores options and potential ambitions for the future and examines the role of elected members in shaping our approaches across the organisation to new ways of working with communities.

Recommendations:

1   That members note the report.

2   That members give their views on the principles of engagement as set out in the draft Community Engagement Framework at appendix 1 and referred to in para 2.1

3   That members give their views on the developments of Community Panels and Networks as referred to in para 2.2

4   That members discuss the potential of their role in future direction of the council's community power/journey.

Tracking

Executive:	
Scrutiny:	
Council:	

Background

Community power and community empowerment are often used interchangeably and indeed have broadly similar definitions. Essentially both terms refer to the concept of communities/people having a greater say over the places in which they live and the services they use. It is a growing movement with communities across the country, and globally, working together to improve places, public services and each other's lives. Communities with greater power have the potential to answer some of the most persistent challenges in our society today.

For the purposes of this report the term "community power" will be used more frequently. It can often be interpreted that community empowerment is still a set of actions that the Council wishes to do "to" communities whereas community power is a concept we aspire to share "with" communities. However, empowerment is an important element of the journey in itself and will be referred to.

Community power is based on the principle that people have insight, lived experience and capabilities which should play a meaningful role in the big decisions taken by central government, local government and the wider public sector. Recognising this has big consequences for how decisions are made, both for communities of place, based around a geographic area, and for communities of experience based around shared conditions, demographic characteristics or life stages.

Current systems can often lead to the assets and social capital of communities being bypassed by formal organisations. If decision-making was opened up or was closer to the community, allowing for the parity of community expertise alongside that of professionals, then better and more sustainable outcomes could be achieved. No one knows a community better than that community itself.

Community power and community led approaches argue that communities should have much more involvement in the design and delivery of public services. In practice, this means much wider community involvement in decision-making and the day-to-day delivery of services and, maybe most importantly, a big shift in the culture of public service workforces away from a paternalistic mind-set to one that respects and collaborates with communities as equal partners.

1. Considerations for Community Power in the context of Cumberland Council

There is a strong rationale as to why community power should be examined as an overarching principle for Council business and an ambition for our communities.

1.1 Our approach is shifting towards a prevention focus:

Putting Health and Wellbeing at the heart of everything we do in Cumberland gives our system great potential to break out of the cycle of treating symptoms and be more able to address root causes to stop problems occurring in the first place or deteriorating if they emerge. Genuine prevention relies on people actively participating in their own health and wellbeing. This links in well with our "Pre Front Door" Front Door approach and the transformation programmes about to commence which includes a specific workstream focused on Community Power

1.2   The challenges we face require active, resilient communities

The depth and complexity of many modern problems from climate change to deindustrialisation or social isolation are beyond the ability of any single institution to resolve. We need an approach that recognises how Cumberland Council can ensure communities are not merely passive recipients of services or transactional customers and one which recognises their role at the heart of sustainable solutions.

1.3   Communities have a basic right to have a say over the system that exists to support them:

No one knows a community better than that community itself. Creating new and more varied ways for communities to engage with decisions affecting their lives is an important part of the co-production journey. As a new Unitary Authority we have a unique opportunity to reset the ways we want to engage with, and empower our communities using innovation and technology alongside some of our effective traditional methods and taking the conversation to the community rather than expecting communities to come to us.

1.4   Harnessing the benefits of Community Power

- Community power has potential to improve individual health and wellbeing. From peer-support groups, through lived experience to innovative community-led approaches, practitioners are recognising the benefits that active participants bring to improvement of their health and wellbeing.

- Community power can strengthen community wellbeing and resilience. Involving people in decision-making, alongside supporting them with resources and wider social infrastructure, can enable community action to improve wellbeing and resilience locally.

- Community power can enhance democratic participation and boost trust. Deliberative and participatory methods can be used to navigate complex socio-economic challenges and to strengthen legitimacy of decision-making.

- Community power can build community cohesion. The common understanding and social ties that are necessary for cohesion cannot be effectively imposed from the national level. Community-anchored approaches demonstrate that cohesion is most sustainably built from the ground up.

- Community power can embed prevention and early intervention in public services. Where some parts of the public sector are pioneering new approaches that draw on the capabilities and capacities of communities, they demonstrate a route to more sustainable and prevention-focused public services.

- Community power can generate financial savings. There is growing evidence that investing in community power approaches can generate greater impact for existing spend and save money in the longer-term.

2. Current and planned approaches

Cumberland Council is already embedding many principles which lead to more communities having greater power over the decisions that affect them.

This approach begins with engagement and inclusion through our Community Engagement Framework and moves through to co-production and communities at the heart of decision making through our Community Panels and Networks and our adoption of the Place Standard.

2.1 Community Engagement Framework

The Council has a clear commitment to improving community engagement and participation with a focus on strengthening the relationship between the council and communities. As stated above, through improved community participation we can build trust and understanding which can help better shape services and improve decision-making and ultimately lead to stronger communities.

As part of the journey towards community power we have identified a need to create a whole council approach to community engagement – embedding a set of principles and procedures across the whole organisation to create a culture of working alongside all of our communities to encompass a range of voices and lived experiences, and to see this reflected in our decision making, leadership and planning.

The draft Community Engagement Framework at appendix 1 sets out some proposed principles and standards for how the council will work in this area to make sure we create a more consistent and inclusive approach across the organisation, with more opportunities to hear a range of voices earlier in the decision-making process.

The framework forms a basis for how we will work to get better at all forms of engaging, from the basics – such as being much clearer in the language we use and the communications we produce (e.g. emails and information on the website) through to new ways to work with communities on redesigning services and taking decisions (using methods such as co-design).

The draft Framework proposes the following principles:

Inclusive: Accessible spaces and formats; making it easier for people to take part; seldom heard voices; lived experience.

Collaborative: Flexible and innovative involvement opportunities for communities; co-production; developing community capacity, confidence, skills, and knowledge.

Co-ordinated: Activity is coordinated; information and intelligence is shared effectively; avoiding duplication and over or under engagement.

Meaningful: Working openly, honestly and with integrity; engagement activity is timely, well planned, well designed, proportionate, transparent and well informed.

Alongside these principles the draft Framework sets out some roles and responsibilities for both officers and elected members as well as giving some case study examples of activity.

The intention is that this will be supported by more detailed guidance through a toolkit and training opportunities so that we can build skills and knowledge across the organisation. The council can build on this Framework as it develops more sophisticated approaches and models in areas such as co-production. A key part of improving our approach is testing new methods, learning from best practice and sharing learning across the organisation.

2.2   Community Panels and Community Networks

In terms of collaboration and empowerment, the Council has introduced a new model for working with our communities and elected members. This is reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that it remains effective.

The new Council saw the introduction of Community Panels that replaced Local Committees, building on the positives of local decision making that local committees brought. There are eight Community Panels, four rural and 4 urban with between 5 and 7 elected members on each. These are the local formal meetings and are more focussed due to the smaller footprint than previously. These meetings provide an opportunity to consider what input there has been from across the council to the benefit of communities in the footprint area and in doing so, encourages much greater accountability from the Council services.

Each Community Panel identified priorities that reflect their areas and these were consulted on within each panel geography. These have now been formally signed off at all eight panels and will now be used to determine funding applications. These are the starting point for each of the emerging Neighbourhood Investment Plans which will be co-produced with communities though Community Networks attached to each Community Panel. An overview of the priorities across the panels is attached at Appendix 2

Each Community Panel was allocated a share of over £0.5million based on an index which considered local population health and poverty. These funds are referred to as the Neighbourhood Investment Fund and each panel is able to distribute these funds in a way that has a direct impact on the chosen priorities.

There was an initial delay to allocating funds to communities as we transitioned from Local Committees to Community Panels but we are now receiving a number of applications and are working with Members and communities to generate interest for appropriate applications.

The priorities are also the starting point for the Neighbourhood Investment Plans, (NIPs) a document produced for each Community Panel area. The draft Plans will be discussed as part of ongoing network activity to both ensure the priorities remain relevant and that the Community Panels are delivering on the priority areas agreed. The NIPs are due to be agreed at each Panel but will remain as a working document to reflect progress made. Progress will be reported to Community Panel formal meetings. The draft NIPs are currently in production.

In addition to the Panels, we have also established Community Networks, one for each Community Panel area. It was envisioned that these would be a network that anyone could join who would meet up four times a year. It was the intention that these networks would also help influence and ensure delivery of the Neighbourhood Investment Plan.

Within the first couple of months, the Community Networks were reviewed and it was identified that they were too static, formal and would only appeal to those who were happy to attend meetings over the longer term. In response, although Community Networks still exist, it is the overarching term for engagement activity and provides greater flexibility, ability to use

many forums, doesn't require 'sign up' by residents and can handle participants becoming more or less involved over time as it suits them. This approach will also help to widen the range of community voices that we get to hear. The Community Network concept is a driver to ongoing engagement activity rather than an ad hoc approach that existed previously.

To support Members to stay informed, we have introduced Member Briefings. These happen in between Community Panel meetings, are held on Teams and consist of two or three subjects. These are an opportunity for Members to learn in detail about planned or actual Council activities that affect all panel areas and to ask questions of officers and discuss in an informal setting.

This has all been introduced within the first year of the new council and some elements still need further development. The following are some of those areas:

- Engagement in the Community Development team will change emphasis so that although we can hold events that people will attend, we will seek to go where people naturally go and speak with them there. This will complement the Community Engagement Framework.
- Work is being undertaken to improve the knowledge around groups who support people with protected characteristics and other lived experience. We will encourage a strengthening of relationships with existing groups and identify gaps across Cumberland.
- The process to appoint co-opted Members has commenced for five of the eight Community Panels. This first year is a learning opportunity and will be under constant review.
- The feedback loop from network activity back to officers in the appropriate directorate is an area that needs further development.
- There is an appetite across the Council to understand community needs and to know how and where to fit into the wider framework that has been established. The Community Development Team are planning some sessions which cover the content of this report to raise awareness and develop / strengthen relationships

2.3   The Place Standard

Cumberland Council has adopted The Place Standard as a methodology for assessing the assets and areas for improvement in a community.

The Place Standard tool provides a simple framework to structure conversations about a community, its assets and facilities. It allows consideration for the physical elements of a place (for example its buildings, spaces, and transport links) as well as the social aspects (for example whether people feel they have a say in decision making).

The tool provides prompts for discussions, allowing you to consider all the elements of a place in a methodical way. The tool pinpoints the assets of a place as well as areas where a place could improve.

This is, by design, a participative, community led, co-produced approach and following a successful pilot event on 31st January 2024, the tool will be rolled out throughout the Community Networks and will be used to drive the Neighbourhood Investment Plans attached to each Community Panel.

Cumberland Council is being seen as an exemplar on Place Standard development by partners in the region including the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the National Lottery who are part funding the approach in Cumberland.

2.4   The role of research

The council has recently worked closely with Suzanne Willson, Research Fellow in Social Inclusion and Community Engagement based at UCLan's Westlakes Campus. The work examined Community Power through the lens of co-creating approaches to participatory democracy. This focused in on some particular communities in West Cumberland and

This research sought to bring a selection of communities from West Cumberland together with new Cumberland Council to co-create new ways to work together. This was done over 18 months through community workshops, where residents explored different strategies for democratic participation and later discussed these with the Council in co-creation sessions.

The full report can be found at appendix 3 and a summary presentation in support of the research will be delivered at this meeting.

The research findings demonstrate that the Council has many of the building blocks in place to develop a meaningful approach to this agenda but there is significant potential in maintaining and possibly developing strong links with academic research as we further develop and finetune our own approaches.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

The Council is very much on the journey towards community power but we have to be aware this is "job started" rather than "job done". The councils programmes of work in relation to Community Hubs, Community Panels, Community Networks and wider Community Empowerment have great potential to place our communities at the centre of our decision making and to deliver services alongside communities in a different, more collaborative way than current models.

There are opportunities to continue to work alongside colleagues in UCLan to develop our approach Cumberland wide and to understand the issues in different communities.

The council plan and values will further ensure we work effectively towards achieving better outcomes with our communities through more open, regular dialogue and through ensuring communities can have the power they need to work with us and other stakeholders to realise their respective ambitions.

Implications:

Contribution to the Cumberland Plan Priorities -
Improving the ability of communities to determine and address their own priorities gives greater choice and control and fits closely with the councils aim to put health and well being at the heart of everything we do.

In improving community power, the council would work more closely on prioritising addressing inequalities, local economies that work for local people and delivering excellent public services, This in turn would contribute to the aims to:

- Provide accessible and trusted services that listen,
- Involve and engage;
- Drive change, learning and improving;
- Demonstrate leadership whilst working collaboratively;
- Think local first and sustainably;
- Focus on prevention and early intervention

Relevant Risks and explain how risks can be mitigated – no risks to consider at this time

Consultation / Engagement – The Draft Engagement Framework has been widely consulted upon through Directorate Management Teams. More consultation will be required.

Legal – no issues to consider

Finance – no issues to consider

Information Governance – no issues to consider

Impact Assessments –
Have you screened the decision for impacts using the Impact Assessment?
Information paper only. No decisions to screen at this time

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Background papers:
None

Appendices attached to report:
1   Draft Community Engagement Framework
2   Community Panel Shared Priorities
3   UCLan Community Power Report by Suzanne Wilson