

A Community Action Network – West End, Morecambe Bay

Introduction

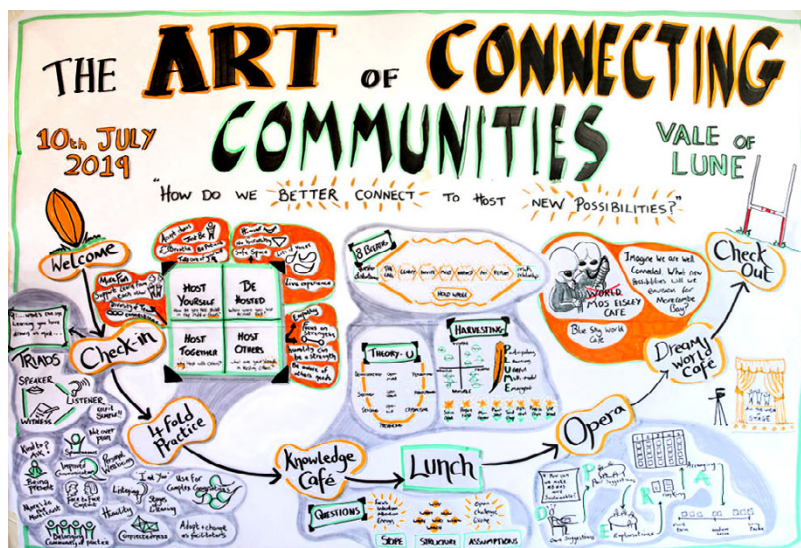
Since January 2020, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) has been supporting the Lancashire & South Cumbria Health and Care System. We have worked alongside the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) and Primary Care Networks (PCNs) as part of a Test & Learn initiative. Working at a place-based level, we looked at ways to draw on local leadership and the power and capacity of communities to improve their own health and wellbeing – in the context of the changing role of commissioning, with a more community-centred focus in the Integrated Care System (ICS).

The West End is an area of Morecambe, Lancashire, one of the poorest coastal towns in England. It has a population of approximately 5,000 and is typical of many coastal communities where tourism has declined. The local population is affected by low income (including relatively high levels of child and working age poverty), poor health, below average life expectancy, low educational attainment, poor housing and homelessness, as well as high levels of crime, including anti-social behaviour and drug use.

The West End vision has been to find ways to improve local lives through sharing resources, seeking investment, supporting each other and, most importantly, involving local people in the conversations and decisions that affect them:

‘We know that across Morecambe, we face tough health and equality challenges. What if we brought people together from all walks of local life to talk about what it means to be healthy and well in our communities? What if everyone got inspired to work together to get to grips with our challenges and create the future we would love to see?’

What has happened so far



The Art of Hosting training events

The journey started in 2017 when colleagues in Morecambe Bay came together to run a series of Art of Hosting training events attended by local residents and health sector colleagues (including colleagues at Morecambe Bay CCG and Dr Andy Knox, the Director for Population Health). You can find out more about the October 2017 event [here](#).

The Art of Hosting is an approach to leadership based on 'personal practice, dialogue, facilitation and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges.'¹ The most recent training event was held in Lancaster in 2019 and was an amalgam of some of the Art of Hosting practices with Morecambe Bay's own developing practices. The event was called, 'The Art of Connecting Communities'. Local people and organisations explored the theory and practices underpinning the question, 'Why bother connecting?'

Whether they worked or trained in the fields of community development, youth and community work, social work, health, education or any other profession that focuses on communities, people were calling for greater leadership. They wanted leaders who could work in new and collaborative ways, show the way through chaos and take wise actions. The training offered a strategic foundation for developing powerful questions, innovative ways to create mechanisms for working together, and a set of practices that support people to step in, step up and act. During the training, colleagues met new and inspiring people with the same passion for developing new relationships and trust.

¹ Description taken from Art of Hosting website

They discovered new personal practices; ways of hosting and facilitating teams, groups and networks; and co-creating innovation for tackling the complex challenges facing communities:

'It's tough out there. All of us working with our communities know just how tough our current environment is. Yet there are some new shoots growing, new ways of being and working together and that's what we have come here to cultivate. How can we work differently, bring people with us, and get more than the results we're hoping for?'

Developing the West End group



Yak Patel



Dr Andy Maddox

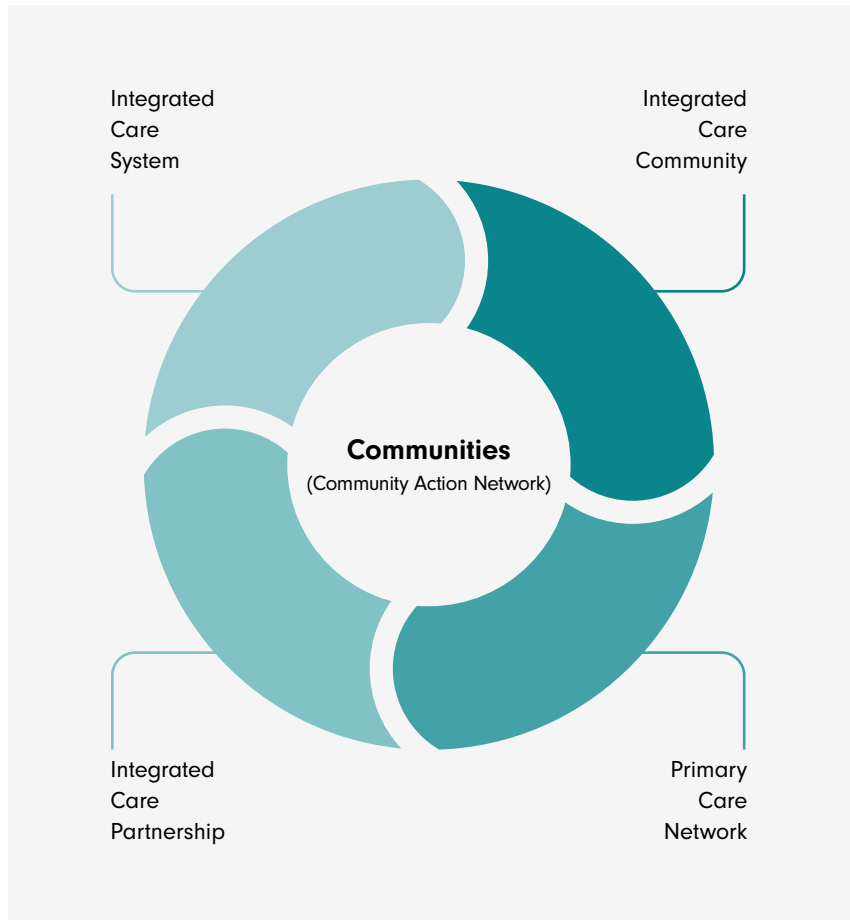
In December 2020, Lancaster District Community and Voluntary Solutions CEO, Yak Patel and Bay Medical Group GP partner, Dr Andy Maddox (also Bay Medical Primary Care Network Clinical Director) began the process of setting up a network of local community partners, a

Community Action Network (CAN). The network aims to look at how to make the best use of the assets in the local area to reduce health inequalities. In particular, the focus has been on looking at how to support health and wellbeing from the ground up and provide support for people who really need it but who are not always 'seen'.

The CAN's ambition is to make communities the starting point. This includes revisiting how local structures fit together, with grass roots communities at the centre rather than a top-down model:

'Communities can't wait for us to sort out structures, they need help now and the voluntary and community sector has this agility.'

The integration and alignment of the CAN with local health and care priorities and structures. The CAN intends to work closely with the Morecambe Bay Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) – a formal partnership of local commissioners and providers – to help fulfil its obligation to enable health and care services to work together better. The CAN provides a space where discussions about collaboration can take place and can also feed in insights from grassroots organisations of how health inequalities are being experienced by West End residents.



The CAN takes a population health approach at a place-based level. This means that the focus is on all determinants of health, not just healthcare. The driving force is about empowering people and communities to develop their capabilities and embedding health equity as part of the local population health strategy: *‘Every community is different, so action must be place-based and respond to that particular community’.*

Those involved in the CAN to date (in addition to the CVS and Bay Medical Primary Care Network (PCN)), are More Music, Stanley’s Community Centre, West End Morecambe Big Local, Well Communities, West End Impact, Homestart, Bay Medical and the Integrated Care Community.

Lessons learnt

The following are some of the things the CAN has learnt about how to get a network up and running and build momentum:

- **Understand what's wrong and build on what's strong.** Gather people and hear ideas, continue to have conversations, listen well, talk to others and build relationships.
- **Place the emphasis on communities and investing in local relationships.** Value the community experience and ability to contribute and make decisions. The pandemic has proved the CAN's worth, forging new relationships and partnerships. Knowing each other has led to a better response and this must carry on.
- **Explore what organisations have in common, as well as what makes them unique.**
- **Be clear about what each person or group needs and what the CAN offers.** For example, what's needed by and from the Primary Care Network? What's needed by and from the community?
- **Have a clear vision and meet new and inspiring people with the same ambition and vision.** In the first meeting, partners reflected on what it meant in this area to be healthy and well. The answer was resounding – local people being out of survival mode.
- **Have courage in your convictions.** It's all about doing the right thing. Keep going, ask questions and explore what is possible together (even when it's hard).
- **Identify the right structure.** It was important to striking a balance between an overstructured network for the CAN, while also maintaining a clear purpose. The emphasis has been on keeping the network non-hierarchical with a focus on building deeper and stronger relationships with health partners, building parity of esteem between all those involved and drawing on everyone's experience and expertise in driving health and care at a hyperlocal level.
- **Capacity building.** Strengthen skills and make space for learning along the way, about what is needed and about each other.
- **Be willing to evolve and adapt.** Ask, what do we all have to do or become (as organisations) to respond well to the health inequalities now more visible than before?
- **Develop a collective response.** Community organisations hear about the anxiety experienced by local residents. There is no one answer, but the response does have to be a collective one: *'It's not about a series of individual projects but about the way the partners in this network work together'*.

What next for the Community Action Network?

All partners have agreed to spend time:

- **Getting to know each other** – Who we are, what we do and what brings us together and most importantly *‘what we can do together’*.
- **Exploring the relationship between other local integrated structures** – The Integrated Care Partnership and the Integrated Care Community.
- **Developing their plans** – Both long-term aspirations and short-term goals (working closer together as the first steps in changing overall working methods).
- **Developing an ethos of partnership working** – Ensuring there is engagement from the community.
- **Moving to action** – *‘Communities need to start planning for what happens as we start to step out of the pandemic – it feels like a key moment in time’*.