Communities Can Report

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COMMUNITIES CAN

We are delighted to share this report on the 'Communities Can' partnership between Stonewater and Community Catalyst CIC. This report summarises what happened throughout our eleven-month journey together and what we learnt along the way. It concludes with some recommendations for what Stonewater might do next within this important strand of work.

We would like to say a big thank you to everyone from Stonewater involved and also to the wonderful local people from the 'test and learn' communities. It has been a genuine pleasure and privilege to be alongside you on this journey of discovery so far and we wish you every success with your next steps.

Angela Catley and Nick Sinclair, February 2022.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> *"Even if it was just passing in the corridor and checking on each other, it only takes that little thing, that little seed to build a community"*
>
> Reflection from one of the Stonewater 'Communities Can' Local Leads

Communities Can was an innovative collaboration between Stonewater and Community Catalysts CIC. The partnership phase that we report on here lasted eleven months and was led by a team of Stonewater staff and local people from Bedfordshire, Halifax and Southampton. It was convened, supported and facilitated by Angela Catley and Nick Sinclair from Community Catalysts.

The intention during this period was to 'test and learn' but for the spirit of Communities Can to be sustained beyond our partnership together. This report therefore aims to help leaders and stakeholders form a view around what could happen next.

What we set out to do through Communities Can

- Support colleagues and stakeholders with practical tools to understand and develop the assets and strengths of local people and their places.

- Better understand what was working well already in three local areas where Stonewater has a presence with a view to sharing ideas, approaches and positive practice.

- Share stories and inspire others to take more community-centred approaches and to spread and scale learning to inspire impact across the wider organisation.

We wanted to learn how Stonewater helps customers to…

- Do what matters to them.
- Build from what's strong (not focus on what's wrong).

- Feel valued, heard and included.

- Access local opportunities and connect with the people and places around them.

- Give and receive the support needed to live a good life.

These were project's outputs…

- Local conversations, learning and action groups.

- Training from Community Catalysts.

- People brought together in three defined neighbourhoods.

- Co-produced tools and materials.

What we saw happening as a result

- **Community action**: Local people taking action, developing their own community assets and supporting each other

- **Identifying strengths and assets**: A discovery and recognition of the strengths, skills and spirt of local people.

- **New learning and perspectives**: A shifting perspective on the meaning of community (from the formal to the relational).

- **Staff peer support and connection**: A supportive community developing within Stonewater.

- **'Testing Tech'**: People bravely exploring the potential for virtual and online hybrid events and meetings.

- **Cost benefit argument**: A clear case for how greater attention and involvement in community leads to reduced costs and increased value.

What we learnt along the way

- It is really hard to understand and support the development of a community if you're not physically in it.

- Technology is not there yet for hybrid community events and activities.

- Digital inclusion remains a big challenge for many people and it is a challenge that that Stonewater has an active role in addressing.

Recommendations

1. Stonewater sustains and grows the current local activity of Communities Can whilst further extending the learning to the wider organisation.

2. More time and resources should be invested in identifying and building upon the strengths of local people and places where Stonewater has a community presence.

3. Explore Stonewater's digital engagement and learning offer in the light of the learning and insights from this project.

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE

Community Catalysts began working with Stonewater in March 2021 on an exciting explorative project that ultimately became known as "Communities Can". The name was chosen as it spoke of the potential and strengths of local people and places, and gave scope for additional, clarifying statements for instance 'communities can… when we work together' or 'communities can… when we listen to each other' etc. The project was part of a wider strategic ambition to test an intentional way of working that focused on the strengths and assets of the local people and communities in which Stonewater had a strong presence. 'Communities Can' therefore set out to explore and highlight examples of positive activity with a view to understanding why that was happening, how that could be developed further and ultimately how the organisation might use that to inspire positive activity and change elsewhere too.

The project focus was on three areas of the country where Stonewater had a mix of tenures; supported, general needs and retirement living. In the end, a lot of the localised work was led by the retirement living teams due to both the physical presence of Stonewater staff working from those places and also the positive relationships that already existed.

From the outset it was clear that Covid-19 was going to be an ongoing factor to contend with throughout. The project took that in to account with people supported to work together virtually as a project team, offered specific on-line training, and through two events attended by a mix of staff, customers and local people.

Project direction and plan

The initial intention was for the partnership to last six months, but for various reasons we extended it to eleven within the same financial envelope covering funded support from Community Catalysts.

Our broad intention was for Communities Can to follow eight stages as set out on the following page. It was recognised from the start that explorative learning pieces like this often need to go in different directions depending on what is discovered along the way and where the energy is etc. The detailed project plan which evolved from

these initial stages helped provide a useful shape and frame for our work together as well as something to regularly revisit to reflect on how things were evolving.

1. **Plan, prepare and organise** – early discussions, to develop a project plan and schedule of work, work allocation, identify and engage key stakeholders. Manage the project and project team over time.

2. **Inform** – produce a clear narrative about the project, its timeline and input needed. Work with Stonewater staff and managers in the 3 key areas to ensure this information is widely shared and people are engaged.

3. **Connect** - bring together a diverse group of key people to work together – managers, staff, customers, tenants and other stakeholders. Design and run a short online workshop for these people exploring ideas of community, connection, contribution and personal strengths.

4. **Learn** – develop and facilitate a series of learning groups to enable people to explore their own strengths and connections and take steps to enable other people to do the same.

5. **Define** – use the learning groups to develop a series of accessible, engaging 'best practice' statements. Statements define what Stonewater customers, staff and managers mean by positive strength-based practice which connects people to and enables them to contribute to their community.

6. **Benchmark** – develop tools that staff, and other stakeholders can use to benchmark what is currently happening in their area. Support people from the learn group to assess their practice/experience against this benchmark.

7. **Capture** – identify examples of strong practice. Work within Stonewater protocols to support people to capture video, audio or written stories that can be shared as exemplars.

8. **Share** – work with Stonewater managers to identity the best route to internal dissemination and systems change. Work with involved stakeholders to enable them to share what they did across the organisation, the tools and approaches and stories.

The three local 'test and learn' areas

This initial process of identifying the three areas was led by Stonewater colleagues Emma Tobin (the Head of Wellbeing in Retirement Living) and Rachel Eatough (the Performance and Delivery Manager for Neighbourhoods.) Emma and Rachel were generous, supportive and consistent leaders of Communities Can from its inception and alongside Emily Georghiou (who was later recruited), ensured that the project developed well. As a side note, we'd like to make special mention of the significant effort and energy these three put in to leading Communities Can in such a positive and inspiring way. It really did make all the difference.

Using a mixture of Stonewater data and explorative conversation together about the "right" sort of areas to start this in, we eventually settled on an area of Bedfordshire known politically as Putnoe, an area of Southampton called Freemantle and a place called Copley Village near Halifax. These three areas were chosen as they had a mix of general needs and retirement living stock and tenures in those neighbourhoods. They were essentially three places where Stonewater had a significant presence, but equally some relationships already in place with customers and the local communities around those properties. We did not manage to map to supported accommodation sites in these areas which was one of the early issues faced in the design.

Once the three areas were determined, we were able to pull together a Project Team of 'Local Leads' from Stonewater with some meaningful connection to the areas either through proximity, role or their position in retirement living. The group started to meet on a weekly basis to build connections with each other and explore and shape the project. In Putnoe this was led by Janice Lewis, Cynthia Knight and Hilda Morley with the support of Purva Joshi. In Copley, Tracey McNally and Jolene Walker and in Freemantle Louise Swainland and Helen Holland. The group was convened by Nick and Angela from Community Catalysts and led by Emily Georghiou and Rachel Eatough. It was supported from a communications and storytelling angle by Chris Marchant. The group were a wonderful collection of talented and energetic people with a genuine passion for people, learning and community. Each had busy day jobs and responsibilities and worked really hard to make time for Communities Can in what was often a very busy schedule following a significant period of organisational change and in the midst of a pandemic too.

Because the approach and methods of Communities Can were somewhat different from the norm and because all our conversations were held virtually (both individually and as a group,) it naturally took time to build connection, relationships and a collective understanding and vision of what this was about. It was important that everyone had a say and input in to this process and felt able to shape it to some degree. This eventually created a sense of buy in and commitment to the approach and turned out to be an important factor in helping achieve the positive learning and outcomes further down the line. The additional time this took was the primary reason why the project took longer than anticipated, although that was in no way detrimental to the overall outcomes, quite the opposite in fact.

General needs customer involvement

Through our discussions it quickly became clear that one of the main challenges was going to be the way the team connected with residents in 'general needs' tenures. In practice, it seemed that the local presence on the ground was insufficient to build meaningful relationships with general needs tenants. Communities Can had a deliberate and intentional aim to avoid some of the more (survey type) traditional methods of tenant engagement, promoting instead a more conversational approach to unearthing what was going on and building relationships of trust. Sticking to this was uneasy for the group at times and was perhaps a reason for lower 'engagement' from general needs customers. Equally though it provided useful learning and perhaps evidence of the need for local presence to foster relationships in community.

'Strengths based' practice training

In addition to the Communities Can work, Community Catalysts also designed and delivered a number of workshops to Stonewater colleagues in the wider organisation. These focussed on the power of community and the concept of strengths-based working. They were attended by over 40 colleagues and were well received.

Project Narrative

As part of the project plan, the group worked together to develop the following short overall project narrative which was used to promote the work to the organisation.

Background

Stonewater wants everyone to have a home but we also know a home is more than bricks and mortar. We want our customers to feel part of connected, contributing and cohesive communities, where people live happier, healthier lives for longer.

Why are we doing this?

We want to understand how Stonewater staff can enable customers to:

- Do what matters to them

- Build from what's strong (not focus on what's wrong)

- Feel valued, heard and included

- Access local opportunities and connect with people and places around them

- Give and receive the support needed to live a good life

What are we doing?

Working with our partner organisation, Community Catalysts CIC, we want to connect and learn alongside local customers, residents and colleagues in areas where we have a mixture of stock and tenures. We have selected Freemantle ward in Southampton, Putnoe in Bedford, and Copley Village in Halifax to 'test and learn' from.

Through local engagement, our aim is to understand what's working well and why, who's doing what and what could be even better. Our ambition is that by really listening and learning what matters to people in these 3 areas, Stonewater can empower positive change and spread that learning, across the organisation and country, for the benefit of customers.

The team also developed a similar but adapted narrative to help create promotional materials to support their conversations with local people in the community. This read as follows:

Communities Can Project

What Matters Putnoe / Copley / Freemantle

What's this about?

We are trying to find out

- What matters to you about this local area?

- What you're good at?

- What are the strong parts of the local community?

- How things could be even better here?

- How and where do you meet with people in the local area these days?

- What makes you feel valued, heard and included in your life?

Why are we asking this?

Our intention is that by having some chats about these points, listening and finding out what really matters to people, we can help the organisation we work for (Stonewater) be better at helping make a positive difference here and in the other bits of the country we work in too.

What do I need to do?

We are just interested in having a chat, hearing your thoughts and stories in any way you feel comfortable. If you're interested get involved in a meeting with the other people chatting with us too (via the internet) then we'd love to have you join us.

The development of local groups and national gatherings

Off the back of these initial conversations led by the local Stonewater leads, small local groups started to form in each area. Local people started to contribute ideas in different ways depending on local circumstances and as a result of considering the key questions both individually and collectively as a group. This then fed in to our first national hybrid (virtual and in the community) event on Tuesday 28th September 2021. The event was attended by over 40 people from the three areas gathered together, online and face to face, to celebrate their local areas and discuss what could be even better.

At the gathering, we heard from each local area about what they've been up to and the conversations which had been taking place between Stonewater colleagues and customers.

Highlights of the gathering included a passionate contribution from Mary in Putnoe, who shared her deep knowledge about the local area and the wonderful activities that she is leading and involved with. We also had the privilege of hearing from Mark, another resident, who shared his beautiful art with us all.

It was wonderful to see people coming together, forming new connections and coming up with ideas for how they could make their communities even better. Equally, it was really great to hear just how many talents exist in those three communities alone. It was amazing what we found out together.

These conversations and discoveries were creatively captured throughout the event by Anna Geyer, a commissioned graphic artist, who drew visual representations of what people shared (see last page for this).

The gathering was followed by more local conversations and action and then another event on the 14th December known as Communities Can at Christmas. This was during the peak of 'Omicron' wave of Covid-19, so unfortunately we were unable to do a hybrid event that time. This had an impact on attendees with many of the potential group feeling uncomfortable with online communication.

Nevertheless, the gathering was a great way to hear about the progress that had been made since the start and since the gathering in September.

WHAT HAPPENED THROUGH COMMUNITIES CAN?

In this section we outline some of the key learning and outcomes stimulated by Communities Can. This learning has been collated a result of routinely convening feedback session of people involved at all levels.

1. **Community Action**: Local people taking action, developing their own community assets and supporting each other

Communities Can inspired a number of conversations that led to local people (predominantly retirement living residents and their contacts in the local community), taking action. This led to some brilliant outcomes including:

- A social action gardening project led by residents and community members in Freemantle where they secured £3,000 of funding with the support Stonewater colleagues.

- A new bench at a bus stop in Copley as a result of feedback from people that there was nowhere to sit, chat and connect.

- The communal lounge in Putnoe becoming a local community resource led and convened by the residents.

- Friendships and new connections forming both locally and across the areas as a result of the gatherings (for instance a published author in one area offering support to an aspiring one in another.)

2. **Identifying Strengths and Assets**: A discovery and recognition of the strengths, skills and spirt of local people

The conversations led to the unearthing of countless skills of local people in the three areas. These included notable examples such as:

- A local community activist driving forward inter-generational connection in the community.

- Several artists keen to share their talents.

- A published author and an aspiring author who connected at the second gathering.

- Builders, gardeners and other talented trades people.

3. **New learning and perspectives**: A shifting perspective in participants on the meaning of community (from the formal to the relational)

Several people involved commented that their perspective of community had changed throughout from the formal activity led by organisations and formal groups towards the natural, local neighbourliness that they saw growing as a result of Communities Can.

4. **Changing Mindsets**: Stonewater colleagues working really hard to do things differently with mindsets shifting as a result

We feel it is worth including a quote in full here captured from one of the local leads during a feedback session as it neatly sums up the learning from this point

"I think that it is quite easy for me, as an employee of Stonewater, to take a perspective on our residents that because there's stuff wrong with the building, because they're not meeting up and have coffee mornings and stuff like that, it is easy for me to fall in to the view and the perspective that there is no community. I think that is one of the things that I've learnt. Just because I, as someone working for a company, can't see the community and can't see the connections it does not mean that they don't exist. That's one of the very first things that I found out going in to this area which from my perspective didn't have a community and they weren't doing things together actually they DID know each other. Even if it was just passing in the corridor and checking on each other, it only takes that little thing, that little seed to build a community. It's to hold back my judgement and really look at the intricate details of relationships because they do exist everywhere, regardless."

5. **Staff Peer Support and Connection**: A supportive community developing within Stonewater

One of the unexpected outcomes of the project was the community that built between staff within Stonewater working on this. This was mentioned several times in the feedback sessions that people found it refreshing, encouraging and inspiring to

connect with likeminded colleagues throughout the organisation to the point of people feeling this was like a community building internally.

6. **'Testing Tech'**: People bravely exploring the virtual and online hybrid

There was an impressive attempt by the team from Putnoe in particular to bring the online and in community worlds together during the September gathering. Although this was problematic with sound issues at points, it did work to a degree and created a sense of connection that would not have been achievable otherwise.

7. **Cost benefit**: An argument for how greater attention and involvement in community leads to reduced costs and increased value.

The cost benefit argument in the housing world for investing in deep relationships with communities is not new, but it was reaffirmed on a number of occasions throughout this project which is worth nothing in the Stonewater context. This quote below gathered from the feedback sessions summarises the points associated with this nicely:

"From our project that came from this, they will have improved the area which will have put an additional value on the look of the scheme which will increase the people who want to take up the properties on the scheme. That in turn will reduce the empty property costs that we get. So that's quite a substantial cost that this has actually saved Stonewater. You know if you go to a site, and you look at it and there's a beautiful garden, a shed and all of this stuff going on, people are going to want to take those properties, therefore our void periods will be shorter when that work is done. Also, the upkeep of the area. All we've done is provided residents with tools to look after the area. That in turn, in time, may stop the gardening costs. Therefore, when we go to procure our gardening contracts again, the costs to our residents and for Stonewater will be smaller. When I was building this with the residents and I was at the residents' meetings, what happened is residents brought up long standing repair issues. These repairs were causing damage to the building which in turn if we hadn't had picked them up and got them fixed would have cost more money."

WHAT WE LEARNT ALONG THE WAY

- It is really hard to understand and support the development of a community if you're not physically in it.

One of the consistent challenges the Communities Can team faced was that for many of them they weren't actually in the communities they were focussing on. The notable exception to this was Putnoe, where three of the staff were routinely in the community (Hilda, Cynthia and Purva.) It was evident the difference this made for them compared to the others, for instance the significant turn out at the September gathering of local people in the community room at Raglan Ct. Essentially the learning here was it is really hard to positively influence and shape a community if you're not in it. This issue was made particularly difficult when thinking about engaging general needs customers in the project. As outlined earlier, we pushed hard to not revert to traditional engagement techniques like surveys etc whilst still encouraging the use of information and flyers etc to back up conversations. Some members of the team felt that this caused a barrier:

> *"Some customers will have missed out because I haven't been able to contact them. It's about having the time to speak to people. We need to find ways to engage with large numbers of people who live in general needs housing"*

Whilst this was an issue it also provided helpful insight and learning.

Another theme that came up a few times was a concern staff had in having conversations with people that led the sharing of issues that the staff felt unable to deal with within their time or capabilities. On the other hand, there was a recognition

> *" Some people we spoke to came up with a long list of issues that were urgent for them – things like fly tipping. We need to think through how we manage that…if we help people with those things and they can see things are being done then that just helps build trust and the relationship"*

that people's concerns cannot be ignored if we seek to build trust. This quote above from a Communities Can Local Lead summarises that well:

- Technology is not there yet for hybrid events

In reality, it is evident that the required accessible and community technology to support such events as the ones we aspired to lead is not widely available yet and arguably it is very difficult to bring people 'in to the room' in a meaningful way from a virtual space.

- Digital inclusion remains a big challenge that Stonewater has a role in.

Stonewater's 'We Are Digital' partnership and offer is evidently helping to address the digital divide some customers are facing. It appeared at times that more could be done around inclusive hybrid working and a deeper source of local support/funding for ongoing skills, confidence, access, safety online etc.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We would like to outline 3 key recommendations here that we feel would be useful here for the organisation to consider.

1. Sustain and grow the current local activity and extend the learning from Communities Can to the wider organisation.

There has been significant and rich learning from this project (much of which has been recorded separately to this report by Stonewater colleagues in a 'Mural' that should be available internally on request). Going forward, it is likely that without routine and dedicated convening, the work and energy of this project could fizzle out. This is made even more likely as a result of the time constraints that the participating staff were under throughout which will continue to be a challenge for them. Consideration should be given to the resource needed for this strand of work and action taken by senior leaders in the organisation to take that investment forward. This should include the growing development of a staff toolkit that is being shaped and developed as part of this project. Some quotes from Local Leads on this below:

> *"I do think that we as an organisation do try and challenge our perspectives and we do have values that we're aware of and try and work towards. As an organisation we're already on the right track…**we're acknowledging that we're not just a provider, we know there is community that we want to help, develop and build on**. I think personally the thing that Stonewater could do differently as an organisation is that we need more staff to have the time and head space to listen and look at our residents and what our communities are like. Because without doing this project I wouldn't have had the time in my role to really look at this and realise this. So, there must be loads of other people in the organisation who are just work, work, work."*

Other reflections from colleagues in this area included: *"I would love this to be more intuitive and the natural way we work within Stonewater'* and the question *'How do we get to a point where community work doesn't feel scary for people and they can see exactly what they need to do?"*

2. More time and resources should be focused on identifying and building upon the strengths of local people and places where Stonewater has a community presence.

It was evident that the participating staff in Communities Can had insufficient time and capacity to fully maximise on the individual and collective assets of the local areas. However, the project also pointed to numerous impressive outcomes that were achieved during a relatively short period. This quote from a Stonewater colleague below really helps to outline the potential around this.

> *"It would be really helpful to have some catalysts in different pockets of the organisation who are gifted at helping us on this journey. I think as a business we have loads of great initiatives. Where we can still grow is in us not seeing ourselves as always putting things on **for** customers. Customers are people who have interests and passions and hobbies and skills. I am so grateful for what we (Stonewater) have, but how do we harness the things that our customers bring to the table too? I don't know what the solution is, but it is a mindset change. We know that our customers exist in communities where there are support groups and networks. We need someone who can help broker those relationships, be a bit of a facilitator and have a bit of headspace, to help the rest of us when we are trying to do strategic work, or operational work, you know like when we're trying to sort out the leaky roof, or the overflowing bins, to think about how can we use this [negative] situation to build some community here?"*

Another helpful reflection from this project was that Stonewater could do more to understand where Stonewater colleagues live, even if they are not responsible for working in the particular area they live in. In the feedback it was suggested that this could breakdown the us and them barriers that might exist:

> *"Our staff are local citizens who often live in the communities that Stonewater serves. Is there anything we can do better to see ourselves in that way – changing the relationship and seeing problems (like bins) as 'our problems' rather than 'their problem'. Much less 'us and them'"*

Another local lead commented on this in the feedback by saying

"It's not just our residents that have passions and interests, it's the staff too. But we are just not able to make the most of that because of our workload and getting bogged down with things like paperwork. So, we get high levels or sickness etc. We are not tapping into the things that fire people up"

3. Explore the digital engagement and learning offer in the organisation in light of the learning from this project.

Digital exclusion for customers was an issue that came up consistently throughout this project. It was evident that there was significant demand from customers for the We are Digital partnership / offer in many parts of the country with spaces been extended to accommodate more people. There seemed to be a bit of a disconnect in knowledge in some local Stonewater staff areas with the wider organisational offer around this though. Some of that was owing to the fact that local plans had evolved with other partners and local people supporting each other etc. We suggest it might be helpful to review Stonewater's 'We Are Digital' work in light of learning from this project and explore what more can be done around inclusive hybrid working and a deeper source of local support/funding.

Conclusion

Communities Can highlighted what is possible when people focus on the strengths of local people and places.

It is evident that Stonewater does make a positive difference in local communities beyond its core business. However, this project suggested that with relatively little resource the organisation could do considerably more in the communities it serves and really help to shape, deepen and strengthen the bonds, ties and connections of both customers, local residents, organisations and services alike. As a result of this Stonewater would likely see significant benefit to both customers, local people, local communities and the organisation's bottom line too. This work should continue to grow.