

## CHAPTER 2 – COMMON THEMES

## THE COMMITTEE

It was usual, though not always the case, for the committee or group 'driving' the initiative to have been established as a result of a public meeting held locally.

Whilst some members of the project committees usually changed over time, the core personnel in successful projects seemed to remain more constant. Moreover, the individual, or individuals, who were acknowledged to be the driving force(s) behind projects which were successful, were usually well respected members of the local community.

The committees responsible for the projects were organised in a variety of ways. The successful committees or steering groups were properly constituted, and met regularly. It was useful to have some continuity in personnel, as there was in St. Dogmaels and Tonmawr. The committee should also, as far as possible, be representative of local opinion and be seen to be responsive and accountable to the wishes of local residents. This can be achieved through the inclusion of representatives from local clubs, associations and other user groups on the project committee. Llandyrnog was a good illustration of the benefits of this, while Cwmdulais showed some of the problems that can arise when a committee was seen as not being in touch with some local feeling.

There was considerable variation in the level of advice and information that each committee received. Committees should be properly provided with professional advice at the outset, and specialist support subsequently. This often arose naturally from a good working relationship with the local authority and other public agencies. However, where no such relationship with the local authority existed, it was important that the committee sought regular professional advice about such issues as accounting, marketing and personnel management. It was also useful to involve experts on the committee, particularly in trades such as construction, who were able to advise the committee on plans for the project. Both Llandyrnog and St. Dogmaels used local expertise to good effect. Such expertise did not appear to be available or used effectively at Cwmdulais.

It has proved opportune in many cases to involve local councillors on the project committee. The advantages of this were shown at Betws, St. Dogmaels and Llanstffraid yn Mechain, where lobbying for support for the project was eased by direct contact with the relevant local authorities. This also improved access to information about grants and other assistance. Where this was not the case, one of the results can be a much lower level of support, financial and otherwise, from the relevant local authorities. At Cwmdulais, where district and county elected representatives were not part of the committee for long periods, there did not appear to be any great enthusiasm on the part of the local authority to become involved with and support the project.



*St. Dogmaels Memorial Hall before renovation work began.*

## STAFFING AND MANAGEMENT

Some projects operated with no paid staff, or merely part-time caretaking or cleaning staff. This was by no means an obstacle to success, providing committee members were prepared to assume additional responsibilities for the administration of the facility. Nonetheless, a successful project of any scale usually required full-time paid staff, with a proper management structure. Any staff employed by the community project should have detailed job descriptions from the outset, and these should be adhered to as far as possible. It was clear that in several cases, including Betws, Cwmdulais and Tonmawr, paid staff were spreading their time too thinly as a result of there being no agreed staffing structure. In Betws the operation of the project was hindered by an overload on both paid and volunteer staff. At Cwmdulais, it was commented that there had been 'too many chiefs and not enough indians'.

There was also the issue of accountability of staff. Being answerable to a committee was not unusual, but there needed to be proper channels of line management to enable paid employees to work effectively. Various committee members overseeing the work of paid staff on an ad-hoc basis has led to difficulties in Betws and Cwmdulais.

Volunteer help was used in each project, but with varying degrees of effectiveness. Most projects needed a network of trained and reliable volunteers. The issue of volunteers is a complex one, and further study of their effective role within such projects should be considered. It was commented, in some projects, that 'volunteers were more a hindrance than a help' as a result of their lack of training. The need for volunteer training was clearly identified in Betws for example; however, the committee had found it difficult to get volunteers to attend courses. It was also implicitly assumed in the staffing structures of some of the larger projects that the same level of volunteer help would be sustained once the projects were up and running. For various reasons, it is nearly always difficult to sustain constant levels of volunteers once the projects have been established, especially when paid staff are in post.

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A number of common themes have emerged from this study of six community projects. It is useful to divide remarks into five sections, which will deal in turn with: the community; the committee; finance; staffing and management; and general issues.

### THE COMMUNITY

The size of the community and the socio-economic profile of its population varied amongst the sample in this study, and did not appear to be determining factors in ensuring a successful project. More important was a degree of self-containment and a sense of community which may or may not be fostered by the extent of that community's geographical isolation.

Many of the communities were relatively isolated in a geographical sense, and were poorly served by transport links. Tonmawr was at the head of the Pelenna valley. Seven Sisters towards the top of the Dulais valley and Betws at the foot of three valleys in Ogwr. Other communities were in very rural locations. This relative isolation from neighbouring communities sometimes helped reinforce a sense of identity, which often resulted in a good community spirit within those communities where there were few obvious or problematic cultural divides. In turn, this community spirit predisposed residents to become involved in, and to support, community initiatives. The benefits of this were seen in St. Dogmaels and Llansanffraid ym Mechain in particular. In the latter case, an element of healthy rivalry between local communities in Powys also had a positive 'knock-on' effect on small-scale recreational provision in the wider vicinity.

However, self-containment and a sense of community identity had its problematic side too. At Cwmdulais, the project became too large to be sustained solely by the use of residents of Seven Sisters, and as the facility grew, it became increasingly reliant on users from neighbouring communities. It appears, however, that in this instance, local rivalry meant that those in neighbouring communities were somewhat reluctant to patronise the Cwmdulais centre. This problem at Cwmdulais may have been exacerbated by a belief locally that the facility had taken up a large share of public and local funds.

As said, each community had a very different socio-economic profile. It was clear that a successful project was able to draw from a range of professional groups and to sustain a cross-section of members from various socio-economic classes. Without such a range of professionals, problems in terms of day-to-day specialist advice have arisen. Betws and Cwmdulais were cases in point, where the local populations sustain relatively few professionals and, as a result, the projects struggled to gain professional support and advice. In many instances, it was the professionals, or at least the specialists, who emerged as the driving force for the project. Where this happened, problems arose if such people did not represent the wishes of the local population as a whole.

Also, without the existence of a 'professional sector' within a community, the whole question of raising local funds became problematic. In most instances, some local money was necessary for the project to proceed. The case with which the project obtained funds from its local population depended, in part at least, on the socio-economic profile of that community. In some areas with high rates of unemployment and/or low wages, it was inevitably difficult to raise funds.

In each of the communities, any pre-existing local amenities were in need of improvement or expansion. That is, those amenities, recreational or otherwise, that were already in existence within the community were generally in a poor state, or lacking in one specific area of provision. Nonetheless, it was important that the community itself recognised that they required improvement. This often provided the main motivation for a new project. The thrust of the development was usually established through an early process of local 'market research', of varying degrees of formality. Without this broad community awareness, it would prove difficult to motivate a community-wide effort for improvements. If there was an existing building or facility in a state of disrepair, as there was at Cwmdulais, Betws and St. Dogmaels, then this often provided the initial motivation for local action.

The existence of a network of active local clubs, whether sports-orientated or otherwise, was valuable in guaranteeing usage of the new facility. Moreover, club involvement in the plans for the project at the earliest possible stage was vital as a means of local consultation, and also for judging the likely usage at the new facility. Llansanffraid, amongst others, showed the benefit of close club involvement in its Recreational Association.

With any proposed project, there will be some who doubt whether sufficient local funds would be raised, or whether the project would be adequately used. Such doubts could be prevented from developing into outright opposition to the plans through a proper consultation process. Such a process was also necessary to achieve a level of local consensus as to the value of the project. In some instances, successful projects were developed at the third or fourth attempt – as at Llandyrnog – because earlier efforts had not achieved the full support of the local population. In other cases, a lack of consultation and consensus led to eventual opposition from influential sections of the local community, as at Cwmdulais.

There was also the feeling in some areas that facilities should be available for use free of charge to individuals and groups in the local community, since large sums of public money were known to have been spent on the project. Such an attitude had clear implications for the project's ability to generate income, and for the continuing level of fund-raising that was therefore necessary to sustain the project.



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*The Recreational Field at Llansantffraid (home for Konica League of Wales football).*

Some projects, two in the sample, incorporated commercial enterprises (cafes) which were run either as part of the main project facility or as independent concerns. It was difficult to judge their overall value, as the one at Betws was evidently successful, both in usage and revenue, while the other at Cwmdulais, while popular, was the source of many problems for the project. Nonetheless, the management of such enterprises should be approached with some care, whether the committee decides to run the enterprise itself, or to let the space to an outside commercial concern. In either instance, the committee should consider the impact that such a commercial venture will have on similar businesses in their area. If the project is seen as a commercial threat in any sense, then opposition can quickly build up in the local business community. This is more likely to happen when the project has been established as a community business and the committee has taken the title of a 'board of directors'. Local people are more likely to see the project, or elements of the project, as a commercial enterprise competing in the market place with other local businesses. In these cases, there might also be some questioning of the receipt and use of public funds in such apparently commercial enterprises.

## GENERAL ISSUES

A range of projects have been considered in this study ranging from, at one end of the spectrum, Betws, which focused almost exclusively upon the development of a community facility with little sporting remit, to Llandyrnog, which was an overwhelmingly sports-centred project. However, the majority of the projects that appear in this study have facilities which operate as community centres, rather than as sports centres. The programming of these centres indicated that sport could be incorporated at a later stage in any recreational project. That is, sport did not have to feature as part of the original plans: it was quite usual and feasible for sport to develop subsequently within community or recreational projects. This was largely the result of the capital costs that needed to be raised to build such facilities, and the desire to make the facility's appeal and usage as wide as possible. Many small communities could not sustain a sports facility but, nonetheless, were able to cater for a range of sporting activities in their new community centres. Both Betws and St. Dogmaels have ambitious expansion plans which centre on additional sporting provision.

Those projects which aimed at a wide and varied weekly programme at their facilities were the better used. Many had high usage by groups such as 'parent and toddler', pensioners associations and doctors surgeries or health clinics, as well as by sports clubs.

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There is, then, the potential for problems with the relationships that exist between paid staff and volunteers. It is often the case that each party expects too much from the other. As a result, tensions can arise as to the agreed workloads of each. These can be avoided if proper job descriptions for paid staff are adhered to, and volunteer help is managed on an effective and realistic basis.

### FINANCE

Successful projects had generally devised at the outset a detailed and well-constructed business plan using professional help and expertise. This plan gave some indication of the anticipated usage at any facility connected with the project, and showed awareness of the implications of capital and nett revenue expenditure. Those projects which did not appear to have planned in this way initially, suffered as a consequence. It should be noted that a business plan is easier to construct if the project is starting from scratch, or where usage can be accurately gauged through close club involvement with the project, as at Llandyrnog and Llansantffraid. Successful planning and projection was made more difficult where projects have evolved over a period of time.

An effective programme of market research seemed to be an important feature in the plans of successful projects. Ideally, such research should be undertaken early on and sustained once the project is up and running. St. Dogmaels and Llandyrnog undertook detailed market research at the outset, while Tonmawr and Betws organised surveys once their project was up and running. However, these often rested on poorly designed survey instruments, which produced flawed results (demonstrating the need for committees to avail themselves of professional help in the design of research instruments). Successful market research enabled strategic planning to be undertaken in the medium and longer term. Furthermore, market research should consider the whole scope of the planned project. It is worth considering multiple use of facilities at the centre, and testing the market accordingly. For example, a meeting room might be used for evening classes through the local education authority, or space might be allocated for a branch library, as at the Betws Centre. Such extra provision also attracted regular and reliable income for the project.

Applications for funding through grants and awards was most successful when approached in a structured manner. The receipt of public monies, particularly in the form of capital grants, has to be complemented with local fund-raising. This was a means by which the local community had a direct interest and involvement in the project. In this way, local fund-raising was a method for sustaining the community's sense of responsibility for the project. St. Dogmaels, Llansantffraid and Llandyrnog all conducted an effective programme of local fund-raising. The most successful fund-raising occurred in those areas which had regularly consulted

their local population about the planned development.

The stage at which grants were secured also appeared to be a factor in the success, or otherwise, of locally initiated projects. At Llandyrnog it was acknowledged that the success of their grant application was a factor in the success of their development where earlier attempts had foundered. It was felt that once the project had received the promise of funds it developed a 'head-of steam' of its own. Conversely, it may be the case that the longer a local project goes without the promise of support from outside sources the more likely it is that interest will wane and the plans come to nothing (although there will always be exceptions).

It seemed that the development of wider community projects opened avenues for more extensive grant aid. That is, projects which were recreational in a more general sense, rather than exclusively sports-orientated, were able to apply for a wider range of grants from public and private sources. However, it should be noted that there may be a danger for over-ambitious plans to emerge in the light of successful grant applications. Larger-scale developments often had serious revenue implications which the committee should fully consider.

It would be difficult to over emphasise the importance of financial accountability and clear accounting procedures, especially in small communities. Difficulties arose where there were opportunities for local residents to criticise aspects of the financial arrangements of a project. If, for instance, differential prices are charged for users at a facility (whereby certain clubs and associations are charged less than others, depending on their ability to pay or whether they are local or not, as was the case at Llansantffraid) then it is important that such practices are open. Decisions to introduce a differential charging structure should be made by the full committee, not one or a small group of members, and, as at Llansantffraid, they should be well publicised to all those involved in order that accusations of favouritism can be avoided. As one committee member put it: 'small communities are rumour factories, which means that the committee must not only be squeaky-clean, but must also be seen to be squeaky-clean.' At Llandyrnog, local clubs and associations were not charged for use of the facility, but instead were asked to make a voluntary donation or to contribute to fund-raising efforts. It was commented that the removal of payments meant that most of the financial tensions associated with the project disappeared at the same time.