

Creative Toolkits Project – Final Report & Lessons Learned

Summary of Outcomes (please also refer to Outputs Report)

The Creative Toolkits project has provided an excellent opportunity to strengthen joint working, particularly between GAVO and Mon CC's Engagement Team. Indeed, it was pivotal in GAVO's decision to mimic the geographical split of the Local Authority's Engagement Officers within its own Development Team. This continues to allow close working relationships to develop and to maximise the support and resources available to Third Sector groups across the Vale of Usk and indeed, Monmouthshire.

The project spawned a time banking project in Sudbrook, called 'Skills Swap.' A decision is pending regarding funding from RDP LEADER.

A number of partnership meetings were held to explore rural development, including work with Severn Wye Energy, to determine the focus of their work in the area. WIMD and desk based research highlighted areas of greatest need in terms of poverty of services. Severn Wye Energy are continuing their work in Llangattock von Abel and making sound progress in engaging this largely unexplored rural area.

The Creative Toolkit offers a guide to developing asset based community development, and there has been learning around the principles and values involved in such an approach. The Toolkit continues to be a useful resource for Third Sector groups looking to develop new services and activities. It features on the GAVO website and compliments GAVO's Group Starter Pack. The Toolkit includes numerous Information Sheets, templates and sample policies that have been accessed by a variety of groups and organisations over the life of the project and beyond.

Development work supported by the project includes a number of small Engagement events in rural areas that were partially successful in generating interest from new volunteers, keen to stimulate community action.

It has been very difficult to penetrate some of the smaller more rural communities, in terms of circulating information and securing community champions to drive new initiatives. Many people involved with the Creative Toolkits project were already volunteers in some capacity and committed to their existing activities. There was limited interest in taking forward additional work.

The greatest traction came from areas where some Third Sector activity already existed. During the project, the following groups were supported:

Rogiet Community Junction – Established CIO status, developed a new Community Cinema and Kids Café and expanded numbers visiting the Community Café. Training on Governance/Constitutions and Safeguarding has been completed and support offered with funding bids. A part-time paid Coordinators post was established and has been critical in developing proposals to develop a Community Shop. A decision is pending from RDP LEADER to complete the Feasibility Study and establish a pilot Community Shop 2019/20. Monies were secured from Awards for All and Monmouthshire Housing Association. A Lottery bid to the People and Places Programme is the next step.

MUCH – Magor and Undy Community Hub. The Committee has learned about safeguarding, governance structures and attended a session on Lottery Funding. An application to become a CIO has been submitted and a decision is pending. Section 106 monies has allowed them to secure £800k of the £1.2 million they are seeking to establish a new Community Hub. Consultation events have been ongoing to ensure an abcd approach. Funding, business plan and policy development advice has been offered.

The Cornfield Project – Ongoing consultation with residents and the wider community has been taking place, shaping the nature of the project. Numerous new features have been added to the green space and numbers of users continue to rise. Partnerships have been formed with various local groups including young disabled people, older users, U3A, local girls football teams, boxing and running clubs. Safeguarding training has been completed and a Safeguarding policy is being drafted. Section 106 monies of £10k have been secured. A further £47k is being sought via Sport Wales ‘A Place for Sport’ to establish a track around the site for recreation/sport. Strategic fit with local and national policy has been established. Significant support has been given with drafting funding bids.

Sudbrook Skills Swap – Desk based and practical research has been undertaken, including community consultation/surveys and a project bid to develop a new time banking project. An application for support has been submitted to RDP LEADER – outcome pending.

Llanhennock and Earlswood Village Halls, Chepstow Drill Hall/Chepstow Town Council and the Palmer Centre have received funding, governance and/or project development support.

Lessons Learned

Monmouthshire County Council and GAVO embarked on this joint project with an aim to stimulate new Third Sector activity in the most rurally deprived areas in the Vale of Usk. There have been many positive outcomes and overall the project has been extremely useful in developing joint working and meaningful relationships across the agencies particularly between GAVO’s Development Team and Mon CC’s Engagement Team.

The project has not been without its challenges however, and there is interest in reflecting the lessons learned in delivering the Creative Toolkits Project.

Staffing- GAVO employed a part-time Development Officer to deliver the project. Mon CC were represented on the Recruitment Panel. The Panel failed to appoint from the first round of candidates and received few applicants on a second attempt. With hindsight, the project should have been delayed until more suitable candidates could be found. The lone worker was line managed by GAVO, with limited support from Mon CC. A hot desk arrangement to build relationships between the GAVO Officer and Mon CC Engagement Workers never gained momentum due to the nature of engagement and development work. Officers were rarely at the office at the same time.

GAVO’s project lead and line manager changed fairly early on in the project and this coincided with a change of Engagement Team Leader at Mon CC. The two main leads/managers had not been party to the development of the project proposal and had different understandings of the aims of the project. It took a few meetings to agree the purposes and main thrust of the Creative Toolkits Project and this was disconcerting for the project officer. Individual members of the Engagement Team also had different views about what the project should deliver. The project worker struggled with lone working and trying to engage people in rural areas, due in part, to a lack of experience. Long-term sickness and ongoing staffing issues halted the project, as GAVO had insufficient resources and capacity to replace the worker and/or deliver the project using existing staff.

Shared Understanding and Aims – With hindsight, the original project proposal to RDP LEADER wasn’t specific or detailed enough in its aims and objectives. Impact and outcome reporting was not particularly well developed upon starting the project. Subsequent bids have been clearer in their purposes and the outcomes they seek to deliver. The project proposal was originally part of a larger project. It was complimentary to a larger bid to the Lottery for a substantial rural development project, consisting of more development staff. The Lottery bid failed and it was difficult to define deliverables given the small nature of the remaining RDP project.

Mon CC and GAVO had different understandings of what the focus of the work should be. This was most evident in developing the Creative Communities Toolkit. Five attempts were made to agree the content which was frustrating for all involved, especially the project officer. Criticisms included the document was too long and/or too short. There was much discussion over the language it employed and at what point in the project it was expected to be published. GAVO expected the Toolkit to evolve based upon learning from the project, but it became a desk-based piece of work in the main, as it became clear that partner's understandings were that the Toolkit should be published for groups to refer to during the first quarter of the project.

RDP LEADER Support and Reporting – Regular reports on progress were submitted to the RDP LEADER group. GAVO highlighted ongoing staffing issues informally, so all parties were clear about the problems being experienced. Formal feedback on the Project Progress Reports was vague, although informal discussions were open and transparent. In future both parties agree that more honest, timely feedback would have supported GAVO with their various staffing issues. LEADERs support in attempting to resolve the difficulties with staffing and project deliverables was much appreciated.

Rural development – Much was learned about the challenges and barriers to engaging with rural communities. It was difficult to speak to large numbers of people, despite approaching individuals and groups at various times and days throughout the week. Part-time, lone working takes a particular set of skills and a good, motivational line manager, with the capacity to devote both time and energy to project development over an extended period of time. Rural development is challenging and above all, time consuming. Project timescales need to be fairly long in order to fully engage people, gain momentum, provide sufficient, ongoing support and ultimately, deliver clear outcomes and long term impact with rural isolated communities.

