# Evidence Paper – Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence to the Committee, following my statement of 11 October 2016 on resilient communities. The committee has asked for further information and has also asked for a review of the responses of the then Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty to the Fourth Assembly's Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee to Strand Four of their Inquiry into Poverty - (Community-based approaches to tackling poverty).

## Resilient Communities

I firmly believe that it is time for a new approach to building resilient communities to promote the Government's objectives of well being and economic prosperity. Building resilient communities requires a cross-government approach. The essential elements of a resilient community are, I believe, employment, early years, and empowerment. This means communities that are ready and able to work; that can offer children the best start in life and communities that are empowered and engaged.

Employment offers the best, most sustainable way of escaping poverty. We have already made a major commitment to the Lift, Communities for Work and Parents, Childcare and Employment (PaCE) programmes. We are also committed to supporting working families across Wales through our childcare offer, helping parents return to work or increasing their employment choices. This work forms part of the wider Welsh Government focus on promoting employment and employability as described by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure in evidence submitted in advance of his appearance before this committee on 8 February 2017. Responsibilities which sit within the Economy and Infrastructure portfolio are central to our approach to promoting prosperity and tackling poverty, including the focus on decent jobs that pay well, skills, infrastructure and connectivity.

We remain committed to Flying Start and Families First helping more disadvantaged children to get the best possible start in life, but, I believe we can more do to build more resilient communities which help prevent and protect children from the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences or 'ACEs'. This is why, in my statement on resilient communities, I invited organisations to join with us to develop Children's Zones for Wales: agencies collaborating to improve children's and young people's outcomes.

My vision for empowered, engaged communities builds on the work of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government to reform local government, ensuring greater participation in civil society and democracy. Local authorities and Public Services Boards have a key role to play and I will engage, challenge and support them to ensure they are working towards meeting the needs and aspirations of all the communities they serve. Discussions have taken place with a number of local authorities supported by their Public Services Boards, to consider how greater financial flexibilities might enable them to further integrate service provision to better meet the needs of communities.

In light of this new focus, amongst other things I have questioned whether Communities First is still the best way to tackle poverty and deliver for communities and consequently in October 2016 I indicated that I was minded to phase out the programme. In this context, I undertook to look afresh at how the Welsh Government can support resilient communities.

My statement signalled the start of a broad programme of engagement with internal and external stakeholders on our future approach, including the proposal to phase out Communities First.

**Engagement to date**

Since October our programme of engagement has included numerous opportunities for all of our delivery partners (Communities First Lead Delivery Bodies, Cluster delivery teams and Third Sector organisations) to participate. This has included meetings with officials and events organised on our behalf by the WCVA. We have actively encouraged any organisation with an interest to participate in the engagement programme and officials have attended a broad range of forums and meetings.

In addition to our online survey 'Talk Communities', which was launched on 24 October 2016 and received over 2000 responses, there were also meetings and events with members of the public, organised on our behalf by both the WCVA and ARAD research. We have also drawn on the expertise of the WCVA to ensure that engagement has included a broad cross-section of individuals with protected characteristics. This has included events organised through Third Sector organisations to ensure we include the views of specific groups. Over 50 individuals or organisations have written to me with their views about Communities First since my statement. We have ensured that their responses are included with the feedback received as part of the engagement programme.

We have encouraged all local authorities and Public Services Boards to contribute their views on the future of Communities First and proposed new approach to resilient communities. Meetings and discussions have taken place right across Wales.

Locally, Communities First works with a very wide range of delivery partners and we are keen to understand the local impact of the possible phasing out of the

programme. All Lead Delivery Bodies have completed detailed assessments of the impacts in their areas.

**Implications for other Welsh Government Programmes**

Lift and Communities for Work currently operate to the same geographical boundaries as Communities First and these programmes often share management and infrastructure. I have made clear that, irrespective of any decision on Communities First, I am committed to the future of Communities for Work and Lift. I have recently announced an extension of the former until 2020 and am considering whether a similar extension for Lift is appropriate. I will be considering what alternative arrangements are needed to support Communities for Work and Lift should Communities First be phased out. I am confident that these programmes will continue to be effective, there are strong links between Communities for Work and Lift and wider services including wider local authority employment support programmes and there are opportunities for greater integration and coordination with mainstream services such as health.

Through our engagement process we have considered the extent of the inter-dependency between Communities for Work and Lift with Communities First. It is fair to say that the inter-dependencies vary considerably from cluster to cluster. In most delivery areas, the Programmes have made effective use of the platform offered by Communities First Clusters. The Programmes' reliance on the Clusters for promotion, referral and engagement is reflected in delivery areas to varying degrees, and is predominantly influenced by the level of resource available in that area.

There are close links with other tackling poverty programmes such as Families First, Flying Start and Supporting People. There are some other programmes that operate independently but use the Communities First footprint as a means to focus their activities, for example Fusion, which, following Baroness Andrews' report "Culture and Poverty", focuses on increasing participation in heritage and cultural activities by residents of deprived communities. It is worth noting if Fusion is extended beyond 31 March 2017, officials are considering alternative delivery options which are not limited by the confines of Communities First.

Communities First, Families First, Flying Start and Supporting People are each separate programmes, but, there are often shared target participants and outcomes. For this reason, officials have been working on much greater alignment between the programmes. The extent to which programmes are aligned in different local authority areas, and their interdependency, varies considerably. In a number of local authority areas, for example there are single delivery plans. In other areas, alignment is still very limited or may be confined to referral pathways between programmes, co-location and collaboration around specific activities.

Communities First does not provide capital funding and therefore, does not directly provide funding for community buildings. Again, part of the engagement process has focused on the impact on community buildings. From this, we recognise that the

viability of a number of community buildings is currently partly dependent on Communities First, and in some cases significantly so. These buildings are often important to the communities they serve.

If a decision is made to close Communities First, then a phased approach would allow time for local partners to identify alternative sources of support as part of a broader assessment of how public sector assets are best used and the opportunities for co-location of services.

**Impacts of Phasing Out**

Gaining an understanding of the potential impact of closing Communities First has been central to the engagement process. As outlined above, this includes other programmes and buildings and has included Communities First service users and staff.

As I have already indicated, nationally, we have encouraged any organisation with an interest to participate in the engagement programme so that we could better understand the impact on them of any potential changes to or closure of Communities First.

**Next Steps**

The engagement process has taken place over more than 12 weeks providing very helpful information and views for us to analyse. As the start of the financial year approaches it is important that stakeholders, particularly those using Communities First services and delivery partners, are informed about the future of the programme at the earliest opportunity.

The first phase of the engagement programme ended on 15 January 2016. Whilst within the context of the broader new approach to resilient communities, this phase focused on the future of Communities First. The second phase continues to focus on the Welsh Government's future approach to building resilient communities. We want to continue to engage with communities across Wales, public bodies, third and private sectors on how to most effectively empower and support communities to be strong and resilient.

**Review of the responses of the then Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty to the Fourth Assembly Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee to Strand Four of their Inquiry into Poverty - (Community-based approaches to tackling poverty).**

In setting out her responses the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty described tackling poverty as a fundamental priority for Welsh Government, with the needs of low income households reflected in policies and programmes across portfolios. She asserted the Welsh Government's belief that the best means of tackling poverty was through a mixture of place based and non placed base programmes. This approach, at the time, endorsed by the Tackling Poverty External Advisory Group and reflected in the range of programmes funded by Welsh Government allows us to reach a greater number of people in need of support, gives us the best chance of improving outcomes for them, and helps generate maximum value from resources available.

Welsh Government continues to recognise the need for a mix of programmes: those which are place specific and those which are available across Wales. Communities First, Lift, Communities for Work and PaCE have a geographical focus, which enables them to target some, though not all, areas with high levels of economic inactivity and unemployment. There is also a geographic focus to capital programmes, such as Vibrant and Viable Places, which are looking to regenerate communities. On the other hand Families First, Supporting People and the Pupil Deprivation Grant focus on specific populations.

We have made a major commitment to Lift and Communities for Work which will continue as planned. Flying Start and Families First continue to support disadvantaged children to get the best possible start in life; we have protected the Supporting People budget for 2017 and have also extended the Pupil Deprivation Grant.

In her response, the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty went on to describe the achievements of key programmes including Communities First. In my statement, I too was keen to pay tribute to the Communities First workforce and to recognise the support the programme has provided for individuals in some of our most deprived communities. However, I also recognised that since the programme's inception fifteen years ago, times had changed and our communities now faced new challenges. I therefore questioned whether Communities First was still the best way to tackle the roots of poverty and deliver for communities and indicated that I was minded to phase the programme out, subject to wide engagement before making a final decision.

The Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty described the Welsh Government's approach to tackling poverty, recognising that employment was the best route out of poverty and the crucial importance of investment in the early years. These themes are central to my vision for our new approach to resilient communities

as set out in my statement of 11 October and demonstrated in our continued commitment to Communities for Work, PaCE, Lift, Families First and Flying Start.

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