

Transcript: Exploring the role of community anchor organisations

See the film on the What Works Scotland website:

<https://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/events/webinar-transforming-communities-exploring-the-roles-of-community-anchor-organisations/>

Drs James Henderson and Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh, and Philip Revell of Sustainable Dunbar

This webinar drew from the recent What Works Scotland research report on community-led, holistic community organisations – in particular as community development trusts and community-controlled housing associations.

In the presentation the researchers:

1. introduce the community anchor ‘model’ and provide some illustrations from the research
2. make links between the role of community anchors and the Christie Commission’s aspirations for public service reform in Scotland
3. highlight themes of social change—relevant to both community anchors and public service reform—of local democracy, community resilience for sustainable development and inequalities.

So, Philip and I are going to talk for about 25 minutes about the research and the research report. I will try and skip fairly quickly over a range of topics and raise some issues that we can then come back and explore the ones that feel most relevant to yourselves in more depth, as is useful.

The whole focus of the presentation report is transforming communities and exploring the role of community anchors in relation to public service reform—their potential in supporting, leading and challenging that reform. We put the question marks in the title just to emphasise it's a developing body of thought and practice and we're keen to engage in dialogue.

The presentation will cover five areas. I will give some background to the research. We'll get a couple of exemplars to show what we mean by community anchors. We'll look at community anchors briefly in terms of public service reform. We'll look at some of the issues for infrastructure, and we'll come back finally to thinking back about community anchors not only [in relation to] public service reform but related social change.

So, the first of those five topics—background to the project. The research project started in 2016 and we aimed to look at the role of community anchors in relation to public service reform in Scotland. What they can do and what they could do, and to generate some written outputs and also to support ongoing dialogue and research with a wide range of stakeholders going beyond, we hope, the life of What Works [Scotland]. The researchers—there were three of us. Myself [James Henderson] I've got a background in future generation and participatory research. Philip Revell, an independent researcher from Sustainable

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Dunbar and a community activist. And Oliver Escobar who's worked as a lecturer at Edinburgh University and is particularly concerned for local democratic participation and deliberation of many different types.

The background, of course, is the Christy Commission and public service reform in Scotland. The Commission emphasises the role of the community sector and that quote at the beginning emphasises independent community action and the role in this case of community development trusts that we interpreted more widely as community anchors. Although the Commission is often summarised as the four p's of partnership, participation, prevention and preventing negative outcomes, and performance (improving performance), it's a far richer document than that. And it gives a wider agenda of a more equitable society in which public services, a balanced economy and varieties of empowerment are integrated.

One of those forms of empowerment is localism or community empowerment and the document is a rich language around democratic participation and accountability, local resilience and autonomy and local partnerships and place-based work in co-production. So all very relevant.

Just to introduce the concept of community anchors or a community anchor organisation. The notion of an anchor is used widely in regeneration internationally as a metaphor so it can mean many different things in the UK. For various reasons which I can't go into in this presentation because it's quite long-winded, the UK community anchor model has grown up and broadly we summarise this in the report as three aspirations. Organisations aspiring to be community led or controlled so with the robust local community governance on-board, networks and a financial self-sufficiency making it independent of larger local bodies built around community ownership. So that was the first aspiration.

The second is for holistic, multi-purpose, inherently complex range of activities to do with the local economy and sustainable developments, local social and welfare development, partnership and participation, community sector local leadership and advocacy. In a sense they're kind of hubs of local economic, social and democratic and environmental development.

And the third aspiration is to be there for the long-term, to be committed and responsive to the local community and the full diversity of the local community to be locally credible. In Scotland, most often these organisations take the form of either community development trusts or community controlled housing associations but to emphasise there is a much richer community sector out there. Hundreds, thousands of community groups and organisations and community enterprises of which community anchors just are one part and which they aim to stimulate a wider growth from the community sector.

Our research process and report looked at six anchor exemplars. We involved a range of public services and documentation, an advisory group and our own research experience in thinking more in depth about those exemplars, and we're going to do two here. But we're

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inspired to research as pragmatics and useful participation so we involved a range of people and critical thinking seriously about the issues.

Section 3 of the report looks at the Christie Commission and anchors in relation to that infrastructure. In section 4, to support the development of anchors and the issue of social change. In section 5, outputs from the report include not just from the report but from What Works [Scotland] a discussion paper in 2015 that sets the scene for a research report which is a full report, executive summary and a briefing and then a range of dialogue and research activities and events, and this webinar, and blog pieces that go towards an ongoing process beyond What Works. And so that's the first part first chunk section a.

Section b of the presentation I'm going to talk a bit about two of the community anchor exemplars. As you can see there are six listed there, some in urban environments, some in rural, some in remote such as in South Uist. We're going to focus briefly on Govanhill and Greener Kirkcaldy and I'll do the first one on Govanhill. I'll change to Philip to do Green Kirkcaldy.

Govanhill is a community just about a mile south of Glasgow City Centre, and it's very much an urban community. Sixteen thousand people live there in about a square mile. The community [anchor is] the Govanhill Housing Association (GHHA). [What I've put] here illustrates community led governance and that first aspiration... It's got a formal management committee and membership. It's got a lot of informal networks, tenants and residents groups, the youth committee, a range of community development and housing related activities and the community ownership built around a large housing stock, social housing in that community, and a range of property owned by its Community Development Trust.

And this illustrates that second aspiration: an holistic multi-purpose inherently complex [range of activities]. It's got a service hub for which it provides housing welfare services and supports tenants and residents groups, and it works in partnership with a range of public services, council and health. It also illustrates its inherent complexity. Its Community Development Trust is a trading subsidiary that provides an information shop and community, a range of community development activities and adult learning supports the local system of Scotland and the schools there.

It has a community sector development angle through a forum and provides a range of employment/employability in social enterprise development, including works and illustrates the third aspiration for local commitment and responsiveness, in particular by that range of activity it does and its concern for the community diversity.

Govanhill is a very diverse multicultural, multi-ethnic community, but also it's that longevity, a long commitment that dates back to 1974 and [it has] continued to work with the community as the community has changed in the last ten years or so. It's had a particular focus on leadership and advocacy around the private rental housing crisis in the community, which I won't going into in depth here, but this has involved lobbying and advocacy with

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local and central government and getting investment from those two bodies and supporting practical development on the ground by bringing private rental tenements into community ownership.

At this point, I'll switch to Philip to do Greener Kirkcaldy. Yes, Greener Kirkcaldy is a much younger organisation. It was set up in 2009 [and] actually it grew out of the Fife Friends of the Earth group that first funded project in 2010 and they've grown very rapidly since then, so they now have around 15 full-time equivalent staff and a turnover of something in excess of £700,000. They operate in Kirkcaldy, which is a town of about 50,000 people in the south of Fife and it has a number of pockets of multiple deprivation.

They run a wide range of projects encompassing food and food growing, energy advice, waste reduction and community development. Next slide. The energy advice project, in particular, is a partnership project which actually runs across the whole of Fife, a partnership with a wide range of both public sector and third sector bodies including Fife Council, and it provides home energy advice and then signposting to support to anybody who needs it, with particular focus on those in fuel poverty. Next. Around food, they have a number of community gardens and are in the process of setting up a community food hub where they run projects such as a living well on the budget programme and they have acquired now former assets which [have been] transferred from Fife Council, the former library headquarters which they are converting into what will be their community hub.

Next. And they do a lot of work with schools and young people and, again in partnership with Fife Council, they help maintain Dunniker park and they do a lot of practical skills training work with kids and young people from deprived parts of the town. Next. So, overall yes they take a multi-faceted approach to local development, but they do a lot in terms of liaising with public sector structures through community planning and various bodies. And they're really normalising discussion about what a greener, fairer future will look like locally. I'll pass back to you, James.

Okay so that's our two exemplars. To get the conversations going, we will refer a little bit to some of the others as well as we go along. The third section is called anchors and the Christie Commission agenda. I'm going to keep this quite brief but we're looking broadly at how community anchors relate to that agenda of partnership, participation, prevention and performance.

Firstly, in terms of local partnership and participation, through the visual here we're emphasising community anchors as potentially hubs for complex local partnership and participation. The six different exemplars weren't all doing the same thing. They're quite diverse but broadly we've summarised their role in relation to partnership and participation. They illustrated a range of public service partnerships in relation to community planning and for health and social care, regeneration, local schools, housing and community safety. They illustrated a range of participatory activity, diverse community networks, community

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organisations and groups, diversity equalities groups and a wide range of third sector networks, and some of them were involved with community councils and local politicians.

And crucially many of them were working with neighbouring community anchor organisations. And then a third range of collaborative and partnership activity was revealed around local training activities to do with a range of funding bodies, local and national. Building community resilience through community renewables, local leadership, anti-poverty working and relating to local democracy community plans and community histories and so on. So a kind of rich complex hubs for local participation.

I'm going to skip the next couple of slides and come to the third of the Christie themes, prevention. In terms of prevention and preventing inequalities, in the report we illustrate two themes one around their potential where suitably resourced to mitigate some of the worst excesses of inequalities. And to poverty work, income maximisation, through supporting vulnerable groups accessing services and welfare, building social capital. And through a community led complex place-making, and we can impact on the local environment, housing, green spaces, local food, energies and so on. So that's one way they work on the preventative agenda.

The second is around what they offer [such as] leadership and advocacy and I've already flagged that up with Govanhill around the housing crisis there, but to use a second example in South Uist, [which] has had a key role in trying to stop the economic decline and depopulation of three islands there. It's been building, in partnership with the state, a range of infrastructure including a local harbour, and has had the ferry service from Mallaig to Lochboisdale reinstated which helps tourism and related activity and local economic development.

So two themes around prevention and then finally I'm coming to the issue of performance. A bottom-up approach is to improve in performance. I'll just emphasise here their role in producing community led plans and visions, which could relate to the local place plans being developed in the Planning Bill. All six of the exemplars illustrated informal activity in terms of local planning and development. One in particular had produced a formal plan, Glenboig community action plan, in which it worked with other community sector bodies in the village there to develop inaction plan. Better known is the Neilston Renaissance Town Charter which is a 20-year vision in which the Neilston Development Trust has developed a community plan and Sustainable Dunbar have also done some work around sustainable action planning. So that that's broadly how these anchors are relating, the sort of themes that come out of relating to the Christy Commission.

I'm going to move on to the fourth section and hand back to Philip on infrastructure for community anchors. Yes, thank you James. The next section of the report really looks at the infrastructure that community anchors operate within and highlights some of the barriers and challenges and frustrations that they face, but also some of the opportunities. Firstly, looking at the sort of policy that they operate within. Clearly, given their wide-ranging

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agendas and the fact that they're based in communities of place, they're really affected by all policies that governments bring forward. They're really, therefore, greatly influenced and impacted by changes to policy, and we particularly highlight that the effect of changes to support for renewables for example, which will come on to a wee bit later, but also a lot of community organisations have been left picking up the pieces from welfare reform, for example.

In terms of opportunity, community anchor organisations are a huge potential source of expertise and knowledge that could be made much better use of by policy makers. There's a real scope to make use of this in moving to more bottom-up policy-making which fits with the democratic renewal agenda. And then looking at resourcing as I mentioned, policies can make a huge difference to the ability of community anchors to generate their own income and build their own long-term financial sustainability. Clean renewables provided one very good way that many community anchors have been able to do that in the past but many have missed out.

Asset transfer provides another possible route. Just looking at one example of how Huntly Development Trust have managed to do this. They actually very nearly collapsed a few years ago for lack of funding and then a mixture of serendipity, government support, local land coming available and local visionary leadership meant that they were able to acquire 60 acres of land locally, Greenmyres farm, which they are in the process of developing as an educational and training centre but more immediately it's given them land on which to develop a community-owned wind turbine, again through support from communities programme and funding from Scottish Government and crucially technical support from Community Energy Scotland. [This] enabled them to get their community wind turbine in place in time to benefit from renewable energy subsidies so they've now got a substantial and increasing income from community renewables, which has not only secured their future as a development trust but it's also developing a local energy economy. Just to emphasise the point that it's really difficult to underestimate how important it is that a community anchor has a long-term reliable income stream if it's going to fulfil its potential as a community anchor organisation because reliance on short-term project funding is a huge drag.

And apart from resourcing the organisation and its development, the other point we really emphasise is the need to support the people involved and we highlight the fact that there is already a huge amount of skill within the community sector itself and was a great opportunity to really make better use of those skills to set up community effecter led training and skill sharing programmes. We also highlight the need to recognise the contribution that is made by huge numbers of volunteers within these organisations and their contribution needs to be better recognised and supported.

The other thing we consider is a need for culture change and the way that the public-sector relates to the community sector. We emphasise the need to move from controlling top-down management approach to one that is much more comfortable with creating conditions

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in which community action can flourish and then work with the complexity that results from that. Just to briefly highlight that, despite What Works Scotland's logo, this isn't actually the way that the world works in predictable cause-and-effect ways. Actually, the world has a much more complex set up, a much more exciting world of interacting complex systems which behave in unexpected and unpredictable ways, and if we're wanting transformational change, then sometimes we need to let those systems dip into chaos in order to rearrange them in a new form.

The final section of the report, we go on to consider local democracy and community resilience, and how we can create a more equitable society and also then look at how this report can really be part of an ongoing dialogue. So briefly looking at local democracy, in a way these community anchor organisations many of them have actually arisen precisely because there is such a gap in local democracy in Scotland at the moment. And they are providing new ways for participation and deliberation, which are focused on improving local outcomes. We emphasise the need to get away from thinking of democracy in terms of voting every few years and to recognise that new democratic s are emerging locally. We emphasise the need for new ways of meeting together and particularly emphasise the potential for more facilitated forms of leadership and setting up meetings, so that often conflicting local ideas and priorities can be dealt with creatively to come up with better local solutions. We then go on to talk about community resilience and we argue it in a way given the uncertain future we face with some of the existential challenges and complex challenges that we face globally.

One of the most important functions that community anchor organisations can perform is to increase their local resilience so that communities can have the best opportunity to engage with and change and shape the future they want so that when we do experience whatever unexpected challenges [that] arise in the next while, they can actually use it as a catalyst for transformational local change. We emphasise that community anchors are, as I said, uniquely placed to support the door into local community resilience but that does extend to depend on themselves being resilient organisations. They are already doing a lot to build local social capital and set up more vibrant localised economies.

Lastly, we're going to talk about social change and the sort of future we are actually working towards, and basically we suggest that community anchors are providing one expression of a wider global movement for a different, fairer more democratic sustainable future in line with a social commons approach which is really emphasising well-being and caring, sharing communities as a way of creating well-being. So, groups are really they are rediscovering place as the building blocks of society and building social commons and providing a glimpse of a more hopeful future based on a fairer and more sustainable society.