

How to keep lifeblood of communities flowing

By **Katie Macleod**

The strength of community is one aspect of life in the Western Isles that is often praised and remarked upon.

But as the Extended Learning Manager at Community Learning and Development, Fiona MacInnes-Begg, notes, “even in the Western Isles, every community is different. They need different things, they’ve got different strengths and different areas in need of improvement.”

To meet those different needs, the Community Learning and Development Team at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar are focusing on building the strengths of communities at the grassroots level.

In line with the move in recent years – both locally and nationally – towards a policy of community empowerment, the staff at Community Learning and Development (CLD) are working to strengthen Community Capacity Building.

“Community Capacity Building is the notion of communities taking more to do with their own futures,” explains Fiona. “It’s about helping communities identify and gain the skills to make the changes they need within their communities.”

To this end, the structure of Community Learning and Development (CLD) in the Western Isles is changing in 2018; rather than have CLD Officers based out of Stornoway, each member of staff will be aligned to Council Ward areas where they will take responsibility for building the capacity of that community. “In other words, they’ll be going into their community area, developing relationships with groups and individuals, providing support and guidance, and helping them make a difference in their local community,” says Fiona.

This support will take a variety of forms, and can include anything from helping youth clubs apply for relevant funding, or helping out on the rota at the local parent and toddler group, to organising adult learning opportunities or simply getting involved in local activities. As Fiona explains, “the job of the CLD Officer is really to forge positive and productive relationships with lots of different individuals and groups within their communities.”

Community Learning and Development already

have an overview of the areas local communities have identified as needing improvement, thanks to last year’s Community Signature surveys which asked people how they felt about all aspects of community life. Results to date show that there are five common areas where people want to see more work done: employment; housing; inter-island and inter-village transport services; access to community assets, such as community schools; and better services to support the elderly.

Having used Community Signature as tool to gather up-to-date information from communities throughout the Western Isles, staff are now able to use the consultation results to create Community Learning and Development Action Plans. New Action Plans are required to be drawn up every three years, with a new plan being created this year for the 2018-2021 period. “The Community Signature Process gives us very valuable information from communities about what they need, want, and aspire to for their communities, and that can be put in an Action Plan that is current and relevant for them,” notes Fiona.

The delivery of these Action Plans will directly involve the CLD Officers in their respective Wards, where the strength of the relationship between staff members and the communities they’re based in will come to the fore. Fiona explains that a CLD Officer in a Ward would need to know who the community activists in that area are, who takes on leadership roles in the community, and even who doesn’t attend public meetings or offer their views.

“It’s not just about those who speak the loudest; we have to be thinking about those who are less represented in any community area as well,” she says, adding that this is particularly important in terms of participatory budgeting, which involves the devolved management of resources from local government to local communities.

As of now, the move to geographic-specific Community Capacity Building is a work in progress, with the majority of Wards currently covered at least part-time. “It’s about the practical stuff, but it’s also about leading by example,” says Fiona. “For communities to thrive, the people in them need to be a part of the decision-making associated with their community.”