

Common Ground Online Dialogue Session 1

Date: Tuesday 20 January

Theme: *Building trust, collaboration and partnership working – what makes community development distinctive?*

Participants: Community development, health, and voluntary sector colleagues from Northern Ireland and Scotland

Facilitators: SCDC & CDHN

Purpose of the Session

- To build on learning from the December Belfast exchange visit
 - To explore the **distinct contribution of community development** in addressing health inequalities
 - To deepen relationships and shared learning ahead of the return visit to **Glasgow (March)**
 - To use an **open dialogue approach**: sharing experience, reflecting deeply, not problem-solving or “fixing”
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Key Themes Discussed

1. Relationships and Trust Are the Work

- Across all breakout groups, **relationships** emerged as the core strength of community development.
 - Trust operates **person-to-person**, not just organisation-to-organisation.
 - Effective partnerships are rooted in:
 - Time spent building relationships
 - Honesty, humility and openness
 - Shared values rather than formal structures
 - Trust must flow **both ways** – communities, practitioners, statutory partners, and funders.
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2. Community Development’s Distinctive Contribution (the “USP”)

Participants repeatedly linked what *works* in partnerships to community development values:

- Inclusion and meaningful participation
- Sharing power, not “consulting after the fact”
- Empowerment and capacity building
- Valuing lived experience and grassroots knowledge

When partnerships work well, it is **because** these principles are present.

3. Tension Between Short-Term Systems and Long-Term Change

- Community development requires **long-term vision, continuity and investment**.
 - This clashes with:
 - Short funding cycles
 - Political cycles
 - Output-driven project requirements
 - There was strong concern that relationship-building (which takes time and resources) is:
 - Under-recognised
 - Under-funded
 - Often invisible in commissioning and policy frameworks
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4. Power, Gatekeeping and Decision-Making

- Participants highlighted barriers when:
 - Senior decision-makers are disconnected from the realities on the ground
 - “Gatekeepers” or organisational egos block collaboration
 - Even when frontline partners collaborate well, **top-down decisions** can undermine shared work.
 - Calls for:
 - Greater power-sharing
 - Decision-makers to act as **enablers**, not controllers
 - Funders and policymakers to rethink visibility, branding, and ownership (e.g. logos vs outcomes)
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5. Evidence, Data and Evaluation – Who Is It For?

- Frustration about the volume of data being collected:
 - Who uses it?
 - Where does it go?
 - Does it inform change?
 - Concerns included:
 - Duplication of data collection
 - Lack of triangulation across organisations
 - Minimal feedback to communities
 - Evidence that **matters most**:
 - Practice learning
 - Lived experience
 - Change for people and communities
 - Strong call to **push back** on extractive or meaningless reporting.
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6. Language, Co-production and Authentic Practice

- Widespread misuse of terms such as:
 - Co-production
 - Co-design
 - Collaboration
 - Participants stressed the importance of:
 - Shared understanding of language
 - Calling out tokenism
 - Positive examples were shared (notably pharmacy PPI work) where:
 - People with lived experience were involved **from the outset**
 - They helped design, deliver and evaluate work
 - Clear distinction made between **true co-production** and “informing after completion”.
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7. Lived Experience and Accessibility

- Strong emphasis on:
 - Plain language
 - Accessible materials
 - Designing *with* people, not *for* them
 - Young people, service users and communities should not be expected to engage with:
 - Overly technical
 - Corporate
 - Exclusionary documents
 - If a document isn't accessible to a young person, a parent, or a grandparent – it needs reworked.
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8. Collective Voice and Getting More Political

- Community development is rooted in **social justice**.
 - Participants expressed a need to:
 - Be more vocal collectively
 - Challenge dominant narratives
 - Name structural injustice and policy failure
 - Collaboration across NI and Scotland was seen as a way to:
 - Strengthen advocacy
 - Build solidarity
 - Avoid isolation in challenging times
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9. Value of the Space Itself

- Participants repeatedly noted:
 - How rare it is to have *protected space* for reflection and shared learning

- o The benefit of small breakout groups for equality of voice
 - o The positive, trusting and energising atmosphere
 - The dialogue process itself was seen as a form of **capacity-building and practice development**.
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Agreed and Implied Action Points

Immediate / Short-Term

1. **Circulate meeting notes** the shared link tree.
 2. **Share links and resources** referenced in the session.
 3. **Issue a short feedback survey** (SurveyMonkey) to:
 - o Capture reflections so far
 - o Gather quotes for funder reporting
 - o Ask for suggestions for future dialogue themes
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Planning for Next Dialogue Session

4. Use feedback to identify **priority themes**, e.g.:
 - o Evidence and evaluation that aligns with community development values
 - o Power, accountability and democratic participation
 - o Language, co-production and practice quality
 5. Retain the **dialogue format** (small groups + open floor) with lighter introductory content.
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Glasgow Visit (March)

6. Share **confirmed logistics** (timings, programme details) with participants when finalised.
 7. Allow sufficient time for **deep discussion**, not just site visits or presentations.
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Ongoing / Strategic

8. Build on this network to:
 - o Strengthen collective voice across Scotland and Northern Ireland
 - o Share practice, resources and learning informally between sessions
9. Consider how this group might:
 - o Influence funders and policymakers around partnership working
 - o Champion genuine co-production
 - o Challenge extractive evidence requirements