

205 - A Task Force and Community Focus: Cwmbran Community Council

Sion Owen

I am here at Cwmbran Community Council in their chamber, and it's a lovely chamber. And if you could please introduce yourselves.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Hello, I'm Gareth. I'm the Chair of Cwmbran Community Council.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

I'm Leanne Lloyd Tolman and I'm currently the leader of Cwmbran Community Council.

Sion Owen

Thank you. So we're here to talk about your task force and also the efforts you make as a council to improve wellbeing in Cwmbran. So would you just give us a brief description of what you do then?

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

So Task Force has been a project with Cwmbran Community Council for approximately 15 years. It is run primarily to serve the residents of Cwmbran and we help with decorating and gardening. So it's a subsidised service.

We charge 20 pound per hour for two men who will come into your garden and do whatever you need to do or decorate however you need to decorate. We also offer a discount on that price for any household which is pensionable age or have disabled residents in the house.

The aim of the service is just to underpin and support those most vulnerable households. We run it by directly employing two members of staff. They've been with the service for a very long time. They've built up really good relationships within the community. They have lots of regular repeat customers and that enables us to just keep an eye on our residents

They'll then ask, we'll notice if things are going wrong. We can then act as a signpost into other support services. Yeah, and it's a really, really popular, really valued service. It doesn't, we're very mindful that we don't want to compete with

commercial businesses. And I think our numbers really reflect that we don't. Over 95% of our users are eligible for the task force discount. So we are really targeting those most vulnerable households.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Right, Leanne's covered everything there. It's really a community-focused thing. We like to get out there. And like Leanne said, it keeps an eye, it gives us an overview of what's happening within the community.

Sion Owen

And so what was the spark to start that service?

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

I think the spark was councillors just being embedded in their community and noticing that their elderly residents were really struggling to maintain their properties and to maintain their gardens and feeding that back into the council and us as a council then seeing actually this is something that we could support, this is something we could do and the service has evolved over time

So originally it was only, the discount was only applicable if there was an adult in the household with a disability. That's recently changed within the last couple of years because we recognise that carers of children with disabilities are impacted, their time is impacted, their finances were impacted by their caring duties and that's something we wanted to reflect.

So yeah, it's about councillors being embedded, it's about councillors knowing their community and seeing those needs. And then being proactive and willing to just take a chance and thinking, can we fill that gap?

Sion Owen

So how does our service, the Task Force, work then?

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

Yeah, so we have two very highly trained employees who are very active out in the community. They go into people's homes, they'll speak to them, they'll absolutely address any needs that they have.

It's a very flexible service as well, which I think people value. So we have elderly residents who have their tea at 3:00. So our guys are more than happy to just pause work because they have their tea at 3:00 and that's what has to happen in that household, which you wouldn't get with a commercial service.

So, I think that ability to be a little bit more flexible, to be a little bit more accommodating of these vulnerable households is very much appreciated.

It's been a progression. Obviously it started much smaller than it is now and the aim is to progress it even further. There's plans to, we were in discussion with some local housing associations who are having issues with residents who can't maintain their garden. They don't have the funds or the resources, they have the resources to meet that need but they don't have the ability to deliver that need.

So the next step in the project is to potentially become a more formal partner in that so that we can then address those most pressing households that are really in crisis because we recognise that it's not only that household that's in crisis, those living conditions aren't appropriate, but they impact neighbours as well and they impact neighbourhoods. So it's about seeing our role in that much wider picture.

Sion Owen

and it's back to that contribution from the council to the community as well.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

Absolutely, yeah.

Sion Owen

In conversation before, press record, you mentioned that as a council, the well-being of the community is really, really important to you.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

Yes, absolutely. So after COVID, I mean, obviously this cohort of councillors came in almost directly after COVID and the need in our communities was just glaringly evident. And there's been a real focus to offer a general package of wellbeing and a far-reaching package of wellbeing. I think probably more far-reaching than the council's ever done.

For example, we directly deliver our own wellbeing package, so we fund art classes with a tutor that run here and in a community venue. We run mindfulness and meditation classes, which again run here. We directly deliver fitness classes, so we pay for a fitness instructor to deliver over 60s gentle exercise to different community venues, and we also do parent and child fitness classes.

More than that, we just underpin community delivery. We support financially through grants and direct donations, warm hubs, food banks, community cafes, these are all venues that residents are accessing on a daily basis because the

cost of living pressure and the social pressure of that isolation, which is still a remnant of COVID, that's still going on. We're still seeing that. I run a community venue myself. We're still seeing that every day, that impact.

And these are just vital, vital small parts in the community, but by funding them, we're creating that map where there's always somewhere where a resident can go, find solace, find companionship, have a warm meal and be signposted into more statutory services. So I feel like we're really playing that vital role.

We're underpinning those statutory services. We're not taking them on, they're not our responsibility, but we are ensuring that helps there at the lowest possible level so that pressure on statutory services is not becoming overwhelming and those that really do need it and reach that point are able to access it.

So yeah, there's been a real change. There's been a real change of focus for the council over the past four years and there's still lots of plans to continue doing that. And again, it'll go back to Sorry, I'm talking a lot. It'll go back to knowing your community, having your councillors heavily embedded in their community, being that known person, being that community leader, being that point of contact to people, any resident who needs, I don't know, they might need a new bin.

They might need, you know, I don't know, we've had an issues with feral cats, it could be anything and going right up to alcohol and drug support. We might not have all the answers and 99% of the time it's not our place to have them, but we know where we can point them and I think that is vital and that's where us as a council are heading.

Sion Owen

So Gareth, as the community council chair, you're not only responsible for how the community council comes to these decisions, but you've got a civic role as well. What kind of thing do you do as chair then in that civic role?

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

As chair, I get to do all the fun things. I mean, it's literally, I go out there, I get to meet people, I get to interact with the public, I get invited to all sorts of things. We've done the International Women's Day with the Gurkha community which was several hours of, it was just amazing.

It was colourful, the food was great. They're such fantastic hosts and there was dancing and music and bingo in the middle of it. Was quite an afternoon. I've attended an event for the local Sea Cadets, one of their parades, which was amazing. You get to see how everybody's doing their stuff, how the kids are enjoying the Sea Cadets.

I mean, we've just had our big event, which is a massive celebration of the community. And again, we've had lots of stalls, lots of free activities for the kids and the families. And we had the police cadets there with the police, the army cadets were there, showing about camping, all about the cadets and first aid.

So it just gives all the kids show what's out there, what opportunities are available. And then you have to some, a couple of weeks ago we had the rededication on the Cenotaph in Pontnewydd, which was a lovely event. It was well attended, but it was one of those quieter events where you give that time to reflect and then it's off for a cup of tea and a slice of cake and then a chat with everybody. And it's genuinely fun. I mean, it's a lot more fun than being leader, I can tell you that.

And that's where that's where we're lucky because we work so well because Leanne is all covers all the details and I get out there to meet and greet and shake hands. I love that bit.

Sion Owen

Yeah. I think we've we've seen that in the answers and the responses

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Literally we just walked in before we you guys came in, I was like, right, next year's big event, I wanna be chair again. if I'm still here, and instead of doing a speech, I want to do a musical number. Let's just go have fun with it. I mean, that's the great thing. I mean, I get to put on a suit, I get to wear, you know.

I mean, I will say to myself, I look like Daniel Craig from the neck down in a suit, and it's wrapped, like all the chains, and people love it. And it's, I mean, it's a people who mix you up with chair and mayor. So I might have to discuss about bringing the mayor back because people seem to like that, but it's fab.

I mean, I'm terrified of vice chairs, like a lot of similar things, but you've got a little medallion. Once you put those trees on, it's like kids think you're Iron Man. They expect you to walk a press in the front of it, expect something to happen. It's brilliant. I wish I'd had it years ago.

Sion Owen

I haven't heard the Iron Man one before, but it does make sense.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

If I could, if I could press it and it would light up, it would be the kids would just go nuts.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

put a request into council for updated chains.

Sion Owen

It's like a civically appropriate lights up chain.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

A bit of music as I walk into the room.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

But it gives you an opportunity to meet people that ordinarily you wouldn't meet. So and I think that's really important. So we do a celebration for the Windrush community and there's a high number of Windrush elders that live locally. So we've started that three years ago, three years ago.

Started again, started really small. One of our councillors is a second generation Windrush and the event has just grown and grown. We now engage with local schools, so they do a whole topic on an aspect of Windrush. They come in, we display all their work, so the whole class comes in, they get to taste some Caribbean food, get to talk to the elders. It's really engaging.

In the evening we have a really vibrant, lively event where we initially have awarded awards and now it's just about celebrating that contribution that community has made to Cwmbran. That what, you know, Cwmbran wouldn't be what it is today without the sacrifices that generation have made and without the sacrifices that their descendants continue to make. And that's something that Gareth and I, we wouldn't have been in contact with them.

Being in our role is a privilege. Being a leader, being a chair is a privilege because it puts us in touch with these communities that we ordinarily wouldn't have contact with. And then it gives us that opportunity to promote them, to allow people to see a little glimpse into the sacrifices that these communities have made. And it is huge. People left their entire lives behind and answered the call that Britain made to come and help us rebuild. And they've stayed and they've continued to contribute. So I feel quite privileged that we're being allowed into these arenas that we ordinarily wouldn't be.

And I feel privileged as a council, we have the foresight to be able to be in a position to support them and we have the will to be in a position to support

them. So yeah, it is really fun and it is a really good thing. Again, underpinning that, there's this privilege that we're in a position to support these things and these events and these communities.

Sion Owen

And it's all coming back to being a part of the community, both as participants and servants, isn't it?

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

I mean, at the big event, part of my speech to say a community is not defined by its borders, it's defined by its people inside, and we've got some wonderful people here. And they just do such a fantastic job. And I mean, it's, I'm getting quite emotional about it. I mean, the people you meet. And like we have a civic award and it's a lovely meal with all the award winners and all the, we have all the, Lord Murphy will turn up, Nick Thomas Symonds will be there. We have the Lord Lieutenant and it's just nice because you get to give.

You not only get to hear people's stories and how they contribute to the community, but these are ordinary people who wouldn't be in a room like that any other day of the week, and you just get to give them a little something and they get their award and it's just...

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

And that's another example of how the focus of the council has changed. Previously the guest list was the high and mighty. I was here three years ago, and I looked at the guest list and said, absolutely not. Like, why? We are absolutely not doing that. So, the focus of the awards changed too.

The real heroes of our community, the people who are putting in shift day after day, running warm hubs, running food banks, running clothes exchanges, you know, going out in your spare time and just tidying up that plant border. You know, there's a 93-year-old woman who makes jams and donates them into food banks. They're heroes, they're the people who have done this for our community 20, 30 years and they're the people that I want in that room being recognised for their impact and their effort and that's what we do.

That's what we do every year now. So every April we have our awards and they are about real ordinary residents who are making an impact, big or small, but it's their time and it's their passion and they're doing it, they're not being paid, they're doing it because they care about Cwmbran and that's what we want to reflect as councillors and as a council.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Yeah, our first meal we did, we went there and to be fair, it was just so boring. We were just sat at the table, the food came to us, you just sat at your own table, you're not talking to anybody, you're just talking to the people you've brought with you. But now we, everybody's mixed up, there's a hot buffet going on, so you have to queue up and talk to your neighbour.

And it's just such a, and we have live music, and it's just such a nice atmosphere, and people get to, you get to walk around going, This is Lord Murphy, and it's like, Good God, you know, that's the guy who helped broker the Northern Ireland agreement. I mean, these are names in newspapers usually, and then they, you know, they're there, and it's...

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

We still have community leaders, you know, Lord Murphy's contributed, Nick Thomas Simmons contributed. They still have those, but the focus is about recognising that untold story. The people who don't get recognition and still do it, still do it.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Yeah, because it was all about celebrating them, but they weren't actually in the room. And it's like, that's not a celebration. That's just you having a slap-up meal. And that's it. So it's all about the community and the people in the community.

Sion Owen

Yeah, the importance of a community too has really come through I think.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

I could carry on for ages. So one of the other things, one of our other projects that we've got, that we inherited, we have an annex building that was sitting empty, was doing nothing. It wasn't being used day-to-day. So as a council we've made a decision to operate that on a non-commercial basis. So that now houses some really, really sensitive and niche support groups.

So we support a baby loss group, we support a bereavement group, we support the ethnic mothers group to meet there and they all meet there free of charge because we understand that need wasn't being met in our community. We also have the most amazing craft group that meets there that was set up by the most amazing and I'd like to give a shout out. Her name's Brenda Llewellyn. She's a personal friend of mine.

She's 80 something. I won't say, I don't know exactly, but she knows she's an elderly lady who saw a gap for a craft group in Cwmbran. She now runs it over 2 days because demand is so high. And she primarily supports people who are socially excluded, people, adults with learning disabilities who previously would have accessed maybe statutory services that no longer exist.

And again, we provided her a start-up grant for that. She uses the annex free of charge and we provide officer support in terms of setting and breaking down. But that's a really important provision for those again, a vulnerable community group that just, it doesn't exist anywhere else. There isn't anywhere else for them to go to come to be together. You know, it's expanded. She now does days out. She does trips to the theatre and to historical sites.

So yeah, these things start small. But knowing the need is there and identifying it and then being able to support it, they've all really grown and grown and grown. And I think that's really important to note that, yeah, just as a general view, our council's view is wellbeing, knowing your community, knowing your residents, being in touch, being available, and then offering all the support that we can offer within the realms of our powers. And being willing to. I always say it, that this isn't our money, this is the community's money. We are just the, we were just the holders of that and our duty is to spend it for their benefit.

And being, we're very, we're much better at listening to our residents and to harness their views, to put on projects that they're asking for. So it's not about us sitting in the room and thinking, well, we know best for the community. It's about listening to what our communities are saying and really, really furnishing those needs.

Sion Owen

And that's the vision for the future then, is to carry on with that work.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

Absolutely. Yeah. So one of our biggest projects this year has been about supporting community groups. So there's been SPF funding, obviously, from central government that was being administered by Torfaen. That only goes so far. So we established a regeneration committee and have offered match funding. So groups could go for SPF funding, we would then match fund it and we've managed to kit three community buildings out with solar panels.

And the feedback from that has been absolutely fantastic. It has reduced the energy bills astronomically, which obviously then frees up those funds for actual

delivery. So in terms of sustainable impact, that's probably been one of the biggest things we've done over the past two years.

And we have plans to continue that. Obviously we have a budget for that committee this year and we're looking to engage more community groups. And it's great. It's great for the environment, it's great for the groups, it's great for the residents because those groups then can deliver more things.

I could say I run a community venue and at one point we were spending close to 3000 pound on fuel a month. It was just unsustainable. So the more of that we can do, the better. I think probably also worth mentioning, we do quite a lot. So we also, we're one of the biggest core funders of Torfaen Play, which a lot of people don't realise. Torfaen Play was initially evolved out of a community council project. We fund them to the tune of 90,000 pound a year, which funds the summer provision. So that enables, our residents go out to work, it feeds back into the economy, and it means that the young people of Cwmbran are getting quality play-based provisions every single day.

They run four weeks out of the summer holidays. And alongside that, they have the biggest volunteering programme probably in Wales, maybe in the UK. They recruit thousands of our local young people, train them up, they go to a really comprehensive training programme who then support the young people through the summer holidays, weekend provisions. They do additional learning needs sites. So yeah, that's one of our huge projects.

Another one that we support, focus on young people again, is we are the biggest core funder into Cwmbran Centre for Young People. So a slightly different age range. It's a youth centre just outside Cwmbran Town Centre. We own the building and Cwmbran Centre for Young People operate it on a lease. But we fund them 60,000 pound a year, which covers their core staffing costs, enables them to open the door, come actually to chair there at Cwmbran Centre for Young People, and they do amazing work, amazing youth work, open access, true youth work, where they're dealing with really hard, really vulnerable children, doing an absolutely amazing job. So, yeah, we support them quite highly as well.

Sion Owen

That all sounds amazing. Busy people.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

It's insane the amount of stuff.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

And we can just continue. Yeah, there's lots and lots.

Gareth Lloyd Tolman

Could rattle it all off and it's all about the community. We literally, we came into these chambers four years ago. I mean, I didn't know much about the community council at that point. And the stuff we undertaken is just it's insane the amount of stuff you can get done if you really, if once you get the people on board, the stuff you can do, if it's good for the community, it's good for everybody and it just goes to show and it'll grow and grow and hopefully.

Leanne Lloyd Tolman

Absolutely. One other thing I'd like to add is that none of this would have been possible without an amazing staff team. We've really got a committed, community-focused staff team. The values of the council align with the values of the staff team, and they would just go above and beyond. We're great, we can sit around here and come up with ideas all day long, but you haven't got the officers then to put those into action and do the due diligence and do the legwork, then it's not going to happen. And we've been really lucky enough in our term that those two things have aligned, and I think that's evident in what we've been able to achieve.

Sion Owen

Yeah. And on that note about collaboration, doing well for your community and doing your best for your community. Thank you very, very much for sharing with us.