Report on the Audit Wales 'Together We Can' report recommendations

Adult Services Scrutiny Panel

7th August 2023

1. Executive Summary

In 2017, Swansea Council published **Working towards prosperity for all in Swansea: A tackling poverty strategy for Swansea**. This corporate strategy represented the Council's commitment to reducing poverty and the impacts that poverty has on the people of Swansea. In line with this commitment, tackling poverty is one of Swansea Council's well-being objectives defined in its **Corporate Plan 2023-2027**:
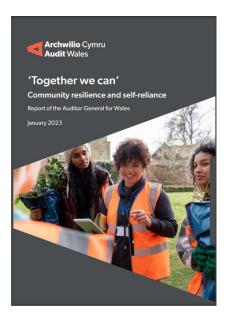
> **Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities** so that every person in Swansea can achieve their potential.

On 23rd January 2023, Audit Wales published the report **'Together We Can' – Community resilience and self-reliance**. The report looks at the priority placed on community resilience and self-reliance in local authority plans, and how local authorities are equipping people to be less reliant on often overstretched local authority services. The report concludes that "local authorities face a challenging and uncertain financial future but find it difficult to empower people and communities to be more self-reliance and less dependent on services".

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the findings of this report (including the key recommendations for consideration) and set out proposals for our next steps.

2. Context

Audit Wales published this report as the third of three key reviews relating to alleviating and tackling poverty in Wales (the other reports being **'Time for Change'** and **'A missed opportunity'**). This report was compiled based on a high-level examination of all local authorities in Wales conducted between September 2021 and August 2022, using document reviews, data analysis, interviews and surveys to inform the final report.

The report recognises that community resilience and self-reliance is important for local authorities as part of a broad shift in policy from 'Doing' to 'Enabling' to 'Influencing' and equipping communities to become more resilient and self-reliant. Financial challenges, legislative drivers and the increasing demand for statutory services make this move essential for local authorities especially as Wales is already facing some of the worst poverty levels in the UK (Audit General for Wales, Time for Change – Poverty in Wales, Nov 2022).

A key issue with this approach is that there are many different interpretations and meanings of community resilience and self-reliance, with the report finding different local authorities taking various approaches to defining it. These range from not making the definitions a priority to using different definitions across various services to believing it is not possible to define these things.

The report broadly uses the terms resilience and self-reliance to cover:
1. Community preparedness for adverse situations (to cope or thrive in adversity);
2. Support from within the community to promote individuals' independence;
3. Everything in between (such as addressing complex societal issues like poverty).

The report identifies achieving this will involve local authorities potentially 'resetting' their presence in communities, focused primarily on two approaches: Community Hubs, and Community Connectors / Navigators. This has been partly achieved through the COVID-19 pandemic which sparked a resurgence in community activism and helped local communities pull together to support vulnerable people in their area. However, there is a risk that these approaches are not embedded for the longer term and an opportunity may be missed to restate the role of local authorities within "resilient" communities.

The report quotes a number of key contributors to community resilience from Public Health Wales 2019 report on Community Resilience:
- **Human capital** – people and their skills, capacity and knowledge;
- **Social capital** – networks and connections within a community, groups working effectively within the community (such as voluntary organisations) and resources that support a community coming from public, private and third sectors;
- **Built capital** – physical infrastructure such as homes, roads and access to amenities;
- **Natural/Environmental capital** – access to green and blue spaces, availability and use of national resources;
- **Financial capital** – income, wealth and access to resources supported through civic and social enterprises.

The main barriers to creating more self-reliant and resilience communities identified through this review include:
- A lack of resources, skills and weak capacity to drive this agenda;
- Inability to redirect resources from service delivery to supporting communities;
- Relationships between local authorities and community residents;
- A lack of appetite from communities to become more self-reliant;
- Internal culture to be direct providers of services, rather than influencers and enablers;
- Limitations in joined up working with partners on the ground to foster stronger community involvement and influence;
- Lack of strategic vision and understanding the needs and abilities of the community;
- Wider challenges such as poverty, rurality, transportation and digital exclusion.

The report identifies there are no established national measures to how resilient people and communities are in Wales. There are proxy measures that could be used as indicators, such as levels of active citizenship, social loneliness and levels of community cohesion. However, the report identifies that no local authorities in Wales are using these indicators effectively to monitor and evaluate community resilience.

Other findings of the report include:
- Most Local Authorities are operating with no clear definition of resilience or self-reliant communities and only three could define the characteristics of a self-reliant individual;
- Local authorities that included 'communities' within their corporate plan objectives were recognised for defining their commitment to supporting communities to develop;
- Volunteering is a key theme but requires a shift in culture and needs to be nurtured carefully to avoid burnout of the volunteering sector;
- Empowering communities to do more for themselves can take a range of approaches from making grant processes more agile to taking a less risk averse approach to Community Asset Transfers (CAT);
- Community leaders, activists, and town / community councils play an important role in the community engagement and involvement for this work;

- The role of local authorities as a result of shifting from providing services to supporting communities to do more for themselves is unclear and requires planning and getting the right balance.

3. Findings

This report from Audit Wales concludes that Local Authorities face a challenging and uncertain financial figures but find it difficult to empower people and communities to be more self-reliant and less dependent on services. It highlights an opportunity for Councils to do more to achieve a clear vision for community resilience and self-reliance. The findings of the report recognise that this is a continuing challenge and that a lot of good work has already been done but recommends some of the key approaches Local Authorities could take including:

- Creating a clear vision of how things will work in the future;
- Holding a two-way dialogue and communicating what change will 'look' and 'feel' like;
- Revitalising the role of local authority Members as community champions;
- Refocussing the work of local authority staff;
- Recognising that recasting community relationships will require different solutions in different places;
- Ensuring wealth stays local and works for all the community.

The report provides good practice examples from across the UK in these approaches but it encourages each local authority in Wales to undertake an internal evaluation of where it is now with community resilience and self-reliance. An **evaluation tool** developed by Audit Wales is included in the Appendices of the 'Together We Can' Report, covering the following headings for local authorities to consider:

1) Understanding the challenge and articulating your role;
2) Knowing your communities;
3) Skills and knowledge to build community resilience;
4) Making a difference.

4. Way Forward

In summary, the findings of the Audit Wales report recognise that, given the significant challenges that local authorities are facing as a result of the Cost-of-Living crisis, the impact on council services is likely to increase in the future. There is a vital role for communities to play in responding to this challenge and by helping communities to become more resilient and self-reliant, we can help people to do more for themselves and be less reliant on stretched statutory services.

5. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (R1)

The report states: To strengthen community resilience and support people to be more self-reliant, local authorities need to ensure they have the right arrangements and systems in place. We recommend that local authorities use the evaluation tool (attached – *Annex A*) to:

- self-evaluate current engagement, management, performance and practice;
- identify where improvement is needed; and
- draft and implement an action plan with timeframes and responsibilities clearly set out to address the gaps and weaknesses identified in completing the evaluation tool.

Recommendation 2 (R2)

The report states: To help local authorities address the gaps they identify following their self-evaluation, we recommend that they:

- formally approve the completed Action Plan arising from the evaluation exercise;
- regularly report, monitor and evaluate performance at relevant scrutiny committees; and
- revise actions and targets in light of the authority's evaluation and assessment of its performance.

Our response:

We welcome the opportunity to evaluate the current position and identify actions, improvements and transformative work required to enable communities in Swansea to become more resilient and self-reliant. The two cross-directorate oversight groups that coordinate the delivery of the Corporate Priority 'Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities' –the **Swansea Council Poverty Forum** and **Enabling Communities Group** – have undertaken an initial internal review of the evaluation tool.

6. Next Steps

Based on the initial evaluation completed as part of the first recommendation, we have identified the following next steps to take this work forward.

Next Steps
1) Across Services and Cabinet Members consideration of the self-evaluation assessment and identification of associated actions.
2) Finalising action plan including timescales.
3) We will explore what community resilience and self-reliance means with our partners and with the people we support and coproduce a definition.
4) We will develop a clear approach that embeds principles including co-production, social value and strengths-based approaches to ensure that communities play a key role in developing community resilience and self-reliance.
5) We will build on our existing partnership arrangements and wider networks, forums and groups to develop collaborative opportunities to enhance community resilience and self-reliance across Swansea.
6) We will utilise opportunities to encourage people to be more active in their community, either through volunteering with the council, local volunteering in their communities or with our partners.

These next steps will develop into a focused Action Plan, aligned with the Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities Corporate Priority. Existing governance in place for coordination of this Corporate Priority, along with the corporate Transformation Programme 'Enabling Communities' programme.

As per Recommendation 2, regular reporting, monitoring and evaluation of performance will be via this scrutiny committee.

Annex A – Self-Evaluation Table – Initial Assessment

Heading		In place	In progress	Not started
Understanding the challenge and articulating your role	We have clearly defined and agreed what community resilience and self-reliance means to us	No	No	Yes
	Our vision makes clear what we need to do and what others are best placed to do	No	Yes	No
	We have identified by service, the activities: • that the authority must continue to provide; • those that can be delivered in partnership with others; and • those that the community can lead on.	No	Yes	No
	We have communicated our definitions widely to ensure all key stakeholders understand what we want to achieve through our work on community resilience and self-reliance	No	No	Yes
	Our key partners have identified how they will collaborate with us to strengthen community resilience and self-reliance	No	Yes	No
	We have completed a place-based asset mapping exercise to assess community resilience and capacity for increased self-reliance.	No	Yes	No
	We know the number and types of organisations working locally that can help us improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	Yes	No
	We know where there are gaps that we need to address	No	Yes	No
	We have agreed the actions required to help improve community resilience and self-reliance in our area.	No	Yes	No
	We have set SMART objectives and actions on how we will improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	Yes	No

Heading		In place	In progress	Not started
	We are clear on the benefits and risks of our work on community resilience and self-reliance for citizens, local communities and the local authority.	No	No	Yes
Knowing your communities	We know who our key community activists and leaders are.	No	Yes	No
	We have good working relationships and work effectively with our key community activists and leaders.	No	Yes	No
	We provide help, support and training to ensure our key community activists and leaders are as effective as they can be	No	Yes	No
	We effectively encourage local community activists and leaders to improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	No	Yes
Skills and knowledge to build community resilience	We are good at encouraging people to help out and do more in their community.	No	Yes	No
	We have the right staff in the right place to help improve community resilience and self-reliance.	No	Yes	No
	We have revised job descriptions and person specifications to strengthen their focus on involvement, to help improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	No	Yes
	We give staff the opportunity to take well-managed risks and explore innovative practices with communities	No	Yes	No
	Our staff are good at influencing people to do more for themselves where they can	No	Yes	No
	Elected members support the authority's work on strengthening community resilience and self-reliance.	No	Yes	No
	We have put in place the right support to help Elected Members strengthen community resilience and self-reliance in their wards	No	No	Yes
	We have a can-do culture and mindset within the local authority to improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	Yes	No
	We are good at encouraging communities to find their own solutions to problems and not rely on us.	No	Yes	No
Making a difference	We have reviewed ways of working across the Council and are changing services to help improve community resilience and self-reliance	No	No	Yes
	We have identified how these changes will impact on people.	No	No	Yes

Heading		In place	In progress	Not started
	We are communicating to citizens how our services are changing.	No	No	Yes
	We have specified the information required to evaluate how our work is improving community resilience and self-reliance	No	No	Yes
	We use our resources, money and assets to build and retain wealth in our local communities	No	Yes	No
	We use our procurement of services as a means of investing in the local economy.	No	Yes	No
	We work with our local anchor institutions to ensure they support community wealth building through their provision of services, use of resources, procurement and assets.	No	Yes	No
	We encourage suppliers to enhance the social value aspects of their contracts through the inclusion of training and employment opportunities in agreements	No	Yes	No
	We regularly report on our community resilience and self-reliance work to scrutiny committee(s) against a balanced set of performance information that covers: • demand for local authority services; • alternative provision within communities and by partners; and • impact of our work on people's wellbeing.	No	No	Yes
	Our scrutiny and evaluation processes provide us with assurance that our work is delivering anticipated outcomes.	No	No	Yes