

Sustaining Community Leadership

Greyfriars Charteris Centre, 3rd October 2024



CORRA
FOUNDATION
voice • power • change

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Executive Summary

On 3rd October 2024, Corra's Place programme, partners and communities supported by *Getting Alongside Communities*, met at Greyfriars Charteris Centre in Edinburgh to enjoy a day together exploring how to sustain community leadership.

The current work was placed in its context of 'Priorities, Plans and Partnerships', alongside the first iterations of the co-produced plans which to help focus Corra and the community's work until March 2026.

The group were taken through several 'Leadership Embodiment' practices meant to show how to identify what support people have in their lives, to be able to centre themselves in the moment and refocus on their desired outcomes.

Through a range of active, creative and engaging sessions, community members and partners explored the ways in which community leadership can be sustained.

Most clearly articulated was the need for systemic change, where people are working together to create positive futures. The need to root ourselves in our communities, our 'Places' and to work from a point of understanding was also key.

Community members and partners also recognised that the current piece of work ensuring Corra's programme comes to a good end had its difficulties but also opportunities. Community members in a panel discussion noted how one of the main benefits of the programme had been having a dedicated member of staff who acted both as a trusted connector between communities and agencies, but also, who showed communities that they have the skills and increased their confidence to build positive futures.



Moving on to the future, communities recognised that community leadership is not easy, and takes a balance of working alongside, and inspiring others. The most important aspects for the short – to medium term in communities are to support good quality relationships with partners and agencies (as human beings), realistic and responsive forms of funding, and the recognition of the hard work and deep understanding that lies within our community groups, and which can make a real difference to the future of communities.

Welcome – Allan Farmer (@AllanDFarmer)

Allan welcomed everyone to Greyfriars Charteris Centre, and set the scene. Corra have been working alongside communities to support collective community leadership. In recognition of that, Allan pointed out the 'community living room' set up in the hall from which we would hear community voices through the day. The themes were to be creativity, conversation and collaboration.

Context Setting - Gordon McLean (@gordonmclean)

Gordon explained that communities, alongside their Co-ordinators, had been working on the Three P's - plans, priorities & partnerships. Priorities have been translated into the first draft of a Plan-on-a-Page with each community, and these were displayed around the room.

Each plan represents ambition, determination and hard work from communities towards their vision for the future.

Gordon pointed out the eight mannequins in the room, which were for a later exercise – and promised that today there would be 'no body left behind.'

Gordon also mentioned the Community Network where peers across communities are meeting to share stories and support one another. Collective learning and relationships have been key. There is also a new and regular reference to a sense of hope which Corra and communities are keen to nurture, including through using Appreciative Inquiry as a tool to help us maintain hope.

For the future, the three key areas of work are:

- Continue development of local infrastructure, spaces, places & resources.
- Identify legacy & long-term resourcing
- Actively delivering the agreed plan with communities & partners.

Leadership Embodiment – Natalie (@TheNestCumnock) and Fraser (@Stone-fraser)

Natalie and Fraser have been training in Leadership Embodiment which is based on Japanese Aikido practices, and offered some of these to the group.

They introduced a practice to support us to identify how we embody leadership.

Participants answered the following questions:

- What kind of leader are you?
- What kind of energy do you need?
- Who's in your team?

Then we were taken through an exercise to remind us we can centre ourselves using the strength of our belief in our chosen leadership qualities, our passion, and the 'team behind us' (our posse, or clan).

Leadership Activity – Natalie and Fraser

Leading on from this was a creative activity where each group decorated a mannequin to represent 'embodied' community leadership. The creative prompts for this were:

- Who's in your team (got your back?)
- What qualities does a leader need?
- What drives the need for change?
- What kind of change is needed?

Trees and rootedness came up for lots of the groups in their feedback from the exercise.

"Hope is quite delicate like a flower, you nurture it, it grows bigger and more beautiful."

A tree is always there - it grows and gets bigger, but as a community group we can be that consistent strength for the community.' *Stacie, Langlees*

Points were made about needing all of your senses to embody leadership, listening carefully, using your voice well, seeing what was really happening, and feeling empathy for people in your community.

"We've been finding ways to work together with partners to offer support to the different groups that access our projects."

People also spoke about needing a whole systems approach to make sure that change communities wanted to make would make a difference.

Community Conversations – Hosted by Shazia and Janice (@janicecorra1) in conversation with:

Frances (Carbrain and Cumbernauld Community Hub);

Fiona (Castlehill Empowering Women Group)

Natalie (The Nest Wellbeing Group, Cumnock)

Shazia and Janice kicked off the conversation by asking the three community leaders some questions, but the format flowed as each person gave their perspective. The session took place in the 'community living-room', a pop up space designed to replicate our desire for the spaces we live in to be safe and secure. Natalie explained it was influenced by the Camerados.

As community leaders, each was asked about their passion, what they're currently passionate about and how to go about sustaining that passion. Everyone spoke about the communities that they're in, and wanting to leave them better than they found them. The panel had all had some difficult experiences but working in the community had brought them joy, a sense of bringing people with them, and also supporting others to uncover their own gifts and strengths.

"In the mannequin exercise someone said: 'Don't fit the Community round what you're doing, fit what you're doing round the community.' And too often I see organisations changing their values to fit funding. We need to be responsive not reactive." Natalie

The panel talked about sustaining passion being driven by a resilience, a knowledge that the skills needed were already in the community. Each person reflected on Corra's facilitation bringing them to a point of realisation that they were the ones doing the work. Now Corra can support them to build relationships, skills and build that resilience.

"We're already doing it though, we're already there, already community leaders. Even when Corra leave in 2026 we've got those skills we'll be developing sustainability and bringing more people on board to share our passion." *Fiona*

"Until Corra came along we'd knock on doors (of agencies and organisations) and get nowhere so Corra did that for us, but now we've built more of that resilience we can do that for ourselves." *Natalie*

The community leaders discussed how vital developing real and meaningful relationships between services, agencies and community organisations was in building trust and collaboration. They spoke of having skills to survive, being used to working on a budget, not leaving anyone behind, but how overwhelming it could be to be passed over, or ignored by people who might be able to help.

They discussed how they were already building resilience and learning not to undersell the work they do. The call to action was for services, agencies and funders to come to the communities, as human beings, leading with the heart, and listen carefully to what people are saying, without a pre-set agenda.

The conversation sparked lots of questions from other people in the room. The panel was asked about how they were dealing with Corra's planned exit, how they felt they would survive, and what the biggest developments were for them since Corra began working.

Frances, Natalie and Fiona all said that believing in communities, walking alongside and trusting them builds confidence in their own skills, resilience and belief.

The groups were more confident, some were constituted, all had grown. Some had charitable status, or their own space, but it was a sense of confidence, belief and courage that was most important. Believing that someone coming in to offer help wouldn't let you down was a perspective shift. Although Corra's exit would be hard, the communities were going forward feeling able to continue to develop and grow.

"Corra's huge support has taken us from Carbrain (a neighbourhood) to Cumbernauld (the town). We're here, but now we've got a multitude of voices. Corra's given us the confidence to see there's a place for us." *Frances*.

Andrew from Langlees offered the room a poem to celebrate National Poetry Day and what we do. It was [Spike Milligan's 'Smiling is infectious'](#) and it did indeed make the whole room smile.

Finally, the panel were asked if they would change any aspect of the programme?

"I would have preferred longer with Corra!" *Natalie*

"I wouldn't change anything because if you were to go back and change you wouldn't be who you are today." *Fiona*

“No - we've just moved forward. I think that's where the Local Authorities go wrong. Because they come in and have an agenda and their expectations of what a community should be doing and how they as a Local Authority should work instead of just listening. I've never been a tick-box person so that flexibility Corra give us is really useful.” *Frances*

The final comment from the floor was this:

“Congratulations to all the communities. What you're doing is working - keep doing it. It's life-changing stuff.”

Mannequins + Boards - Everyone

After lunch people had an opportunity to look at the various community Plans-on-a-Page. These will help to focus Corra's work until Spring 2026, and have been developed with the community, focussing on their priorities. Each of the plans, alongside the communities' achievements and stories to date, were displayed round the room.

“It's been amazing just to come and be inspired by everyone else. We've all got things to learn from each other. You can get so focussed on your own project, it's great to see other people's.” *Suzanne, Buckhaven*

“Communities often don't realise all the things they are doing but everything on these (display) boards is something the community has done, or the community has said they want.” *Angie, Co-ordinator, Langlees.*

National Context - Carolyn (@Four_story)

Carolyn Sawers provided an overview of the national context and highlighted three main challenges.

- Public Sector finances are difficult. It feels like austerity might be back.
- Community cohesion - the race riots have affected our Black Asian, and minority ethnic neighbours and friends.
- Climate change is affecting communities right now. How do we achieve a just transition?

Carolyn reassured everyone when questions come answers come too. Place is important because we need to understand the opportunities and assets in communities. Communities are still stepping up and sharing information with each other in times of crisis, including bigger ideas for what needs to change

Carolyn shared an anecdote about watching an old friend giving a speech. He referred to 'The Long Winter' we've been through, with Brexit and Covid, the cost-of-living crisis and climate change. However, he also noted 'that spring always follows winter.'

Carolyn's challenge was asking how do we encourage the spring and bring it about? And the answer, Carolyn suggested, was in the room - community leadership.

After we broke into groups for a discussion on leadership, the notetakers fed back three key takeaways from each table.

- [illegible]

Table 1:

1. We need to connect within and across communities in order to replicate or share the good work going on there.
2. Leadership can be done well or badly. We need accountability to others and to lead through trust. Leadership should also be shared - not just one person, which can create a vacuum.
3. Space gives us the ability to connect locally and wider, to identify & test ideas and to take risks.

Table 2:

1. Personal passion and need drives the leadership. Giving opportunity and support provided to community. Leadership is about seeing the qualities in others and using to best ability. Feeling of support networks around.
2. Leadership challenges: Funding can be challenging as larger funds lacking. Space is a challenge - Community centres are centre of life for community but seen as chargeable space with income generation by council (not valuing the connections). Bringing on volunteers for specific roles is challenging at the moment (right skills, right people for roles). Managing relationships with volunteers – money is important - creating jobs in communities as well as opportunities for those volunteers that can't work full-time
3. Sustaining support for communities - having lived-experience community members leading discussion and developing spaces for different groups

Table 3:

1. Lived experience is an important motivator for people to get involved, give back and support others. It's about building resilience and a belief that you can do it.
2. Identification as a community "leader" can be uncomfortable and confronting but also empowering and inspiring.
3. Leadership is recognising your own influence and getting alongside others - heart first.

Table 4:

1. Communicating together and understanding each other. It's important to have banter!
2. Sharing the load and supporting one another. Look after your own wellbeing and avoid burnout.
3. Supporting people and stepping back, enabling but not controlling. You need to be a Jenga block, helping support at times, but not the foundation.

Table 5:

1. Values drive people – alongside a passion for the places we live. Finding our voices and supporting others to find theirs gives us inspiration. Lived experience is vital but we need to properly value it.
2. We need to build spaces for communities - both physical and metaphorical where communities can come together.
3. We need to look after our own energy and passion and find ways to bring in fresh people and the next generation.

Reflections & What's next? – Allan Farmer (@AllanDFarmer)

Allan wrapped up the afternoon by noting how throughout the day there had been references to leading with our heart. Allan reflected that his heart was full of everyone's contribution which had been honest, engaged and inspiring – and had filled his head with ideas.

A key thing that is coming out of the work and communities' reflections on it is that services, support & funders need to fit around communities. Groups need to decide on their own form rather than being driven by the needs of services which are supposed to be there to provide support.

There had also been several mentions through the day of helping people to find their own voice & skills. It was great to hear this, being such an integral part of Corra's work. It's fabulous to hear communities doing all of that.

Another key image that had woven through the day was that of a tree, and a sense of being rooted in your place. This is a powerful metaphor to help remind us to centre ourselves as we move through this work. We're all driven by passion and a belief in our communities, but it's not always easy. Sometimes we need to take a moment to remember to root ourselves.

What next:

- Plans on a Page - these are at an advanced designed draft – now there will be conversations with communities about the future and how to sustain that.
- The next Community Network is in November in Methil. Anyone who would like to attend from communities should chat with their local Co-ordinator, or contact Cath.
- Corra will think about what's gone on today, how we can support the future through resources & funding.

Allan thanked everyone for their time and effort in making the day so successful, from the community leaders, and community members, to our partners, the organising team and the venue staff.

Allan hoped everyone was leaving with their heart full too.

EW 04/10/24

Appendix 1: Community Conversations Transcript

Hosted by Shazia and Janice (@janicecorra1) in conversation with:

Frances (Carbrain and Cumbernauld Community Hub)

Fiona (Castlehill Women's Group)

Natalie (The Nest Wellbeing Group)

NB – this is close to, but not verbatim transcription.

Shazia and Janice kicked off the conversation by asking the three community leaders some questions, but the format flowed as each person gave their perspective. The session took place in the 'community living-room', a pop up space designed to replicate our desire for the spaces we live in to be safe and secure. Natalie explained it was influenced by the [Camerados](#).

Shazia and Janice kicked off the conversation by asking the three community leaders some questions, but the format flowed as each person gave their perspective.

What gets you up/ fuels your passion?

Fiona: "Being a woman, and supporting my community through the women's group."

Frances: "I don't want anyone else to feel how I felt before I started my work in the community."

Natalie: "My people - the community drives me, the people themselves."

What are you passionate about currently and why?

Natalie: "I've loads of passions, but my passion is the heart of the community. Anything I can bring to the community to make it better. You need to bring your whole self. In the mannequin exercise someone said 'Don't fit the Community round what you're doing, fit what you're doing round the community.' And too often I see organisations changing their values to fit funding. We need to be responsive not reactive."

Frances: "Way back before Corra started, but then I realised what I was looking for was in here (gestures to heart). And getting people around me to believe in that. I knew I was looking for other women who the NHS wasn't helping – there had to be something else, so we gathered together and we started something."

Two of our community leaders, Nat and Frances, first met a long time ago in 2011, and volunteered together on a train station project. They went their separate ways and lost touch. Over the years they created two projects very similar to each other in different communities in Scotland. Neither realised that they'd followed parallel paths until Corra began work in their communities and they were reunited at Corra events.

Fiona: “Janice asked if I was interested in a Women’s Group, and I was, and now two and a half years later I’m still here running the group! Now we’ve started a Health and Wellbeing project, for people overwhelmed after (the pandemic) and it just keeps going from there.”

You’ve talked a lot about your passion and drive – what would sustain that for you?

Natalie: “Corra can help us build resilience, let us know we can do it on our own. Helping us to find the other people who can help. Because we know it’s all there – it’s all there. People like us who thought that no one cared about them, no one believed in them. But they’re on their own journey, and finding them and letting them see what they can do, what they’re capable of. That’s where the magic is.”

Frances: “Although I’ve found my voice, and my passion and people have some on board with that - it’s not about any ‘one’ of us, it’s about what the community needs. The good thing about what we’ve built is that people can find their own passion, their own voice – like with so many of the projects in the room today. Even if in years ahead the Hub’s not there, people will have found their place to be and that’s so powerful for a community in an area of deprivation.”

Fiona: “What will keep us going is keeping volunteers - Ensuring we know we’re already doing it, having faith in ourselves that we are doing it. We’re already doing it though, we’re already there, already community leaders. Even when Corra leave in 2026 we’ve got those skills we’ll be developing sustainability and bringing more people on board to share our passion.”

What’s striking is time & effort you’ve given your communities. Communities deserve not only to own things but benefit. What else do you need? (Georgia, Scottish Business in the Community Question from the floor)

Natalie: “There’s a strong desire for a sense of ownership the community. Not to have things done ‘to’ them. Meet us where we’re at. Create open invitations to us. Take badges off and be alongside us. Strengthen relationships and bonds, come and see us, and really hear us. Until Corra came along we’d knock on doors and get nowhere so Corra did that for us, but now we’ve built more of that resilience we can do that for ourselves.”

Frances: “Take the time to come and meet us (as services). Introduce yourself, introduce the people you’re trying to refer directly to us. We do so much more than just food parcels. Find out about us and we’ll reach out directly to support the community.”

Fiona: “Communities often do much more than you can see from the outside. We’re used to doing the things we want to on a budget. We’ve managed to get a lot of funding – and we’ve been developing new projects for the community.”

Janice (who works with Fiona in Castlehill): “Sometimes we undervalue smaller community groups, and their worth as a small group isn’t being recognised. Fiona’s group isn’t constituted but it just keeps going. I think sometimes we don’t see, because she hasn’t got a desk, how much worth there is in people just getting out there and doing it. Blow your own trumpet!”

What will happen to you when Corra pull out and support other new things? Can you survive? (Question from the floor)

Natalie: “Corra have helped us build strength and resilience, but we undersell ourselves. At the end of the day, we wouldn’t have gotten here unless we had something within us that had brought us here. Corra gave us the gift of understanding our value, so yes, we’ll be ok. As Corra exit we’re going to learn ourselves, but also teach other people. I’m going to help build resilience in the community around us.”

Since Corra started working with you, what's had the biggest development you've seen in the community? (Question from the floor)

Frances: “Confidence. We didn't even know what a constitution was. Never mind becoming a charity with our own name. We needed to constitute to get money, and that’s fine, but it would have been such a challenge! Six years ago, I would never have gotten up on this stage – my confidence grew, but so did the organisation. Corra’s huge support has taken us from Carbrain (a neighbourhood) to Cumbernauld (the town). We’re here, but now we’ve got a multitude of voices. Corra’s given us the confidence to see there’s a place for us.”

Natalie: “Corra's given us courage. But also a sense of safety, of coming home. You think everyone in a community feels safe at home, but they don’t. And we were listening to our community and they wanted a building, a place to call home. And other organisations ‘supported’ us but that support was helicoptered in and out. And I realise there’s an exit plan with Corra but that’s been dealt with sensitively and compassionately. It’s also built a sense of trust – that not every organisation or person that comes in to help you is going to let you down.”

Community groups and orgs can become quite protective and don't work together. But the approach from (Corra & Carbrain Hub) welcomed us in, supported us. Honesty, sharing, and gave us knowledge. (Comment from the floor – Steven, Carbrain Community Events group)

What attracted you to community work (when you could have done other things)?

Natalie: “There was a significant trauma in my life that left me unable to function really. And so for me, it’s making sure no-one’s ever left behind. Making sure no-one's forgotten or overlooked. Although Covid kept people apart it was also a beautiful opportunity to find the people who needed support, who needed community. It’s about the people in our community always knowing that there’s a place to be, a place to go where they’re safe.”

Frances: “For me it’s similar, because I had a breakdown and when I gave up work I realised that ‘this place is a mess, what can I do about it?’ What can I do for the community? But then I realised the community has given me so much love and confidence. “

Fiona: “After doing a boring job I started to go back into academic learning. A tutor believed in me and encouraged me to do an HNC. So I did an HNC in community work, and then wondered how I was going to get a job in that. Then I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. But then, the Council decided to scrap our bus service. We fought to get it back and WON. And we just kept going from there.”

What challenges did you face and how did you address them?

Natalie: “Red tape, politics & bureaucracy, a sense of preciousness and ego. Other organisations who just don’t get it - sometimes what people need is love and compassion. We’re not doing it to make other services feel bad or look bad. But we need compassion too. I think sometimes you

need to step back and lead by example rather than always trying to prove yourself to people who are convinced you're wrong."

Peer support is really important. Biggest thing we do is offer support peer-to-peer. We act as a 'no wrong door' organisation. That's the thing that's missing. I love it when you can sit down, have a chat and make someone's life simpler. (comment from the floor)

Andrew from Langlees offered the room a poem to celebrate National Poetry Day and what we do. It was [Spike Milligan's 'Smiling is infectious'](#) and it did indeed make the whole room smile.

Would you change any aspect of the programme? (question from the floor)

Natalie: "I would have preferred longer with Corra!"

Fiona: "I wouldn't change anything because if you were to go back and change you wouldn't be who you are today."

Frances: "No - we've just moved forward. I think that's where the Local Authorities go wrong. Because they come in and have an agenda and their expectations of what a community should be doing and how they as a Local Authority should work instead of just listening. I've never been a tick-box person so that flexibility Corra give us is really useful."

"Congratulations to all the communities. What you're doing is working - keep doing it. It's life-changing stuff." *(Comment to the community leaders from the floor.)*

About Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation exists to make a difference to the lives of people and communities. It works with others to encourage positive change, opportunity, fairness and growth of aspirations which improve quality of life. Corra wants to see a society in which people create positive change and enjoy fulfilling lives.

In 2020 Corra launched a ten-year strategy. It is long term because making a difference on the big challenges will take time. At its heart is the strong belief that when people find their voice, they unlock the power to make change happen.

Our ways of working

At Corra we have a set of principles that we strive to put into practice across our roles as an employer, independent funder, charity and partner, as well as in our influencing activity.

We will:

- Listen and respond to people, communities and organisations and amplify voices that are less well heard – their wisdom is at the heart of Corra's approach.
- Build relationships, always working alongside others on the basis of shared power, mutual trust and shared learning.
- Pursue diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), trying to challenge structural discrimination and contribute to radical shifts in the funding sector.
- Be an open, trusting and flexible grant maker.
- Ensure we contribute to tackling climate change, through our investments, operations and grant making and encouraging others to take action alongside us.
- Be bold, taking considered risks and supporting others to do the same.

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