SCDN

Scottish Community Development Network

Supporting People who Support Communities in Scotland

Reflections from the frontline- challenges, opportunities and lessons for the future

A report of SCDN engagement with over 520 Community Development practitioners throughout Scotland from October 2018 – November 2021

June 2022

1. Introduction

SCDN is a member led organisation for people who, paid or unpaid:

- Have community development as their main role or part of their remit
- Actively use community development approaches
- Support the values and principles of community development
- Aspire to use community development approaches in their practice

Membership is open to individuals who ascribe to the principles and practice of community development. We currently have 481 members and a further 518 contacts. We have 1600 followers on Twitter and 380 on Facebook.

2. About community development practice

'Community development enables people to work collectively to bring about positive social change. This long-term process starts from people's own experience and enables communities to work together to:

- Identify their own needs and actions
- Take collective action using their strengths and resources
- Develop their confidence, skills and knowledge
- Challenge unequal power relationships
- Promote social justice, equality and inclusion

in order to improve the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live and societies of which they are a part.' (Community Development National Occupational Standards)

SCDN also believes that "good community development work is done in ways which challenge disadvantage and tackle inequalities. It involves changing the relationships between ordinary people and people in positions of power. It is not simply about listening to the loudest voices or doing things the way they have always been done. It is an approach to achieving social change. It is based on the idea that disadvantage and social injustice cannot be tackled by top down solutions alone"[1]. (Community Development Alliance Scotland 2008)

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[1] https://regentsswk.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/community-development.pdf

As community development values, principles and approaches are increasingly recognised across health and social policy in Scotland, and undertaken by people across sectors, SCDN has a core mission to understand and raise awareness of the issues facing practitioners who support communities.

3. Why engage with practitioners

As a member led organisation, the key purpose of SCDN is to engage with a broad range of community development practitioners, strengthening their voices and raising the profile of community development across Scotland. In particular we sought:

- To develop a picture of the reality for CD practitioners (including unpaid practitioners) including their response to working through a pandemic
- To analyse this picture in the context of current policy aspirations
- To more effectively capture and reflect practitioners' views and experiences
- To develop our network in response to practitioners' needs

Our previous engagement report, [Community Development: the continuing challenges,](#) covering the period 2015 - 2018 highlighted a number of common practice issues and frustrations from practitioners across Scotland. Our engagement is ongoing, and we wished to collate feedback from the Network since then to find out if there had been any improvement in the context for practitioners and to highlight current issues and aspirations.

4. How we engaged

Our style engagement over this period changed in line with the many challenges faced by organisation to maintain contact with their members. We accessed Zoom and Microsoft Teams to offer online meetings, increased our bulletins from monthly to weekly sharing funding, events and support updates and posted daily on our social media. In addition to this, we used a number of methods to gather views. Feedback was collated from:

- Evaluations of two national conferences in 2018 and 2019

- An evaluation of our online network meetings from May 2020 to November 2021 including a national network meeting in September 2021
- An ongoing analysis of our Network meetings
- Jam board responses to questions posed at our AGM in May 2021 and our national conference in November 2021

5. Policy / political context within Scotland

The policy context for CD in Scotland is increasingly positive, recognising the role of communities in decision making about the issues that affect them.

For example, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 aims to help to empower community bodies through the ownership or control of land and buildings, and by strengthening their voices in decisions about public services.

The Fairer Scotland action plan aims to work together with the people of Scotland, particularly those living in poverty, with communities, with business and industry, and with all public and third sector organisations.

However, whilst these policies and others (SCDN Strategy) are welcome in that they support strong, empowered communities, there is little evidence of an increase in the resourcing of community development support available to both communities of place and interest.

The challenges of working through a pandemic and now a cost-of-living crisis, have placed significate pressures on communities, practitioners, public services and budgets which has a damaging effect on the provision and sustainability of CD support across the public and voluntary sectors. This combined with entrenched poverty and inequalities has resulted in a perception that there is a disconnect between policy aspirations and reality.

6. What Practitioners are saying

This report differs from previous ones due to the incredibly challenging circumstances practitioners have had to, and continue to face, working through a pandemic. Nearly two years of this three-year report covers the period of time practitioners were working while experiencing the uncertainty

of lockdowns and supporting communities in ways very different to their usual roles.

SCDN had to quickly adapt to this everchanging environment too in order to continue to offer support to our members and ensure we were able to directly hear their experiences. The following is a summary of key feedback received from a variety of ways.

6.1 Feedback from SCDN Conferences 2018 and 2019

A key highlight of SCDN's work is its annual national conference. Practitioners gather from across of Scotland to listen to engaging speakers and feedback their views in a variety of workshop settings. Our 2018 conference focused on democracy while our 2019 conference was a celebration of 20 years of SCDN. General feedback from the conferences included:

'Fantastically facilitated event for sharing knowledge, networking and learning. It is always great to share a room with like-minded individuals on taking a critical approach to community development'

'Realise how important it is to make and maintain wider networks to keep motivated, share ideas and knowledge and practice'

More specifically, practitioners told us that, for both conferences, what they found most beneficial was networking and attending the workshops:

'It allowed the free exchange of ideas and experiences and common issues were brought to light'

'Gained more knowledge and shared loads of different experiences'

6.2 Network Meetings

SCDN has networks in Fife, Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire (currently being reviewed) and over the period of the report two new networks were formed in Dunbartonshire (August 2019) and Glasgow (November 2020). From November 2018 through to March 2020 our networks continued to meet quarterly, face-to-face.

From March 2020 all face-to-face meetings were cancelled and network members agreed that they wished to continue the meetings online. They also requested an increase in frequency to every six weeks. Over the period of the report, 18 face-to-face meetings took place and 38 online meetings were facilitated as well as a national network meeting bringing all networks together in September 2021. An evaluation of these meetings highlighted the following points:

'It was great to be able to keep in touch with fellow Community Workers particularly over the last year, to hear how everyone was managing their work through COVID and to know that experiences were very similar'

'The network meetings are about the only source of support for community development workers in Fife. Perhaps we need a major push to get more community development staff involved.'

'I enjoyed hearing from other CD practitioners and their networks across Scotland. It can feel a bit isolating during these times and it's great to hear about what's happening in other areas i.e. similarities and differences.

'It was interesting hearing from different types of areas e.g. issues for Aberdeenshire network. Enjoyed the positive feedback on networks from Ayrshire and Dunbartonshire'

The majority of feedback was positive with people finding the opportunities to network, share resources and offer support beneficial. While the numbers attending fluctuated over the period, a core group of regular members consistently joined and felt a genuine sense of bonding in the groups over the period. When asked what was least beneficial about the meetings the following points were raised:

'Representation across sectors and areas has declined since we first started meeting, would really add value if we could increase representation'

'Lack of agenda sometimes'

'I prefer face to face meetings'

In recognition for the additional pressure our members were under during the pandemic, a self-care workshop was also provided in the spring of 2021 to support wellbeing. Feedback from members was that this was very beneficial at the time.

6.3 Further analysis of network meetings

As well as evaluating the effectiveness of the network meetings, key points raised at meetings were collated and continually updated over the period.

> **What's worked well over the course of the pandemic?**

- ➢ The huge number of people who have come forward to volunteer and the amount of work they have done delivering food, prescriptions, dog walking, phoning the isolated etc.
- ➢ Online communication through, Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp has increased and people have found creative ways to work and connect
- ➢ The amount of funding offered to groups and the speed at which it has been made available, with minimum criteria
- ➢ Some areas have been able to access devices for community groups through Connecting Scotland
- ➢ Practitioners are supporting groups to open up safely following COVID compliant procedures
- ➢ Flexible working has been really beneficial for many workers

> **What's been challenging?**

- ➢ Worries about what is going to happen longer term
- ➢ Worries about social issues particularly poverty and mental health
- ➢ Some groups are not engaging online and difficulties building trust online. There is also Zoom fatigue
- ➢ Trying to work and home school has been impossible

- Some community activists are uncomfortable using Zoom etc. as it involves being invited into their homes. It may not be safe or they may be living in a chaotic environment. It feels vulnerable to them
- The use of online platforms staff can access differs across the country which has impacted on their ability to connect with groups. Some local authorities have banned the use of Zoom altogether.
- Practitioners are missing sharing day to day issues, concerns and successes with their teammates and it may be that teams will be dispersed throughout communities rather than all based in one venue. There is a sense, for some, that things will never be the same again

6.4 Jam Board responses to online conference and AGM

We did not hold a conference in 2020 as at this time our emphasis was on supporting our networks and finding our way around new technology and the best ways of continuing to engage with our members. With technical support from IACD, we hosted both an online AGM and conference in 2021 utilising Jam Boards to seek the views of our members on key questions which are summarised here:

AGM, 12th May 2021

What would a flourishing community look like?

'A flourishing community could be characterised by a lack of poverty, the need for community development workers and unmet basic needs'

'And by the presence of knowledge, abilities, skills, experience and mutual support; local people recognised as experts and assets; democratic participation; conflict resolution, sustainability'

How can we work with communities to nurture the things that help and challenge the things that prevent?

'Inclusion of everyone who should have a voice at the table and listening to people you don't agree with'

'We are a people service not a system service, spending time in, and with communities and ensuring initiatives are led by communities. Engagement can be physical or digital but important to spend time in and with communities. Relationships make things work. Communities need to find solutions for themselves'

What do CD workers need to ensure value-based practice?

'An agreed set of values and principles to adhere to and to nurture a wider understanding of what CD is'

'Establish the principle of reflective practice, use local networks as a sounding board to reinforce this and to advise and support best CD practice'

'A collective voice and peer support will give us the strength to challenge within our own structures'

SCDN Conference Workshops, 30 November 2021

What we, as CD practitioners can do to ensure grass-roots activism is at the heart of local democracy

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'Making Community Planning work, CD advocates supporting citizens' initiatives'

'Understanding what communities need/want, devising how to progress this and building the capacity to undertake actions can take a long time so stay with the project'

'Encourage "co-production", engagement and involvement of local people as far as possible in everything we do'

'CD workers might develop specialism and expertise across a range of areas – from energy to green spaces to social care to active lifestyles and much more.

Involve elected members at every opportunity – build political support'

'Role for citizens assemblies in supporting others to be involved'

'Move from consultation to professionally supported engagement'

'Joining up local networks'

'Involving all stakeholders, equipping people to ask relevant questions and building the expectation that they should be consulted'

> **How we might ensure that the most marginalised communities are not left behind**

'Identifying marginalised communities is not always straight forward – The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is a crude measure. Rurality is an exacerbator of marginalisation'

'Local councillors responsibility for local democracy'

'Local people understanding local issues and leading on solutions'

'Value lived experience, make it meaningful. Know you worth, know your value – know your voice matters'

> **How can we put together a case for investment in communities and the skilled intervention of community development to increase the political capacity of our communities to meaningfully engage in this process?**

'Making sure workers are linked to communities but also are connected to decision makers at a higher level'

'National CD organisations to forge links with SG decision makers and ministers'

'Develop a CD strategy/framework (CDAS and others?)'

'Use what influence we can to ensure the SG view of the new role of the third tier of democracy in Scotland is fit for purpose'

'Need to improve engagement without disenfranchising long-established activist'

'Emphasise the risks of not investing in community development'

'Need to get local and national politicians on board – involve them in the development of the CD strategy/framework?'

'Show where CD is working, real, active examples'

'Sharing peoples stories "what works"'

'Strategy/ framework should act as an aide-memoire for elected member and senior managers'

'Role for SCDN to share voices and make more noise'

'Use networks better, highlight the professionalism of the CD role and how it furthers national/ local policies'

7. Summary

SCDN is committed to continuing to represent the views of CD practitioners across Scotland in order to support communities to fully and effectively engage with Scotland's priorities of challenging social injustice and inequalities. Reviewing the many comments we have received from our events, conferences and network meetings the key points are as follows

- ✓ highlight the impact of CD interventions

- ✓ Raise the profile of CD

- ✓ Support communities and practitioners to navigate their way out of a pandemic
- ✓ Listen to and act on the feedback and experience coming from communities
- ✓ Recognise the wealth of knowledge and skills amongst practitioners to build a strong and positive workforce
- ✓ Support realistic timescales when consulting with people, enabling them to identify **their** issues and create lots of different ways people can come forward
- ✓ Highlight more clearly our practice values and knowledge to enable the voices of communities and individuals to be heard
- ✓ Work through a process of good, open and strong communication
- ✓ Build strong trust based on knowledge driven partnerships
- ✓ Return to the passion of the community as that's what gets people involved

8. SCDN – The Way Forward

As a member led organisation the following points were identified as key roles for SCDN to take forward on behalf of its members

- Continue running events where practitioners can come together, network and share their experiences of working in CD in a supportive and creative environment, offering this is a way that suits e.g. online/face-to-face
- Continue to represent practitioners views at a variety of levels including Scottish Government through feedback from events and social media and our work with CDAS and other partner organisations
- Continue to provide information on current legislation to practitioners and help to breakdown some of the language within this to ensure community engagement
- Continue to support current SCDN Networks and encourage new Networks to enable SCDN to represent the views of its members at a local as well as national level, offering this is a way that suits e.g. online/face-to-face
- Explore ways in which we can link up our networks more effectively

- Continue to increase our membership
- Continue to circulate regular bulletins with the latest CD news across Scotland to all of our contacts
- Develop partnerships with other relevant agencies to promote effective and empowering community development practice
- Further develop services to our members and encourage more active involvement in our work
- Utilise responses to inform our action planning and evaluation