

Transforming communities?

Exploring the roles of community anchor organisations in public service reform, local democracy, community resilience and social change



James Henderson, What Works Scotland

Philip Revell, Sustaining Dunbar

Oliver Escobar, What Works Scotland

Summary: Research report

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Community anchor organisations are multi-purpose, community-led and -based organisations such as community development trusts or community-controlled housing associations. They have become more visible in Scottish policymaking in the last decade, yet what is the potential of these community organisations to engage with, lead and provide challenge to Scottish public service reform?

This is the Executive Summary of a What Works Scotland research report which aims to support and inform the discussions between the community sector, public services and policymakers as to how they can work together. It illustrates how community anchors can contribute to and challenge constructively public service reform through community-led place-making and, in the process, support the development of local democracy, community resilience for local sustainable development, and wider social change.

This Summary outlines the learning from the five sections of the full research report, which provide an introduction (section 1); detail on six community anchor exemplars (section 2); consideration of the exemplars in relation to the Christie Commission agenda for public service reform (section 3); discussions of infrastructure to support the development of community anchors – policy, investment, culture change (section 4); and, reflections on the potential roles of community anchors in relation to local democracy, community resilience and social change (section 5).

1. Community anchors: community ownership and public service reform

*“We have [...] received evidence on the value and strength of **independent community action**, and have been particularly impressed with the recent expansion of community development trusts, which are enabling communities to make their own plans and aspirations a reality. These organisations are about local people deciding what is important to them, and then taking action.”*

Christie Commission, 2011: 34

Community anchors are diverse, but share three broad characteristics or aspirations:

- **Community-led or controlled:** with robust local community governance and community networks/connections; and, financial self-sufficiency for core work sustained through community ownership.

- **Holistic, multi-purpose or ‘inherently complex’:** concerned for local economy and social capital; local services and partnerships; local environment and sustainable development; community sector development; local leadership and advocacy.
- **Responsive and committed to local community and its context:** responding to that context whether urban, rural or remote; addressing poverty, deprivation and inequality; and committed for the long-term – a credible local brand.

This is not a one-size-fits-all definition but a broad ‘model’ to support ongoing dialogue within the community sector itself, and with other stakeholders, as to the anchor role. In Scotland, the role has been taken up in particular by both community development trusts and community-controlled housing associations. However, other local community organisations may also undertake or aspire to this multi-purpose role, potentially working together as a ‘local eco-system’ to fulfil this approach.

A wider, diverse local community sector

Community anchor organisations play a key role as part of a wider body of not-for-profit (third sector) local community organisations and groups, which are locally controlled and accountable. These include:

- community social enterprises and local voluntary organisations of many different varieties e.g. credit unions, community-led health organisations, community food groups and so on¹;
- local community organisations of interest/identity e.g. relating to class, gender, race/ethnicity, disability, sexuality, faith/belief, age and so on; and,
- community councils and a wide range of smaller community groups and networks.

Each has distinctive, unique roles to play and so make for a rich community sector locally and more widely across the country.

Public service reform in Scotland

We understand the reform agenda to continue to broadly follow the ‘direction of travel’ outlined by the Christie Commission (2011)² with its emphasis on:

- *partnership* and *participation* that seeks to improve public service *performance*; and
- where *performance* improvement is concerned to *prevent* negative social and economic outcomes, e.g. inequalities, and so reducing pressure on services and systems.

The Commission sets this thinking (the ‘4Ps’) within a richer narrative that includes local democratic accountability; local community resilience and concern for ‘place’; and, commitment to more equitable, fairer society whilst seeking to cope with public spending constraints (‘austerity’). We illustrate how community anchors can contribute to and challenge constructively public service reform *through community-led place-making concerned with local democracy, community resilience for local sustainable development, and wider social change.*

¹ See, for instance, Social Enterprise Networks supported by [Senscot](https://senscot.net/) (Social Entrepreneurs Network Scotland) at: <https://senscot.net/>; and the member networks of the Scottish Community Alliance: <http://www.scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/about/>

² View the Commission’s report at: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/06/27154527/0>

Our research argues that it is crucial to understand the key roles of local and central state, including community planning partnerships (CPPs), in supporting the development of community anchors and infrastructure for the community sector.

Our research process and beyond

Our research works within a participatory policy analysis tradition³ and has been influenced by an ‘appreciative’ inquiry approach that puts emphasis on aspirational discussions⁴. The research process therefore involved: interviews and discussions with six community anchor organisations, selected as exemplars of ‘good’ practice by the researchers and an Advisory Group (see Acknowledgments at the end of this summary); and, further discussions with the Advisory Group and other consultees. In so doing, we have sought to consider: the constructive contributions and aspirations to public service reform and related policy issues that community anchors can make through their work with public services and for community-led place-making; and, how public services and the state can support their work through building suitable infrastructure for community anchors – policy, investment and culture change.

The research raises key issues but doesn’t seek to provide a representative picture of partnership working between community anchors and public services across Scotland. Instead, our process looks to create and support ‘spaces’ for ongoing reflective, critical action-orientated dialogue and further relevant research between the community sector, public services, policymakers and other stakeholders. Our consultation work on the report with the exemplar organisations, Advisory Group and other participants has continued to deepen the investigations and move towards more reflective, critical discussions across sectors including regarding local democracy, community resilience, and social change. There is potential for this to be both further ongoing dialogue and research across sectors and beyond the ‘life’ of What Works Scotland.

2: Community anchor organisations: six exemplars

We present profiles of six community sector organisations in relation to the community anchor ‘model’ outlined above. These were chosen to illustrate diverse anchor practices across urban, rural and remote contexts and the social geography of Scotland – in areas of high deprivation and those with less obvious poverty and inequality. Each has emerged in different local circumstances and diverse contexts. Their approach is distinct from the public sector and other parts of the wider third sector, and the variety of organisations and contexts should inform rich discussions of policy and practice.

Ardenglen Housing Association (AHA), East Castlemilk, Glasgow

Castlemilk has a history of complex social challenges. It is one of the four large peripheral housing schemes developed by Glasgow Corporation in the 1950s to tackle a severe housing shortage and relocate people from the overcrowded inner-city slum areas such as the Gorbals. Established in 1990, and now with housing assets worth £22m and turnover of nearly £4m, AHA takes pride in providing high quality social housing combined with a responsive and efficient management and maintenance service. AHA also works with over

³ Often termed ‘critical policy studies’, this approach to the study of policymaking emphasises participatory, interpretative and deliberative approaches between researchers and participants.

⁴ ‘Appreciative’ as in seeking to understand the constructive potential of community anchors.

35 partners and a community committee of local tenants and residents to deliver a programme of 'regeneration activities' from the Maureen Cope Community Hall.

AHA as a community anchor illustrates:

- a *highly participatory approach* to the development and running of wide-ranging community learning and regeneration activities that community ownership and control can bring.
- how a *multi-purpose, locally-committed body* can support the building of strong, trusting relationships, which can empower local people – helping to mitigate some of the impacts of welfare reform, sustain tenancies and embed community cohesion.

Glenboig Neighbourhood House (GNH), North Lanarkshire

In semi-rural North Lanarkshire, Glenboig was originally a thriving industrial village until closure of its renowned fireclay works, coal mines and then the nearby Gartcosh steel works in the late 1980s led to significant unemployment and an increase in social problems. As one of North Lanarkshire's *community growth areas*, the population is set to double to over 4000 over the next few years. Since 1990, GNH has gone from delivering occasional, small-scale services to becoming a *community hub* for the whole village, engaging with residents of all ages and delivering a wide range of services. About 20 (FTE) staff are now employed and over 120 volunteers are involved. Turnover is about £520k.

GNH as a community anchor illustrates:

- the role of a *community-controlled hub* as a focus for complex, locally-tailored social care and other community services
- *long-term community commitment*: the dedication and perseverance of key staff and board members, combined with strong community support and engagement, can enable significant achievements and remarkable performance despite challenging circumstances and inadequate facilities.

Govanhill Housing Association and Community Development Trust (GHA/GCDT), Glasgow

Govanhill is a densely-populated, multi-ethnic working class urban community within Glasgow's Southside, a mile to the south of the city-centre. It has been plagued by a private rental '*slum*' *housing crisis* with many private sector landlords failing to invest in the maintenance of ageing tenement properties and blocks, whilst continuing to rent them out in poor states of repair and in over-crowded conditions to vulnerable immigrant workers/families. GHHA was one of the first community-controlled housing associations in Glasgow, established in 1974 and now has a turnover of £14m. Beyond the provision of high quality housing and related services, GHHA/GCDT undertakes a complex array of activities that support community participation across the community's diversity, builds social capital and the local community sector, and supports local welfare and public service provision.

GHHA/GCDT as a community anchor illustrates:

- a complex matrix of community-led governance and connectedness across a diverse community, combined with a Service Hub (with public services) and local Community Sector Forum.
- committed, long-term term community leadership and advocacy in response to crucial private rental housing issues and the need for significant investment in local housing – that has also influenced national policymaking.

Greener Kirkcaldy (GK), Fife

Kirkcaldy is a large town on the south coast of Fife. It is now a major service centre following industrial decline and closure of coal mines in the 1980s. Concentrations of deprivation are interspersed with more affluent residential areas in the older part of town and by new peripheral housing developments. Founded in 2009 to implement practical, community-led climate action projects, it has grown rapidly into a well-respected development trust with an annual turnover of about £700k. Greener Kirkcaldy's focus is on delivering projects to meet the needs of local people: tackling fuel and food poverty, improving health and wellbeing, and bringing the community together *"to make Kirkcaldy a greener and fairer place to live"*.

Greener Kirkcaldy as a community anchor illustrates:

- facilitative, *multi-purpose community leadership* to build creative, *cross-sector partnerships* across both public and third sectors
- commitment to active support, advocacy and solidarity to mitigate the impacts of *fuel, food and financial poverty*
- the enabling of *local participation* and discussion on creating a greener, fairer future.

Huntly and District Development Trust (HDDT), Aberdeenshire

Huntly is a small rural town and wider surrounding district (11,000 people approx.) in north-west Aberdeenshire. Whilst not deeply deprived, there is considerable 'invisible' food and fuel poverty and the more rural parts of the district have poor transport links and mostly poor broadband connectivity. The Trust (HDDT) started in 2009, building on the work of the Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership, a local authority-led initiative. The Trust has a diverse agenda around local economic development, social and cultural development, sport and the environment. It has recently commissioned its own wind turbine on its community-owned farm. Current annual turnover is about £245k.

As a community anchor it illustrates:

- *building towards a sustainable independence* through development of income-generating assets e.g. community-owned farm and wind turbine; and committed local board members
- commitment to *sustainable local economic and social development* e.g. supporting town centre regeneration initiative; work with Networks of Wellbeing to support local mental health and wellbeing; and exploring a Green Travel Hub.

Stòras Uibhist (SU) (South Uist), Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles)

A negotiated sale of the South Uist Estate in 2006 brought 93,000 acres of South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula into community ownership. After years of neglect by absentee landlords, the island's fragile crofting economy was on a negative trajectory with few opportunities for young people and families, a declining population and very high rates of fuel poverty. With assets worth over £33m, a very diverse portfolio of activities, and an annual turnover approaching £4m, SU is now a complex (not-for-profit) commercial organisation employing 18 (FTE) people across its estate management and development activities. Its 6.9MW Loch Carnan windfarm provides vital core income whilst attracting £10m of investment into the new Lochboisdale Harbour development has the potential to be transformational for the local economy and re-build the population.

Stòras Uibhist as a community anchor illustrates:

- how *community ownership* is fundamental to an extensive and diverse *community-led regeneration* that can re-build the morale of local communities.
- acting as a *community-led local economic development agency*, delivering crucial infrastructure to secure a sustainable future for a remote community.

In summary

The exemplars above help to build a rich picture of the varieties of practice undertaken by community anchors and how they illustrate the community anchor ‘model’ – community-led, multi-purpose, committed and responsive to context. We argue, therefore, for the ‘model’ as a valuable framework for supporting cross-sector dialogue, research and policymaking in relation to anchors.

The analysis in our full report also points to key opportunities and challenges in relation to local democracy, community resilience and social change through further critical reflection and action-orientated discussion that include:

- sustaining local participatory democratic activities in diverse, and at times conflicted, communities.
- working to build community resilience concerned for local sustainable development, with partners who may not see this as their priority; and,
- coping as smaller organisations with dynamic, turbulent policy currents, e.g. welfare reform, whilst seeking to pursue commitments to social justice, community empowerment and aspirations for a fairer, sustainable economy.

3. Community anchors and ‘putting Christie into action’

Using the community anchor exemplars as illustrations, we consider how community anchors can support, lead and challenge policy and practice relevant to the key Christie Commission themes of partnership, participation, prevention and performance.

Partnership working

The Christie Commission 2011 puts great emphasis on developing local, collaborative partnership working – across public sector and third/community sector partners – that is concerned with: pooling resources, local accountability across local stakeholders; focused on improving outcomes; and, developing a public service ethos and empowering both staff and communities. Increasingly, notions of local service hubs and/or community hubs are being considered.

Key learning

The exemplar community anchors explored in our research illustrate that they are well placed to facilitate a complex collaborative approach, drawing from detailed on-the-ground knowledge, in order to:

- *initiate and work across complex webs of relationships at multiple levels with public services, policy and decision-makers, and neighbourhoods and citizens.*
- *assert themselves at the ‘public sector table’ and build trusting cross-sector relationships – where suitably resourced.*
- *help cultivate and support rich and diverse local community sector activity – including through varieties of local community and service hubs.*

Participation

This can be understood as partnership working at the micro-level. It is what community-led organisations need to be ‘all about’ as they seek to build the trust and social capital that keep communities working together. The Christie Commission points to the diversity of participatory and empowering activities that public services can undertake through: co-production with service-users and carers; engagement, consultation and co-production with communities; and working with the community sector and wider third sector bodies. The community anchor ‘model’ emphasises the potential for these organisations to embed participation in their structures and culture through: their governance of volunteer boards of directors – local people elected from their membership; and, the rich matrix of community networks and connections that they sustain in order to ‘do the job’.

Key learning

A participative approach is embedded – part of their ethos – in the way that community anchors seek to work in communities, making them well-placed, where suitably resourced, to take the lead in seeking to:

- *bridge divides and bring diverse communities together.*
- *support and enable participation by all across their communities.*
- *connect to local knowledge to support local service development and place planning.*

Preventing inequalities and reducing pressure on services and systems

The Christie Commission argues for preventative approaches that reduce ‘unnecessary’ demand (‘failure demand’) on public services by focusing on preventing inequality and promoting equality. It points to employability, community-led regeneration and place-based approaches, and the potential for generating a virtuous circle between public services and economic development that generates a fairer, healthier and more equitable society.

Key learning

Community anchors are well-placed to work locally to mitigate (limit) the worst excesses of inequalities locally, as resources allow, through working:

- *for income maximisation: employment, training, access to benefits and welfare.*
- *with groups at risk of significant harm through inequality including supporting access to public services – this includes work re. poverty, social and ethnic diversity, social isolation, mental ill-health, children and young people.*
- *for sustainable, community-led place-making: improving the local environment and developing the local economy.*

Further, there are examples of anchors leading wider advocacy work and engaging with policymaking structures to create local change – in the face of inequalities, state constraints and market failure. There is potential for community anchors to work together and with others to advocate for wider social change.

Performance – improvement, accountability and social outcomes

The Christie Commission suggests turning existing notions of performance management on their head through emphasising local stakeholder democratic accountability – via partnership and participation. Further, its concern to prevent inequalities so as to reduce pressure on public services and create a more equitable society, points beyond performance improvement and cost efficiencies to the need for bold political actions – so tackling inequality at ‘root’ or source.

Key learning

Community anchors provide crucial opportunities for leading the development of:

- *community-led local plans and visions e.g. ‘Local Place Plans’ – that can help to focus service development and consider outcomes.*
- *complex inter-connected and co-located community hubs and services.*
- *local learning cultures – open to exploring creative approaches and social change.*

In summary

The research points to the distinctive opportunities that community anchors offer to public service reform through: their *local leadership and governance structures* that bring together advocacy, community ownership, local hubs and so on; their *local knowledge, flexibility and creativity* – sustained by multi-skilled committed staff, activists, volunteers; their potential to work with *local diversity and connectivity* and connecting to ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, local social capital and prepared-ness to work with local difference.

We also argue that key opportunities and challenges for further critical reflection and action-orientated discussion across sectors include:

- the challenges, skills and achievements of being local leaders, particularly in your own community;
- the need for longer-term strategic approach to developing financially-secure community anchors that can sustain strategies for community resilience; and,
- using the local knowledge of community anchors to deepen understanding of the root causes, and lead advocacy on, inequalities.

4. Community anchors: developing supportive infrastructure

This section draws together the learning from the previous sections, as well as wider discussions with the Advisory Group and others involved in the consultation work, and our wider knowledge as researchers on related projects. It recognises that community anchors face a number of barriers, challenges and frustrations that continue to limit their potential, and broadly points to three areas where suitable infrastructure needs to be developed:

- the **policy** landscape in which community anchors work.
- the need for **long-term investment** in anchors and supportive infrastructure.
- public service **culture change** and community planning partnerships.

Resourcing community anchors and the community sector

It would be difficult to underestimate the crucial importance of a reliable long-term income stream if a community anchor is to fulfil its full multi-purpose potential. Anchors are there for the 'long-haul' but reliance on unpredictable, short-term project funding can be a huge drag on their activity. It leaves them at the mercy of changeable funding fads that may not align with local priorities, leaves little resource to cover core costs, makes it hard to retain hard-won staff expertise, can be particularly burdensome on volunteer boards and limits their capacity to build reserves. It is crucial for them to develop more sustainable sources of income-generating activity that can also work to maintain their independent governance and local advocacy. Further, there is need for investment in varieties of training for staff, activists and volunteers to support the complex work undertaken by anchors. Given the community sector best understands its needs, such training would best be 'community-led' and provided from within the sector. Finally, the works of anchors rests firmly on its base of activists and volunteers, and therefore a fundamental question as to how society supports those on low incomes in undertaking this crucial work.

Key learning

The local and central state have crucial roles in investing in anchors to:

- *build their long-term financial sustainability through community asset ownership, e.g. suitably supported asset transfer, and community enterprise, e.g. procurement.*
- *support the further development of community anchors of substance in all deprived communities.*
- *develop resilient, independent organisations through varieties of relevant training to build the resilience of organisations and their staff, activists and volunteers – including community sector-led 'change-agent' programmes⁵.*
- *support local social capital (activists and volunteers) who are so crucial to our society, e.g. via training, citizen allowances and/or the welfare/benefits system.*

Culture change: public services and society

Working with the community sector, and its distinctive ethos and diverse ways of working, requires a significant shift in thinking for public service organisations and partnerships: moving from one dimensional linear-thinking through top-down management to an approach that supports complex deliberation, negotiation and communication across evolving systems and networks. This requires the development of on-going reflective and action-orientated dialogue between the community sector and public services that build common understandings and complex relationships.

⁵ A change-agent programme concerned, for instance, for facilitative leadership and local democratic practice; building community resilience for local sustainable development; and community organising and campaigning for social change.

Key learning

Community planning partnerships, the public sector and public services should look to:

- *invest in community-led training for public service staff to support understanding of the community sector and its potential.*
- *work with community anchors to build local deliberative and participatory democratic structures to feed into planning and decision making*
- *invest in the longer-term role of community anchors in monitoring change in actual (local) social and economic outcomes in their communities, e.g. inequalities, sustainable communities, to support the development of preventative approaches to inequality and related social change.*

In summary

We point to the need for both the community sector and public services to be engaged in discussions of 'genuine substance' to build the infrastructure relevant to a vibrant community sector and to a public service reform informed by the Christie Commission agenda and its concern for a more equitable society. This, we recognise, requires change from both sectors and beyond including policymakers.

We also point to key opportunities and challenges for further critical reflection and action-orientated cross-sector dialogue on:

- integrating representative, participative and deliberative approaches to local democracy through skilled facilitative and accountable leadership;
- the varied approaches and expectations around local economic and social regeneration held by different sectors, given their differences in power; and,
- the tensions around social change and preventing inequalities given the need for wider structural (systems) change.

5. Reflecting on public service reform, community anchors and future aspirations: local democracy, community resilience and social change

In this concluding section we reflect on the role of community anchor organisations in local democracy, community resilience for local sustainable development, and wider social change. We consider how they can actively contribute to developing strong local foundations for a fairer society and sustainable economy in Scotland.

Local democracy and facilitative leadership

Community anchor organisations provide foundations and initiative for economic and social development locally *and* they also constitute spaces with significant potential to advance local democratic engagement. They are one of the key local resources that can facilitate and deepen complex local democratic practices.

Key learning

- *Community anchors can contribute to addressing the deficits of local democracy in Scotland by providing new spaces for public participation and deliberation focused on improving outcomes for communities.*
- *Fulfilling this potential requires strong participatory foundations in terms of community anchor governance and community engagement.*
- *New styles of facilitative leadership are crucial to developing community anchors as key institutions of local democracy.*

Community resilience for local sustainable development

Calls for building community resilience are now common place and multi-purpose community anchor organisations are uniquely placed to support this agenda.

Key learning

- *Community anchors can support the development of community resilience – but only when they themselves are resilient organisations.*
- *Community resilience needs to be understood as being about supporting transformational, systems (economic, social and political) change.*
- *Transformational change will require resilience ‘in the round’ – including personal, cultural and economic resilience as well as inter-community collaboration.*

Social change: a fairer, more equitable society and sustainable future

Contemporary societies are being tested by a range of economic, social, political and ecological crises. Community anchors are making important contributions to three key agendas in post-Christie public service reform, namely: social justice, community empowerment and aspirations for a fairer, sustainable economy. In sum, community anchor organisations provide local spaces to both think and act collectively in response to the question ‘what kind of society are we working towards?’

Key learning

- *Suitably resourced community anchors can act as catalysts and advocates for both local and wider social change.*
- *Community anchors and the community sector are one expression of a wider and global movement for a fairer, democratic and sustainable future.*
- *The social commons⁶ as a shared, bottom-up approach to regenerating natural, social, political and economic resources offers a fresh perspective on how community anchors and communities, the wider social economy and the state can build towards a more equitable and optimistic society.*

⁶ The Social Commons (Coote, 2017 – see Full Report) is understood as a collective commitment and coordination of natural, social, economic and political resources and infrastructure through the shared working of both community/civil society and public sector/state.

Concluding thoughts

Our study explores the complexity of roles that community anchors can undertake to engage with, lead and challenge public service reform in Scotland but that this *cannot*:

- happen without the necessary investment in infrastructure through policy, resources and culture change, and angled to support and prioritise more deprived, working class communities.
- be a one-size-fits-all approach - different communities and contexts will develop community anchors which will take varied forms and build distinctive networks.

Crucially this needs to be understood as an ongoing reflective and action-orientated dialogue between the community sector, public services, policymakers and others (including researchers); one that sustains a focus on a 'Scottish Approach' to public service reform and, yet, in the process, connects to a wider body of discussions about the society we want to live in.

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What Works Scotland is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration which aims to improve the way local areas use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

The full report – *Transforming communities? Exploring the roles of community anchor organisations in public service reform, local democracy, community resilience and social change* – is available on the What Works Scotland website at whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/exploring-the-roles-of-community-anchor-organisations-in-public-service-reform