

Community Learning and Development Progress Visit Report

South Ayrshire Council

14 November 2023

1. Context

HM Inspectors visited South Ayrshire Council to undertake a community learning and development (CLD) progress visit during October 2023. During the visit, we talked to learners and community representatives, CLD leaders, managers, staff, and volunteers, and other key stakeholders. HM Inspectors evaluated the effectiveness of local authority CLD partnerships' approach to self-evaluation and planning for improvement, and considered progress made against identified priorities in their CLD plans.

South Ayrshire encompasses the main towns of Ayr, Girvan, Maybole, Prestwick and Troon and a large rural area stretching from Dundonald in the north to Ballantrae in the south. In June 2021, the council created a new Thriving Communities service that brings together community-based services, CLD, community safety, community engagement and development, health and wellbeing, and employability. From January 2023, community wealth building also became part of the service.

2. Findings from the progress visit

How effective is the leadership of the local authority and their CLD partners in improving outcomes?

Areas of positive progress

The CLD Partnership and leaders have a clear vision for improvement. There is a culture of trust across partners, and they are clear about their own and each other's roles. Networking is strong and effective, benefitting from well-established relationships, including strengthened partnership working with Voluntary Action South Ayrshire. Partners are solution-focused and work together effectively to avoid duplication. As a result, resources are targeted well to meet local and South Ayrshire-wide priorities. Partners also collaborate and respond well to emerging needs. For example, supporting a large number of Ukrainian refugees to access learning and to secure employment. With the creation of Thriving Communities, the profile and recognition of CLD within the council and across local communities has increased. The structure, planning and delivery of the service around localities is helping to drive a similar approach by the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). This is beginning to simplify and rationalise the overarching CPP response to local need and the allocation of resources. The voices of young people are increasingly included at strategic level, such as in the mental health partnership. Staff at all levels are trusted to lead and their views are listened to and inform planning and practice. Recently, staff helped to develop locality and team plans. These plans are clearly linked to council, CLD and community planning priorities.

There is a clear shared vision, commitment, and ambition to improve outcomes for individuals and groups and to address inequality and social and economic disadvantage. CLD leaders and staff are resilient and confident in their approaches. Staff and volunteers are empowered to build capacity within a strong strategic framework. They have appropriate flexibility and autonomy at a local level to drive improvement. The council and partners are clearly committed to professional learning and workforce development for CLD staff and volunteers. For example, a few staff have been supported to gain CLD qualifications and a few modern apprentices have secured employment with Thriving Communities. Opportunities for career progression have been strengthened further as a result of the restructuring and bringing together of teams who work closely with communities. The council and partners are effective in securing additional external funding to increase capacity across services, including improvements to local facilities.

Areas for development

The third sector and community representatives are not yet sufficiently active participants in strategic decision-making or engaged early enough in the planning process. The recent refresh of the Communities Reference Group has the potential to increase the ability of community representatives to have a stronger and clearer voice. Going forward, it will be important to evaluate how effective this is in achieving its intended purpose. CLD partners should continue to develop community capacity building to empower communities further to do more for themselves. For example, taking ownership of land and buildings where appropriate to the benefit of local communities, and having a larger role in delivering local services.

How well does the performance of the local authority and their CLD partners demonstrate positive impact?

Areas of positive progress

Thriving Communities and partners use data effectively to show how they are improving performance and outcomes. Comparative reports clearly show increasing and improving trends across most measures. Employability data is particularly strong and shows significant sustained improvement. Strategic decisions are informed well by demographic, qualitative and quantitative data, which is complemented and informed by staff knowledge and local intelligence. There is a clear focus on improving outcomes for disadvantaged and marginalised groups including care experienced young people, young carers, those who are economically inactive and people who would benefit from support with their mental health and wellbeing. Case studies are used very well to show how services are improving the lives of individuals, communities of interest, geographic and equality groups. Learner feedback is gathered systematically, and programmes are adjusted flexibly in response.

Partners are delivering services effectively, which is helping to improve the life chances of disadvantaged individuals and groups in local communities and across identified groups. For example, English speakers of other languages learners are very well supported. Alongside the tutor, a team of committed volunteers are creating a relaxed and collaborative learning environment that is building the confidence of the learners to achieve their goals. 'Living Life to the Full' members completed a cooking on a budget course, which is helping them to manage the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. An emotive short film produced by a few young carers has helped to raise the profile of the challenges they face. As a result, there are significantly more young people self-identifying as young carers and able to access support. The Glendoune Community Association provides very effective support for local people, boosting confidence and civic pride, and engaging them in community led initiatives and adult learning. A focus on cost-of-living support, including food provision is helping to improve lives.

Participants are gaining new knowledge and skills across a range of programmes, which is helping them to meet their needs and to progress. Effective collaboration by the local employability partnership (LEP) is helping local people to secure employment. The third sector are an important and active member of the LEP. Member organisations of Voluntary Action South Ayrshire benefit from increased volunteering opportunities and work placements, which are helping people find long term work. Partners know each other's role well. As a result, they are highly effective at signposting learners to the most appropriate support no matter which service they contact. The employment of care experienced young people in modern apprenticeships, mostly with the council, is well above the national average.

Areas for development

In taking forward their intention to reduce the number of actions within the CLD plan, partners need to review and set out clear improvement targets and measures of success. These targets should take full account of partners priorities, local needs, and available resources. The council are at an early stage of developing a youth engagement and participation strategy and should continue with their intention to increase local youth engagement, to ensure it is inclusive and representative. The council and CLD partners should continue to review the demographic groups that they are focusing on. For example, developing their plans to engage more fathers and male learners and to increase the offer for older people as part of their Ageing Well work.

3. Practice worth sharing more widely

The local approach to employability is leading to sustained success for young people and adults across a range of measures. Job seekers and learners are benefitting from an effective 'no wrong door' approach. This is supported by a range of partners including Thriving Communities, psychological services, third sector organisations, Skills Development Scotland, the jobcentre and Ayrshire college. In recent years, the initial school leaver destination percentages are consistently high. Progression is clear, strong and well-evaluated. Last year, 1,175 adults and young people benefitted from the person-centred approach. Job seekers value the 52 week after-care offered to them after they find work. This is building their confidence, helping them to sustain employment, and to seek additional help if they need it. A focus on supporting care experienced young people is ensuring that those at risk of dropping out of college are engaged with at the earliest opportunity.

4. What happens next?

The local authority and their CLD partners are making sufficient progress with their CLD plan and have the capacity to continue to improve. As a result, HM Inspectors will take no further action in relation to this progress visit. During the inspection, we identified an aspect of highly effective practice which we would like to explore further.

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14 November 2023