

John McLuckie 0:18

Hello and welcome to this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. I'm John McLuckie, Partnerships Lead for community planning in Argyll and Bute, and in this episode we'll be talking about the Community Planning Partnership priority of community well-being, which focuses on actions related to increasing the quality of access to community leadership opportunities; increasing the voice in collective decision making; understanding how communities achieve connection and belonging; and enhancing communication within communities.

Joining me today are Gill Simpson, Manager of Helensburgh Community Hub and Chair of the Helensburgh and Lomond Area Community Planning Group, and Colin Buchanan, Chair of Isle of Luing Community Council and the Oban, Lorn and the Isles Area Community Planning Group. Welcome both to the podcast.

Gill Simpson 1:02

Hi, thanks for having us.

Colin Buchanan 1:02

Thank you, John. Thank you.

John McLuckie 1:04

So, if I could start by asking yourself, Colin, what led you to your current role with Isle of Luing Community Council?

Colin Buchanan 1:11

I actually started with the Community Trust and that's how I first got involved in community activity. The elections for the Community Councils came along and I thought it was a good opportunity. A lot of people were retiring as community councillors to make a fresh start, so we kind of stood for election for Community Council, which we were successful.

So, it was kind of Trust first, Community Council second, but they are interlinked and as you go forward, you know, doing the work, you realise just how interlinked they are.

John McLuckie 1:45

So, was that about the sort of timing of that and being in the right place at the right time when these opportunities came up, or was it something you were actively looking to do?

Colin Buchanan 1:52

Well, no, I wasn't actively looking. I suppose it was timing to an extent, but once I'd been doing the Trust activity for a while, you start to realise what the community needs, what the community is looking for and when the Community Council elections came up, I thought, well, I can maybe add something to this and make it make it better by being in both the Trust and the Council, if that makes sense.

John McLuckie 2:13

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And Gill, for yourself and your role within Helensburgh Community Hub, how did you come into that role?

Gill Simpson 2:21

Well, I've worked in the third sector for almost a decade now, but I've been involved in kind of community stuff, I think my whole life, you know, on a voluntary basis. School PTAs and all of that kind of thing, and so I've always been interested and want to get involved in having a meaningful role in my community, and then this opportunity came up. I'd worked at the TSI, the Third Sector Interface for Argyll and Bute before, so that was my introduction to working in the third sector and then this role came up, about four years ago now actually, and it was ideal. It allowed me to take the learning that I'd had from a kind of more organisational support role with the TSI into much more doing things, you know, with and for the community. And it's been a fantastic job, actually. I've loved every second of it. So that then led to being part of the local Community Planning Group, and then I've sort of taken on roles within that.

John McLuckie 3:17

Fantastic. One of the sort of areas of community wellbeing that the CPP is looking at is around community leadership. It may not be the most comfortable question to answer, but how do you see being in a community leadership role, Gill?

Gill Simpson 3:29

It's funny, I wouldn't have described myself as such, but I do see myself I think as a connector in the community, I think, and the role of the hub, because we have such a variety of people, organisations, services, activities, events, and things happening across different ages and different parts of the community that just naturally gives me exposure to lots of people coming in and out. I do lots of collaborative work with other local organisations because I really enjoy that, because I think that's just a fun way of delivering your work, really, is working with other people.

And I think that you just speak to people, you know, I'm sure Colin says the same thing, you just get to know people. We live in relatively small communities, although Helensburgh is the biggest town in Argyll and Bute, it still feels like a very sort of local place, so you just get to know people, and so I think rather than leader, I think a community, I'm not going to say the word gossip and chatty, but there's definitely something to do with, you know, being a chatty person in there. So, I think it's more community connector, I would say.

John McLuckie 4:34

Yeah, yeah, really interesting. What about yourself, Colin? Feel free to choose between leader, connector or any other descriptor.

Colin Buchanan 4:42

No, I like the connector piece. It's true, isn't it, because what Gill says is absolutely right. You don't really see yourself as the community leader, but you get involved. In my case, I have the space and the knowledge to do certain things and so after I retired, you know, you're looking for something to do, something to give back. But when you're working with a Trust, a very small group of people with very specific things to do, so you start forging ahead with those. The Community Council and the Community Planning Group are slightly different, a much wider and more collaborative framework. You've got to cut your cloth for what you're behaving in. So, in the Trust, yes, you're leading the trust, you're moving it forward. You're maybe steering more in the other forum, that's kind of how I look at it. And again, Gill's point about communicating, the whole thing about meeting people, and the reason things happen is because you meet people, talk to them, are able to convince them perhaps, that there's a way forward.

John McLuckie 5:35

Yeah, excellent, and you touched on the Area Community Planning Groups there. Colin, how did you first become aware of the Oban, Lorn and the Isles Area Community Planning Group?

Colin Buchanan 5:48

One of the very valuable things about the CPGs or the Community Planning Groups are the focus on the community, and we were a focus for one of the events. Of course, we stayed for the whole session and that was my first exposure to it, I thought this is really interesting. So, we decided to attend them regularly. They are a source of knowledge that we can take back either as community councillors, Community Trust, but then the Vice Chair came up, which strangely nobody really wanted. Again, there's something else we want to maybe dig into is people's bandwidth to take part in these things. But I thought, this is important, let's do that, and then of course, the Chair left and I took that as well. But you know, you have to step forward at some point and say, well, I'll do that then.

John McLuckie 6:35

Yeah, yeah, another example of leadership there, was that quite a similar journey to yourself, Gill, for the Helensburgh and Lomond group.

Gill Simpson 6:42

Yes, exactly that. I mean, I was aware of the Community Planning Group when I've previously worked for the TSI, so I was aware of the usefulness of attending, and so I wanted, when I took over the job at the Hub, to make sure that the Helensburgh Community Hub was really central, you know, a central player in our local Community Planning Group, because there's visibility there to all the partners that come and that's a wide range of statutory and third sector partners and it's just opportunities to find things out, share information, promote what you're doing as well, and make sure that more people are aware of the services and things that we offer at the Hub. And there's been so many good conversations, good collaborations that happen in the margins of the meetings as well as the kind of content of the meetings. So, although as Chair now, I've introduced a 10-minute comfort break, because they are quite long meetings, they're only every quarter, but you know there's a lot to pack in and there's a lot of really good stuff happening and good conversations happening, and we don't always agree in those conversations and that's a really positive thing as well.

When you get a conversation happening where people are coming from different perspectives and you're trying to sort of help everyone come to some kind of action or way forward or understanding of each other's position.

Understandably, as Colin was saying about people's bandwidth to take part, I know that does feel like a bit of an issue, but I wasn't aware actually that I think Argyll and Bute is quite unusual in having the Community Planning Partnership so wide and open to community organisations at that level. I might be wrong in that John, but I think that's the case. I think the model that Argyll and Bute uses for community planning, I think, is a really commendable one. Making sure it's not just the statutory partners who are involved, it's the whole community and voluntary organisations, small community groups, charities, third sector organisations.

I think it's really, really important that when we're looking at improving our communities and making things better for people in our communities, that we are all around the table, because the landscape has changed so much in the last couple of decades about the essential services, as well as, kind of, social activities that are provided within our community.

I think everyone still sort of believes that it's the Council who does everything or it's the Police who do everything, but actually that's not the case and hasn't been for a while, but I think people are behind the curve on really understanding that. So, being able to be in a forum where we're all together trying to kind of talk to each other about how we do drive things forward, I think is really, really important. And so, although it does take up a bit of my time as Chair, doing the chairing like Colin, you know we've got a few extra meetings to do, my board of trustees were really supportive of me doing this because they recognised that this is about how we all work together to improve things, for everybody in our community, and it's a really, really important forum, I think.

John McLuckie 9:37

Do you want to come in, Colin?

Colin Buchanan 9:38

You're absolutely spot on and the idea that community groups can lead something like the Community Planning Group is quite unique from my experience, but we're kind of trying to leverage that. Community planning is about, the magic word is community. Let's get the community groups more involved, and again, to take Gill's point about getting people involved, getting the community groups more and more involved in these sessions, so that they have a voice, they know what's happening and they can at least try and influence the direction of travel.

John McLuckie 10:06

Really interesting. I think as well just on the model in Argyll and Bute, from a legislative point of view, there's the Community Empowerment Act that community planning sits within and the requirement to have what are called locality plans, within the Local Authority area, and the means through which the discussions and actions are taken forward and who should be involved in that. It's not determined specifically other than the public bodies that should be involved, but it does say there is scope to bring in all the different sectors.

Gill Simpson 10:38

It's interesting isn't that you bring up the kind of community empowerment legislation and consultation is a very specific legal thing, but the idea, I think people sometimes interchange that with, you know, communicating with communities and engaging with communities and I think there's a lot of discussion about how lip service that sometimes can be. There's lots of legislation there, there's lots of kind of warm words about it, but I think communities sometimes feel like, that it's a tick box exercise.

But I do feel, genuinely, that the Community Planning Group is an authentically positive forum for genuine discussion, that does lead to things happening and, you know, it's not necessarily earth shattering stuff, but I was really surprised actually that Community Planning Partnerships in other parts of Scotland do just involve the statutory partners, because when you look at the services that are being delivered now outside of the statutory sector and with contracting and defunding of things because, you know, we know money is tight and everything. It seems nonsense to me that you wouldn't be involving all the parts of the community that are involved in making the community work. So again, that comes back to my point about this is why I think it's important that organisations like mine and other local organisations and community groups do get involved in this kind of forum, because it is the main forum locally where we can have a voice, I think.

John McLuckie 12:07

Yeah, absolutely. Just to touch on again, the community wellbeing priority that the CPP has as one of its three priority outcomes over the next 10 years, one of the areas is around enhancing communication with communities and within communities. Colin, do you have a view on how that, we've talked a little bit about how the Area Community Planning Groups could help facilitate that, have you got a view on how that could be developed further?

Colin Buchanan 12:35

Yeah, it kind of follows on from Gill's point about consultation and surveys. A lot of times communities feel as if they're spoken to, not really consulted, but the Community Planning Group has a really unique opportunity here to change the dialogue when we're talking about consultation and make it more relevant at the working level.

So, a lot of consultations and communications are kind of broad, maybe region wide, the CPG's by the virtue of their structure, give us the opportunity to break that down.

Talking about communications, you know, at the CPG's you meet the Fire service or the Police service or Health and Social Care, and you're able to maybe talk about specific things that they're not aware of as well. So, the communication's going in the right direction there as well as coming back down.

How you change it going forward, my approach to this is to get the Community Councils and communities way more involved in the CPG and by that I mean up their attendance, the number of attendees at it.

The statutory groups attend every quarter, regularly, and trying to keep some continuity with community groups is quite difficult, but I think it's an opportunity that I'm certainly keen to pursue, to make sure that they take the chance to understand what's going on and influence things.

Gill Simpson 13:54

I would agree with that Colin, and I think you're right about attending. There's something about the in-person element as well, I mean we have a hybrid meeting, so obviously some people are online and that's completely understandable, but you see their face and you hear their voice and you start building relationships.

I think the key for me when I was thinking about this, there's something about visibility and trust, and I think those two things are really, really important and I think in this day and age, there's a lot of importance set on communicating via social media, e-mail, website traffic, that kind of thing, because that's got a lot of reach in terms of quantity, but I think the quality of that is different, and I think when you're looking at community well-being and tackling some quite significant issues and local issues and things that really matter to people locally, you need trust and you need visibility. And when I look at some of the kind of key issues that are happening by us at the moment, I think where the Community is struggling is a lack of communication from say a certain body about a particular issue and there's not the visibility there, but when we've actually specifically asked somebody to come along and explain something that's going on to the Community Planning Group, just seeing that person coming along in person so you can actually start building more of a sort of trusted relationship with them, I think really matters.

So, I think for me there's something about, it's a challenge and an opportunity about, say the visibility, particularly of statutory partners and being able to build trusted relationships, because there's no doubt there's a power imbalance there between, I think the statutory sector and the third sector. I think Colin you might agree with me on this, hopefully, and I think the way that we start to kind of change the dynamic around that is about building trust in each other and that comes from seeing each other.

And the amount of positive collaborations, understanding of people's positions, has come from proper solid interaction, talking to people. It's time intensive and it doesn't give you massive numbers of website hits or whatever, but I think that's the thing that needs to be absolutely embedded in how we go forward with kind of communicating as a Community Planning Partnership.

John McLuckie 16:07

Mm-hmm, just I guess in terms of another area that the Community Planning Partnership is looking at in community wellbeing, which is people's sense of connection and belonging within their own community, which is maybe a little bit harder to define. Do you think that might link to the visibility and trust that you were talking about there, or do you think it's a lot wider than that?

Gill Simpson 16:26

I'll jump in first. I think again there's that point about actually people seeing people and speaking to people. As we live in a world where we're becoming much more I think disconnected in real life sense and we're doing things online and we're on our social media, and there's something about stepping outside your front door and being with other people, that is what creates a sense of connection and belonging, and people want to belong. And I think this is absolutely an issue that is becoming a really negative issue for all ages, you know, the isolation, loneliness, those kinds of things, and those things are definitely getting worse. And I do think there's an element of people, not necessarily just getting out of their houses, people are doing lots of things online, so I think anything we can do to encourage people to come together. Helensburgh is a funny place in that regard because we're sort of connected to Glasgow, but we're part of Argyll and Bute. So, we've not got that necessarily remote, rural sense of, you know, we're far away from stuff, so we've got to stick together and we've got to work together to make things better for ourselves, to introduce something new, whatever. And so I think towns of our size find it quite tricky because there's lots and lots and lots of things that people can do here or go into Glasgow to do, or you know, the surrounding area, and that sort of fragments people a little bit.

So, I'd be interested to hear what you think about that Colin up where you are.



Colin Buchanan 17:49

Well, yeah, the CPG or those type of activities for me, for Oban, Lorn and the Isles are quite different maybe.

So, you've got Oban which is a large town and then you've got rural areas around, and then you've got the islands and each of them has their own particular sense of place and their own particular issues as well. The big thing about the CPG, certainly of late, is for people in the town to understand the people on the islands' problems and the people on the islands to actually understand, because they tend to think well, everything's hunky dory in the town because they've got the shops and all the rest of it, but it's not. There's different issues. So, it's understanding each other's issues and on a few occasions recently, we've been able to match people up, maybe on the islands with something that's happening in the town, because they weren't aware about it, so there's a huge advantage in terms of communication and joining up there.

But, it's certainly true that each person's sense of place is different because their living a different life in a different environment. It's good for them to understand it, and it's good for the partners to understand it as well, because if you think about it, the partners don't always have representatives on the islands or in the more remote places, so it's good for them to hear what's actually happening as well and be given ideas.

John McLuckie 19:04

Really fascinating discussion and I'm sure we could double the length of the podcast. Colin and Gill, thanks very much for joining me for this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. Thank you.

Colin Buchanan 19:17

Thank you. Thanks Gill, thanks John.

Gill Simpson 19:19

Yeah, nice to see you