**Hello and welcome to ‘Third Sector Insights’, the knowledge and learning podcast from The National Lottery Community Fund. I’m Josh Coles-Riley, and I work for the Fund in the Knowledge and Learning team.**

**We’ve created ‘Third Sector Insights’ to give a platform to organisations funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, to share the knowledge and insight they’ve gained through their projects. Each episode, you’ll hear directly from third sector leaders, project staff, volunteers, and the people and communities they support. We’ll talk to them about their projects and the difference our funding makes, and about key lessons, challenges, mistakes and successes – basically any learning that might be helpful to other groups and organisations seeking to make a difference in their communities.**

**Each episode will focus on a different topic – an area of special, or maybe a challenge or experience that lots of third sector organisations have in common. We don’t want this podcast to be about us as a Funder giving our position or saying, “this is the view of The National Lottery Community Fund on x”. Instead, Third Sector Insight (the clue’s in the name!) is about drawing out the wealth of insights, wisdom and experience third sector organisations are gaining through the projects we fund.**

**This episode is all about community development in rural areas. Slightly ironically, we’re here in our Cardiff office with Dave Gittins from Severn Wye Energy Agency and Rob Owen from Bro to talk about their National Lottery funded project, Rural Futures. Rural Futures is delivered over seven years over a range of communities in Wales’ most rural counties.**

Dave: I’m Dave Gittins and I work for Severn Wye Energy Agency. We’re a charity working across Wales and the South West of England supporting communities, residents and businesses to create a sustainable, affordable and low carbon future. We’ve been working in Wales for the past 10 years supporting community development work and looking at renewable energy and energy efficiency. We found from our renewable energy work that we couldn’t do community energy work without doing community renewables, which is why we started working in community development.

Rob: I’m Rob Owens from the Bro Partnership. We’re a small environmental community consultancy based in Wales. We’ve teamed up with Severn Wye Energy Agency to work on the Rural Futures programme.

**How would you describe Rural Futures? What is it in a nutshell?**

Dave: Rural Futures in a rural community development programme working across 10 areas in Wales. We’re there to support rural communities that haven’t had community development support before, to think about what matters to them in their community and how they can improve it.

We spent a lot of time thinking about a name that encapsulated what it’s about. We were keen that communities were focusing on the future. It’s a rural programme and we wanted to think about the future. There can be a tendency sometimes to dwell on the past and what we’ve lost. We wanted this to be a forward facing and optimistic programme, so we called it Rural Futures!

Rob: With any community development programme, it’s easy to focus on all of the things that are wrong and get lost in that. Rural Futures to us was a good title, “Y dyfodol gwledig” in Welsh, which then gives a real focus of where the community is now and where it wants to get to in the future.

**You’re two years into the programme now, how would you describe the journey of Rural Futures over the past two years?**

Dave: It’s been really exciting. We spent at least six months at the starts setting up the programme as a whole and making sure we had a process where we could identify communities that were eligible and wanted support.

We also set up an expert advisory panel of experts across Wales that could bring their expertise to the programme, but also take the learning from the programme back to their organisation. There’s an emphasis on learning that we can take to other organisations and take to future funding opportunities.

We set up an evaluation team to conduct an annual evaluation – not half way through or at the end – we felt we wanted to learn as we went. We’re working with Wavehill to do that annual evaluation to make sure we’re getting learning from the ground that can influence the way we operate year on year.

We’re working with a rural expert, Paul Milbourne from Cardiff University who has published many papers about issues in rural areas. He can use our learning to further the academic sphere and knowledge on rural issues and we can use those papers to help influence policy, and other ways.

We felt that there are two sides to what we’re doing. There’s the work with communities which is really important, and we want to help those communities, but there’s also a second part which is just as important. We shouldn’t look at this as a seven-year programme and that’s it. After the seven years, this can help shape the future of rural policy from Welsh Government and funders. There’s a real opportunity there for that two-fold benefit.

**Rob, how would you describe the journey of the project over the last two years?**

Rob: In the initial part of the programme we had 12 or 13 outcomes for the programme. We then worked with The National Lottery Community Fund to narrow them down to four outcomes, which really gave us focus. What then occurred to us is that the four outcomes were sequential.

The first one is around getting that engagement right through a bottom up approach. What’s important with that is making it really inclusive so that all sectors of the community have their voice heard.

When the community have their ideas shaped, that leads up to the second outcome which is to bring in the support of some of the intermediaries such as local authorities, CVCs and other partners to add value to what the communities with.

The third outcome is that there are real tangible benefits in reducing poverty and the issues that effect rural communities such as isolation, low incomes, access to services.

The fourth outcomes is the learning and the policy influence that comes from that. There’s a real sequence in what we’re trying to do, but the starting point has to be to get that engagement absolutely right, and not to do it in a way where only certain members of the community are shaping the ideas. That’s why there’s a lot of time invested to work with the communities to identify what they want to do.

**Where would you say the programme is in terms of that sequence?**

Rob: We’ve done a lot of that engagement and now the communities have definite ideas. Now it’s a case of prioritising what they can do, or what they should start with, and then lots of discussions are happening with intermediaries about how they can support those. We’re well into outcomes one and two, how that now manifests itself into actually tackling some of the issues, will take time. However, with the first tranche of communities we’re working with, we do expect to see some of those benefits.

Later in the programme, we’re going to build in opportunities for workshops, conferences and so on. We have the expert advisory panel with a number of expert and policy makers on it. We want to share some of the results with a much wider audience, because this could potentially be a more effective way of tackling issues in a more sustainable way, so you don’t have to keep going back and repeat the process every few years because you’re empowering the community to take charge themselves.

**What difference do you already see the project making in the communities you’re working with?**

Dave: The place coordinator in Kilgetty has got the community to come back together and whilst they’re talking about the issues and priorities that are important to them, they wondered why traditional things that used to happen like carnival and classic car events in their community had stopped. And they realised it was because people weren’t talking and meeting. And now they’re talking and meeting, they’ve decided to bring that back. So through us asking what’re important to them, they’ve gone and got small grants from other organisations locally to enable them to go and meet and hold little projects that have kickstarted peoples imagination and getting people fired up to do thing.

Meanwhile we’re there talking to them about the bigger things that are important to them. We’re finding that’s an ongoing theme.

**Something that is quite exciting about this kind of community development is the anticipated changes that happened and that every community is different. I imagine each community is going on a slightly different journey, is that current?**

Dave: Yes, we’re working across ten communities in Wales and each of them is entirely different. The National Lottery Community Fund didn’t want us to work where there had been lots of community development support before, so these communities are starting from a bas where they haven’t received that support before. The speed in which they progress varies and we’re working at the pace of the communities. We don’t want to rush stuff because they’re in the lead, so it has to be them taking it forward.

**And I suppose if you don’t go at the pace of the community, you end up doing stuff for them?**

Dave: Yes. Our approach to community development is that we’re facilitators, not ‘doers’. We’re there to help the communities do what they want to do and achieve that and think about how they can achieve it. But we’re not there to do it for them, because we’re only funded for a finite amount of time when we leave, there will be no one to do it for them, so we need to upskill them, so they can do it for themselves.

**Rural Futures is a community development support programme. For anyone unfamiliar with that as a concept, how would you define community development?**

Dave: Community development is about supporting the community to think about what their lives are like at the moment and what they would like to to be in the future. Traditional community development always focused on what’s wrong, and what can we do to fund and improve where your lives are insufficient. We threw that traditional book of community development away a long time ago.

We use an asset-based community development and co-production approach. The asset-based approach is about looking at what you do have in the community. That doesn’t necessarily have to be physical assets, which is a good starting point, but also infrastructure, universities, businesses and other support. It’s about mapping those assets and thinking about what you want to change, and what you can do with these assets to make that happen. In many cases across Wales there’s opportunities to marry up these assets to issues you want to address, quite often at low cost.

The co-production side of things, and again, the traditional community development theory was to parachute in an expert who will tell the community what is best for them, and then to look at how to fund that. We like to use the co-production method where we go into a community and say “you’re the experts because you live here. What we can do is facilitate a way for you to come together to think about what’s important to you. We can bring best practice, examples, expertise to help inspire you to help you to come up with what you think is the best method.” There’s a lot of emphasise on prioritisation and consensus building, and then supporting the community do this work themselves.

**What would you say is distinctive about doing community development in rural areas?**

Dave: in urban areas, populations are concentrated, conversely, in rural areas populations are very sparse. When we look at statistics such as the Welsh Index of multiple deprivation, because of the way they’re calculated, rural areas often mask their poverty related issues. In urban areas you’ll often have the same housing, you’ll have people with similar problem in an area. The urban based methods will draw a circle around an area that needs community development and supporting people that may have very similar lives.

Whereas in rural areas, you can be living next to a millionaire land owner but be dreadfully poor yourself. The rural makeup is very different and because of the sparsity, you’re contact with your neighbours may be very different and you might not have a meeting place. So there has to be a focus in rural areas on bringing people together and finding a way of talking about issues that are important to them. Where you have urbans areas and you’ve been labelled as an area that needs community development support, sometime people are more comfortable talking about it because everyone around them understands that and it acknowledged.

However, in rural areas, where support is needed, there’s a lot of pride and people don’t necessarily want to admit that there are problems or that they’re struggling. From research that Paul Milbourne has done, people will often say “I may not have much money or access to services or jobs, but I live in a beautiful area” – they counterbalance it and say “I’m rich, I have all these beautiful things around me. I don’t need your help, talk to someone else”. So the way people think can be slightly different, I think.

Rob: There are different issues that different demographic sectors have to cope with. For older people, access to services is an issue, particularly when local banks and village shops have closed. If you don’t drive, how do you get access to basic food and financial services? For younger people the challenges may be around lack of opportunities, lack of place to meet and things to do. You get more of a range of issues across different age groups in rural areas.

These issues are often hidden under the surface of rural areas, you don’t want to talk about it in terms of ‘poverty’ in that sense. It’s more about asking what the challenges are facing those members of the community and how can they come together to work up their own solution and take charge of their own future, and that’s coming through in some of the communities we’re working with.

The main thing is to get people talking, exchanging ideas and harness that energy. That’s your starting point and it’s really quite exciting. There are sometimes challenges, some people don’t get on, there’s always issues in any community, but if you can think about the common good that they’re all working towards, then that’s really positive.

**What methods have you used in Rural Futures to get communities through the door?**

We came up with the concept of the ‘Story Studio’. It isn’t a consultation event, it’s a place to talk about stories. Stories are a common currency, it doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, or any other demographic, you have stories of the place you live to share.

We set up the Story Studio by taking a lot of time going to BBC archives and getting footage of the area. We ask local people and organisations to gather photos of what the place looked like 40 or 50 years ago. When you walk into the Story Studio, you have a beautiful pop-up museum of what’s happened in the area in the past. It’s a great way of getting people in. If you have a room full of people and someone isn’t confident, you can come in, walk around and you can get used to your environment. It’s non-threatening and there are members of staff there to tell you what it’s all about.

We have a series of questions to get people to think about what they loved about the place they live in. We then get people to think about what they would like to keep the same, because we’ve found a lot of people in rural areas don’t want to make lots of changes because they like the status-quo, which is an interesting point we hadn’t really thought about. We then ask what are the things they would like to change, improve and make better.

What we wanted to do was give people as many opportunities to give us that information and talk about their story as possible. We had large pieces of papers on the walls with prompts and questions. We would ask the same question in four different ways as we found some people would respond to certain types of questions and not others. We would also have the place co-ordinators on hand to talk to people on a one-to-one basis. We did a lot of audio recording of stories and asked about the issues that matters to them. That could then be played back to other people. We had themed discussion groups where people could get together in a little group if they were passionate about a topic. We had tablecloths where we provided tea and coffee while you write on a tablecloth if you wanted to do it that way. You could fill out a form. It was all about trying to make it as friendly as possible.

We were really keen that these were held in a neutral venue, so it wasn’t held in a town hall or somewhere would think “oh I wouldn’t go in there”. In a number of places we found empty shop on the high street within the communities where we were. We would contact the owners to ask to use it for a few days and most were really good and would allow us to use it for free. It was really good because people would see that something was happening within the shop on the high street and come have a look, which is a good way of drawing people in. It’s all about creating that opportunity and interest.

Rob: The Story Studios were owned by the community themselves. Although we were there, and we employed an artist, the first thing we did was to set up a steering group locally so that they could decide how they wanted to organise the Story Studio and own the results of it. The one thing Dave forgot to mention, the real secret weapon… cake!

Cake is the answer – we got people to stay for two hours, three hours. They would really spend time looking at some of the archive materials, reminiscing about the past. When you do that, you think about what it used to be like, what it’s like now and what you want it to be like in the future. You can use it as a way of taking people through those thought processes.

At the end of it they would have a cup of tea and some cake, and that’s a great opportunity to chat to them because then they have some really good ideas about what they would like to see happen next. It wasn’t one of those dreadful evenings in a village hall where everyone is sitting in rows hearing an expert tell them what will happen next. This is actually the energy of the people themselves about what they would like to see. We learnt a lot from the Story Studio and we think the community got a lot out of it too, and it creates a lot of energy and enthusiasm around what could happen next.

**I spoke to Zoe who is the National Lottery Community Fund Funding Officer for Rural Futures, and one of the things that she mentioned that in a lot or rural communities there’s a lot of burnout from consultation fatigue, and one of the great things about Rural Futures is that you’ve been able to get around that. Why do you think the ways you’ve been working have done that?**

Rob: I think the difference is that, quite often, whether it’s a local authority or somebody else, they consult a community but within frameworks so, “what do you think of this? Do you like it or not?” so the ideas are already being formed for them to react to, and our approach is very different, it’s more like a blank piece of paper for them to shape their ideas on it. The sense of ownership right from the start is with the community, plus I think the techniques that we’ve used that I think are more engaging. Often when you have a public meeting you will find that only certain people will speak in that meeting, and people that are used to going to meetings that are minuted and stuff like that are more comfortable with addressing a bigger crowd, and other people stay very quiet but still have very good ideas. We’ve done a lot of work to try and break that down and makes things much more open and transparent, exciting and inclusive forms of engagement.

Dave: I think one of the important things with the Story Studios is that they’re over two or three days so rather than just have an evening event, and if you can’t make that evening or whenever it’s held you’ve missed it. It was really good and one of the things that we found that as a big benefit was that we talked to people and they said, “I don’t feel like you need my help but I know someone who does, and I know people that should come and talk to you.”, and because it was over a longer period of time people would go away and get their sister-in-law or their brother or their next-door neighbour and go, “you should really go talk to this because you’re passionate about something, and it’s really important that it’s captured”, so giving people the time to talk to you and actually listen. Rob’s point that we’re not there to go and say, “this is our agenda; would you like to vote on options A, B or C?” we go, “what’s important to you?” and just listen, and at that point there’s no experts in the room, we’re just listening. It’s giving power to the community to say “this is what’s important to us”, and that has very rarely happened in the past and that’s one of the things about engagement fatigue is that you come in and you’re asked a question and it’s a yes or no answer whereas we’re saying, “say what you want, tell us what’s important”.

Rob: We’ve also involved local schools, particularly primary schools in a lot of the events as well, and that’s very refreshing that they come along with absolute clarity that their views are captured as well, and they’ve drawn pictures of the futures they’d like to see. They’re involved in discussions and they’ve got really good, innovative ideas which you need to include within the discussions.

Dave: And that also included a wrestling ring in Llandysul as a priority \*laughs\*. So there were loads of really impressive stuff where we thought, “Wow this is amazing. The kids are thinking of future housing, employment and the environment” but there were some quite amusing ones such as a wrestling ring as well.

**Is that on the horizon, the wrestling ring?**

Dave: I’m not sure how that’s going to support the development of everyone in Llandysul and improve their lives but…

Rob: You never know. \*laughs\*

Dave: Watch this space.

**OK, I think organisations listening to this, one of the things they’ll be interested in is how you publicise the Story Studios in the first place. You’ve talked about natural curiosity and footfall, how else do you go about bringing the community into those events?**

Dave: One of the key things was involving the community itself in organising it and working with other partners and organisations that worked in that area, that was really important. Traditional posters going up, social media, and in Llandysul it was really interesting – they did a whispering project. The artist that we used, the arts for wellbeing that are based there, they just started going around and saying “You’ll never guess what’s happening in Llandysul in three weeks. You can’t tell anyone but I’ll tell you”, and the jungle-drum started beating, “oh you’ll never guess that there’s something exciting happening in the old bank”, and that spread like wildfire, people didn’t know what it was but they knew something interesting was happening – that was great because it brought loads of people to our door. We only did that in one place and we found that worked really well, I think in Glantwymyn, a really dispersed community over several villages, they said “it’s really important that you hold a story studio in our village because it’s about us, and it’s important to us, and if you do it in another village we won’t come”, so we wrestled with that idea for a while and we thought that we couldn’t put on five story studios because we had neither the manpower or the money to do it, but we want to bring the ideas of all these people together. We ended up hiring an events bus and doing six mini Story Studios throughout those communities over a three-day period, which is what the community asked for. It was being responsive to what they wanted to do, and not just saying “this is what we do, we have a model of what we want to do across the whole of Wales”, and again the community has responded really well to that.

**I can really see how the Story Studio is a really effective method of hearing people’s voices and stories, and gathering a huge amount from the community, with the community. What do you do with that information? How do you turn it into an idea or where do you go from there?**

Dave: The first thing, immediately after the Story Studio, you take a big, deep breath and five minutes to relax but whilst you’ve still got all the ideas and exciting stuff in your head write it all down. Every Story Studio we brought in all of the staff working across Wales so we had a group of people there, and we made sure that they wrote down all their ideas and when they talked to someone we got their contact details. What we did was we pulled together all the information that had been written down on walls, and on sheets, the tablecloths - everything into one big report and tried to…, in some cases it was hundreds and hundreds of suggestions and opinions. We weren’t doing a research project but we were trying to bring things together around themes so where people were saying that access to services or jobs or doing something with that old community centre that’s falling down, it was almost, trying to filter out the noise of the Story Studio, to bring out ten really important things that the community as a whole felt really passionate about, and putting that in a report, and this report is there for the community – we’re not holding it, it’s there – if you want to go use it for other funding or whatever you want to do with it. It’s about giving that information back to the community and having these playback events where we say, “Right, we’ve had the Story Studio. This is what you told us, did we hear you correctly?”, because what we don’t want to do is completely misinterpret what people have said and say “this is what the aims are for this area”, and for people to say, “actually that’s not what we said at all”. Largely, people have said that we’ve heard them correctly, and it was then using that information to do that prioritisation and building consensus to say to the community, “If you’re going to do something here, what are the next steps? What are the ones that are really important to you that we can build into projects that deliver for the community?”, and we can look at funding.

**What are the methods you’ve found around prioritisation and building consensus then?**

Dave: A lot of the things at the playback events have been saying “These are the things that you’ve said you’ve been interested in”, and we use voting techniques on some of them, and we’ve used voting with sweets – you’ve got all the themes on the tables and you’ve got five votes and people vote like that. Another one that we’ve used is that people turn over the ones that they feel are important and if there’s a lot of ideas on the table people will think “Oh yeah, that’s definitely one that I want to leave on the table”, so doing that voting in a different way so just giving people the opportunity to say what’s important to them, and at the end of the day they’re the ones that are taking this forward and if they’re not supportive of it, it won’t happen. It’s really important that people can say “This is what I can demonstrate that I’d be up for doing”, and asking people “If this is what you’re passionate about, how can you help? What would you do to take this forward as well?”.

Rob: Often you can’t do everything at the same time as well – you’ve got to prioritise and maybe do things that are slightly easier to do to begin with. Then that raises the confidence of the community and they say, “Yeah, we’ve done that – now we can begin to tackle some of these other issues.”. There is a point coming out of the Story Studios as Dave was saying that you might have loads of different ideas and information, how do you make sense of it, prioritise it, do the things that you can do like get access to funding relatively easily, so that increases the confidence of the community so that they can then achieve more, that creates a momentum. Dave mentioned that they were working with Wavehill on the monitoring and evaluation; one of the analogies that they gave us which was very useful was that it’s a bit like pushing a ball up a hill, and it gets harder and harder until you get to the very top – and when you get to the top you’ve done the hard bit, and it’ll roll down on the other side. The danger is that if you stop pushing when you’re on the hill side that it’ll roll back to where it was when it started. I think that’s quite a good analogy about community development that you’ve got to maintain that effort until there’s enough confidence and resilience, and skills within the community to then go onto the next ideas that they want to pursue.

Dave: An example of this with the microgrants is the felting project in Aberhosan. The group there have decided that they want to make a huge mural of the landscape of Aberhosan village, and there was quite a separation between the English and the Welsh speakers there and both sides were really keen to solve that issue so that they could come together as a community. What they thought they’d do is to do this mural landscape of the village and put all the field names on the mural and do it in Welsh and explore what all the meanings are in Welsh because they’re really descriptive, those Welsh place names, and it would help people understand more about the landscape and bring them together. And really, the felting is irrelevant, and the felting itself has been going on for four months, the mural is massive – it’s about 10 metres long, but what it’s done, every week for those three months is that the community have been coming together, talking to each other, talking about what they’re doing, talking about these place names, and just having discussions about what’s important to them, and bridging that gap between a divide that had existed previously. So that’s brought them together really well and they’re proud of this as a community – I think the work is still ongoing at the moment because it’s so big but it’s something that they’re really proud of that it’s brought them together as a community and I think work is still ongoing at the moment because it’s so big but it’s something that they’ve really come together about and it’s brought them together to talk.

**What sort of projects do you think might come out of the engagement that you’ve been doing with communities, what are the projects do you think communities might take forward?**

Dave: In Esgairgeiliog, one of the things the community said was they didn’t have a place to meet, there was no village centre, and there used to be…, and it was like an old army camp where they had training, so there were all these old army huts, and what the community have said is that if they were able to take over some of these, they would like to convert them into flexible spaces that could be; one, a community centre, but also use it as a make-a-space and a place for employment so that there’s local employment rather than go to Machynlleth so that they could actually work in their community, and actually have that space as a gallery as well to market and sell the products that they’re making. So, there’s real opportunity there where they have a focal point where they can come and meet together as a community but also there’s employment opportunities that aren’t there are the moment.

**When you get to 2024 and you’re looking back on the last seven years, what do you hope to be looking back on, or what will you have needed to achieve to consider the programme a success?**

Dave: All of these communities that we’re working with, we want to be able to, we want to look back on them and say, “We’ve worked with them, and supported them to identify issues that are important to them.”, and actually then said, “These are the issues, what are the solutions to those issues?”, and then help them apply for funding to actually fund some of those things, or where they don’t need funding just bringing expertise or support to help them do that. And then once they’ve been through that process,… the critical success factor is saying “You’ve done this once, now go do it again, go back and reassess what’s important to you”, and go through that process again of prioritising “We’ve done this, we’ve got confidence, we’ve got people with skills – let’s do it all again and make this place even better,” so for each place we want to leave that legacy and there is a phased and tapered approach of our place-coordinators working there, so it’s not going to be “There is a cut-off date where you’ll never see a place-coordinator again”, it’s all phased so they’ll be available for less time and they’ll be there on the phone for longer. But as we touched upon earlier, we want to be able to share all the learning we’ve got so we’ve got this best practice document that other communities can look at and we have all these examples of what communities have done through Rural Futures, and there’s also the learning side of it that we can share with funders, with Welsh Government, and academia of what we’ve learned from this programme so that is shapes other programmes and can be used by other communities to go, “How can we do things here like Rural Futures did, or cherry pick the best bits of it?”.

**That sounds like a really exciting legacy to aim for, and it sounds like you’re well on the way to that. Great, thank you both for coming in to talk to us today, it’s been fascinating.**

**You've been listening to Third Sector Insights, the knowledge and learning podcast from The National Lottery Community Fund. The projects you heard about in this episode is one of 11,000 funded every year across the UK with money raised by National Lottery players. To find out more about Severn Wye Energy Agency you can visit www.severnwye.org.uk. Find out more about BRO by visiting their website, www.bro.cymru. Find out more about the Rural Futures programme by visiting www.ruralfutures.wales.**

**We'd love to know what you think of this podcast, please let us know by leaving us a review or you can email me your thoughts directly at Joshua.Coles-Riley@tnlcommunityfund.org.uk. Thanks for listening to Third Sector Insights, keep a look out for future episodes where we'll continue to talk with third sector organisations and find out what knowledge learning and insights they're gaining through projects funded by the National Lottery.**