



Ryelands Community Action Network

Review Report

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1 Introduction

The review

This report presents findings from an independent review of Ryelands Community Action Network (CAN) conducted by consultant Alan Chapman.

The review was commissioned by Lancaster District Community and Voluntary Services (LDCVS) as an opportunity to take stock of development work over a seven-year period in establishing and supporting the Network. This includes considering:

- achievements against initial goals including short and long-term outcomes
- learning, including successes and challenges
- how the community has responded and its perceptions about issues and solutions
- what's next, short and long term.

The review has been informed by the consultant's one-to-one interviews with members of Ryelands Residents Association (RRA) and representatives from a number of partner agencies active in the area. The latter include LDCVS, Lancaster City Council, Lancaster Medical Practice, Ryelands Primary School, Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) and St Chads Church.

Each person interviewed has an involvement in the Network; for some it is longstanding and for others more recent (see Appendix, page 16 for a list of interviewees). Interviewees were asked for their views on the Network, its role and the future. All were open and constructive in their feedback.

Overview of assessment

Ryelands CAN has developed into a positive and productive mechanism for residents and organisations to work together to improve the local area. This has been the result of much work over the years by committed, active residents and organisations. There is more to be done in the short and long-term for progress to be consolidated and built on. However there is a strong foundation for further work in developing local processes where the community's voice is central, with an approach that could usefully be used in other neighbourhoods.

2 LDCVS and Community Action Networks

The model

LDCVS began developing its Community Action Network (CAN) model in 2017, with an emphasis on putting people at the heart of change in their local community. This includes those whose voices may not usually be heard and who live with inequality and social injustice. It recognises the importance of social determinants of health and the need to embed health equity in steps towards change, including service provider strategies.

In order to work, the model requires “buy in” both from residents and organisations active in the local area. and a willingness to work together and do things differently. LDCVS points out on its website that for CANs to work, they need to move beyond just having “nice” conversations, to a focus on what needs to be done to get to where a community wants to be.

This means bringing together residents from the local communities with those that provide services or represent the area, including people from schools, faith groups, voluntary and community organisations, Council officers and members, GP practice and NHS staff, neighbourhood policing teams, local businesses and others.

LDCVS sees the development of CANs as requiring time and - in practical terms - regular meetings between partners to enable trust to develop, with:

- an initial stage that examines how to make the best use of local assets with a focus on providing support for people who really need it but who are not always “seen” (with the goals of empowering residents and communities and developing their capabilities)
- a process that aligns priorities and structures to enable people and partners to work together better.

CANs are intended to be a driver for change. This will begin to be seen in the production of neighbourhood plans, improved green spaces and better services including after-school programmes, work with young people, food clubs, digital inclusion, help with literacy and numeracy and support for older people.

Why Community Action Networks matter to LDCVS

The commitment to CANs reflects LDCVS's wider strategic aim, *"To connect together communities, the VCFSE sector and support agencies."* It also states that:

"As a district, we can only be successful in tackling entrenched problems, such as poverty, if we understand, and are able to work together to address, underlying inequalities we will continue to create and contribute to forums for the exploration and discussion of the complex challenges we face, ensuring that all voices - not just the loudest - can be heard.....and expand our involvement with Community Action Networks and with new developments in population health."

LDCVS Strategic Plan 2022-25.

LDCVS's prioritising of this approach has been highlighted as it is key to understanding the level of involvement and investment it has brought to Ryelands CAN, alongside the commitment and work of local people and other agencies.

3 Ryelands CAN

About the area

Ryelands Estate is north of Lancaster's city centre, on the opposite bank of the River Lune. It includes over 350 council tenancies with an average length of ten years. Construction of the estate began in the 1930s. The estate and surrounding Ryeland's area are located within Skerton West ward.

This is one of six "Focused wards" in Lancaster District, so defined by the NHS for their high deprivation rates (within the 20% most deprived in the UK) including low income, child poverty, high unemployment and a range of poor health outcomes for children and adults (including long-term conditions such as asthma, depression, hypertension and hypothyroid). NHS initiatives such as Population Health include the targeting of these areas.

Ryelands as a location has over the years faced, and continues to face, exceptional challenges. These include having the worst health outcomes in the District, as referred to above. Some services and facilities such as refuse collection and public spaces are relatively poor

with a lack or absence of provision such as youth clubs or a community centre.

The estate has had a poor reputation in the District for some time including for anti-social behaviour and crime. As will be outlined shortly, there was feedback by residents, and some concurrence from organisational representatives, that this view of Ryelands has persisted in spite of recent improvements. There was also comment that this may have influenced those responsible for facilities such as rubbish bins and skips in assuming there was little point in providing or maintaining them as they would quickly be damaged.

The development of Ryelands CAN

LDCVS's work on developing a CAN involved an exploratory meeting in 2017 with a range of organisations and people about a network for North Lancaster. These discussions led, the following year, to the emergence of a CAN focussed on the much smaller geographical area of Ryelands Estate.

The table below sets out work carried out so far in developing the CAN over seven years. This includes building relationships, developing partnership projects, and securing funding for local action.

The remainder of the report looks at developments over the period, drawing from the feedback of residents and organisations involved in the Network.

Ryelands CAN: Actions 2017-24

Date	Action
2017	Inaugural meeting of North Lancaster CAN for interested partners.
2018	Ryelands CAN works together to develop the first Community Plan for the estate.
2019	CAN participants and the Ryelands Residents Association (RRA) spend the year talking and listening to the community, building relationships and trust, and carrying out design work using Art of Connecting Communities tools.
2020	RRA and the CAN take the lead in supporting the neighbourhood through the pandemic by organising food parcels and digital inclusion support.
2021	RRA first successful funding bid, receiving a This Girl Can grant from Sport England for women-only keep fit classes. A range of adult learning courses, including digital skills, begin in the community.
2022	Community gardening and clean-up projects, one of the priorities identified by estate residents, are well attended and enthusiastically supported. Ryelands Community Plan updated with actions focusing on housing repairs, the physical environment, anti-social behaviour, health and wellbeing, and financial wellbeing.
Winter 2022/23	Locally administered grants from the Westminster Foundation support young people and families at risk of food insecurity
2023	After school activities for children and young people start to be delivered.
2023 - 24	RRA begin a campaign to secure a community centre for the estate alongside a masterplan for the improvement of play areas and the multi-use games area. Further funding from the Westminster Foundation provided another winter of food support to the neighbourhood's families, children and young people.
2024	Play schemes and positive activities for children and young people begin, providing access to a range of social, sports and recreation activities. Ryelands Estate Community Space Ambition's five-stage plan for public space produced followed by a multi-agency task group being formed to take it forward. Consultation event at St Chads Church re the plan Let's Talk About Power Workshop for community groups including RRA organised by LDCVS and University of Lancaster.
Adapted from information provided by LDCVS	

4 Community perceptions

RRA and its development

Interview feedback from members of RRA referred to the Association being formed in 2018 on a relatively small scale i.e. compared to the present day. Whilst RRA's activities were reduced during the pandemic, it did help with food distribution for those in need and digital inclusion support for the isolated.

In 2022, RRA re-emerged with new leadership and a membership that continues to grow. Activities and achievements carried out by RRA from 2022 onwards included organising litter picks with the active involvement of local people including children, a direct and practical action to improve their environment. The chair of the group said the lack of clean public spaces and activities for children was a major driver for this initial work. She described a continued lack of provision in the area with pressing issues being faced such as poor mental health in children and young people.

RRA has gone on to develop events and activities for children, young people and the wider community, building links and trust with local people. It played an important role in work on community plan for the area with Lancaster City Council and LDCVS in 2022 and is working with partners currently on a five-stage plan for the area (see page Recent Progress, pages 9-10, for more on this). It has a well-used social media presence for ongoing communication and has invested time building links with local people.

RRA is quick, in describing its progress as a group, to acknowledge the support it has had from a number of organisations. It particularly highlights the help provided by LDCVS over many years - which continues - as having been vital in supporting its development. It also has good, longstanding working links with other agencies, described in the sub-section that follows.

RRA and Ryelands CAN

As is apparent from the above table's chronology of developments, the interconnection between the work of RRA and CAN is strong. Put simply, without RRA's association of active and committed local people with a strong voice there would not be a CAN.

It became clear early into the interviews that the term CAN was not one used routinely by all RRA interviewees or that residents saw themselves as working to a model. However, the residents were unambiguous and positive about the need for their group and its development with immediate and longer-term aims and aspirations that aligned with those of CAN's. This includes the need for immediate changes and improvement in public space and amenities and, longer-term, more fundamental improvements in services, with the community having an ongoing say in how their area is developed.

Comments on the area

RRA's representatives fed back a journey of steps forward and back in their efforts to see improvements on the estate. Interviewees describe the frustration of not being able to have basics such as a road sweeper active on the estate or to secure sufficient rubbish bins or skips.

As one interviewee said, "we are doing our bit now with things like litter picks, why can't other do theirs with more rubbish bins and a road sweeper?" There was a sense in comments that people in the area were still not seen as deserving of such basic amenities and that other parts of the District had fared better than Ryelands. This ranged from maintenance of park/ play areas and public space to facilities such as a community centre. Some of the interviewees from organisations also saw Ryelands as having been left behind compared to other parts of the District.

At the same time, residents spoke with pride about their area, the resilience of the community and the progress they had made as a group. For example, the lighting of fires and vandalising of houses were no longer common occurrences on the estate. There was confidence for the future and hope that real change could take place. This was tempered by recognition that the community required commitments such as improvement in public spaces, promised for some time, to be honoured.

Recent progress

Residents cited Lancaster and South Cumbria ICB officer involvement as having helped to reinvigorate plans in 2024 for improving park and public space, with a five-stage plan, "Ryelands Community Space Moving to Action." This has included the establishment, with LDCVS, of a multi- agency task group to support the implementation of the

plan, with Lancaster City Council leading for parts of its of delivery. Additional organisations have also recently joined the group. This development had followed a visit to Ryelands in 2024 by NHS's England Director of NHS Transformation.

Feedback from residents also highlighted the importance of a Lancaster Medical Practice (LMP)'s Practice Nurse whose community-based health outreach had made valuable links with local people who might otherwise not access health provision e.g. blood pressure checks.

RRA members also described a positive working relationship with Lancaster City Council's Community Engagement Officer who has been active and supportive for some time. This has included helping with practicalities such as litter pickers for community clean ups and linking back to the City Council on issues affecting the area.

Good working links were also referred to with:

- St Chad's Church's acting vicar (with the church used for meetings)
- the Head Teacher and Early Help Mentor from Ryelands Primary School, a key local organisation which has recently got involved with the Network.

Community Leadership and aspirations

RRA's chair, whose contribution is well respected by representatives from partner agencies, is playing a key role in the new multi-agency task group and has presented at the District's Health and Wellbeing Partnership on work in Ryelands. The chair's leadership role in RRA and work in the community has also been recognised in the District with the Roger Sherlock Community Inspiration Award.

The commitment and passion of residents through RRA is impressive and inspiring. RRA's immediate priorities are to see the delivery of improvement to park/play and public spaces alongside basic provision such as road sweeping. Longer term it is ambitious for the area to have more services and facilities for local people that will help transform their opportunities and quality of life.

Central to its aspirations for the future is the development of RRA as an organisation. The group is keen to strengthen its structure by

becoming a charity and continuing to grow its membership of local people. RRA also is seeking the establishment of a community centre over the next couple of years – a development that is included in the five-stage plan. This will enable activities and support for local people to be delivered from a hub which is led by the community.

5 The contribution of agencies

Buy-in

As has been outlined, Ryelands CAN involves a range of agencies, some of which have been engaged over a long period and others more recently. All organisational representatives interviewed gave positive feedback about their involvement on their organisations' behalf and commitment to further work.

They each expressed commitment to their organisation's work in Ryelands with a shared sense that there had been improvement in the area but that more change was needed to improve local people's quality of life.

Challenge

Feedback included openness about some of the challenges faced by the area and, in some cases, about their own organisation still needing to do more. One interviewee acknowledged that slow progress in some elements of their agency's work in Ryelands may reflect "blockages" with colleagues elsewhere in the organisation. This might also reflect the persistence of negative views about Ryelands in their organisation.

Another interviewee said that two interconnected narratives needed to be countered for further progress in the area to be made. The first was agencies thinking that action and improvements were not justified as local people would not value or maintain them. The second was residents feeling that nothing would ever change as they had been made promises before and nothing had come of them. The same person was positive that this could be achieved by building on the good work to date.

Opportunity

There was also feedback that there were important developments already underway that could be built on. This reflected, to some extent, a growing recognition of the importance of a community-led approach to their respective organisations' work. These included initiatives such as Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB's Population Health programme, the person-centred and qualitative approach of LMP's Practice Nurse's work and Lancaster City Council's Community Engagement Strategy.

The multi-agency task group - established recently to steer improvement work on public spaces - also offers, through its link to the local Health and Wellbeing Partnership, the potential for more concerted and joined-up action on the part of agencies.

The goodwill expressed about and commitment to further collaboration should not be taken for granted. It is the product of sustained, positive working by organisations over a number of years and involvement in community conversations, including using tools such as Art of Hosting.

6 Ryelands CAN - achievements and the future

Community involvement

Ryelands CAN has supported local people to:

- speak with a strong voice through RRA
- become used to meeting with representatives from local agencies and press for improvements in their area.

The community has become proactive in activities and projects - working with organisations - from litter picks, clean ups and community gardening to children and young people's activities, adult learning courses, grants and provision including addressing food security. These are all are examples of an active community working with local agencies.

Local people involved in RRA are committed, passionate and ambitious for their local area and engaged in their dealings with agencies.

This is a major achievement and success. It is a foundation for further progress for Ryelands CAN and example of what can be achieved for other parts of the District.

A positive, shared space

The participation of both residents and agencies has created a collaborative space for tackling pressing issues and for nurturing aspirations for the area. This is underpinned by positive relationships and trust.. There is goodwill and a commitment to further collaboration which should not be taken for granted.

It is the product of sustained, positive working by both residents and organisations over a number of years and involvement in community conversations, including using tools such as Art of Hosting.

Making the next steps count

The most pressing short-term challenge for Ryelands CAN is the implementation of plans to improve to park/play areas, public space and basic amenities - some of which have been committed to for a while. Failure to do so will undermine what has been achieved to date. The signs, after steps forward then a delay in action, are looking positive.

Further development of the Network and the community's voice

As described earlier in the report, Ryelands Can is beginning to link with a wider range of organisations through a multi-agency task group.

There is a need to ensure that the strengths of the CAN approach with its community-led ethos are not weakened as numbers involved in Network grow and its role develops in support of action and change. The commitment and awareness of residents and organisational partners that have supported the journey so far should ensure that this is an issue that will be managed well as the Network moves forward.

The future - longer-term

The initial vision of LDCVS for CANs was as a mechanism that will help transform local communities. Eight years on, this aligns with the commitment of some of the organisations currently involved in Ryelnads CAN to a community-led approach for improvements to people's health and wellbeing.

The extent to which fundamental change and improvement to services and outcomes in neighbourhoods is achieved will depend on how organisations commit to further work in the Network.

There is a connected question about how best to harness the work of a growing number of different agencies at neighbourhood level in a co-ordinated, joined up programme for improvement that retains a strong community focus and voice. This could include producing a more comprehensive local plan involving more organisations setting out their commitments to the area and/or central plans that include local targets – or a combination of both approaches.

Further progress and action, both short and long-term, will require the support of whole organisations to avoid “blockages” in action, as important as the work of locally active staff is. It will also, as emphasised in the previous sub-section, require the voice of the community to remain central to further development of the Network and plans for the area.

Resources

This work comes at a financial cost which should not be underestimated both for further development work in Ryelands and potentially adopting the CAN approach elsewhere in the District

This has required considerable time and resources from LDCVS in its role as an infrastructure and development organisation. This has often been provided “under the radar.” LDCVS’s CEO, a Ryelands resident, has invested considerable time to this work both paid and unpaid. Other agencies have also dedicated resources in support of a positive environment for change and improvement – in addition to providing key services.

The role of RRA

An earlier section (Community Perceptions, page 8) highlighted that without the development, commitment and contribution of RRA there would not, in any meaningful sense, be a CAN in Ryelands. The current momentum in the work of RRA is driven by residents’ passion for both short and long-term improvement in the area.

It follows that RRA's continued development is essential for further progress and sustainable, positive change in the area. This will require further support and resources being available.

Final word

The message from this review is positive. It was inspiring to meet committed, active residents that want the best for their community and representatives from organisations that were working hard to improve the area. Whilst there is more to be done through Ryelands CAN in the short and longer-term, there is a strong foundation for further work.

The progress made, particularly in supporting the community's involvement has been significant. There is an opportunity to use the CAN approach more widely to build wider a framework for community-led improvement and change and improvement in local areas. Other neighbourhoods will have their own starting points, from local assets to community aspirations, which will shape the development of a network.

Appendix - Interviewees

- Jenny Armer, Chair of the Ryelands Residents Association
- Gabi Donaghey, Secretary, Ryelands Residents Association
- Rebecca, Ryelands Residents Association
- Ashley, Ryelands Residents Association
- Rachel Harland, Community Engagement Officer, Lancaster City Council
- Claire Williams, Early Help Mentor, Lancashire County Council (working from Ryelands Primary School)
- Linda Pye, Headteacher, Ryelands Primary School
- Claire Neibieski, Population Health Manager (North Lancashire), Lancashire & South Cumbria Integrated Care Board
- Sarah Baines, Integrated Care Community Development Lead (Lancaster), Lancashire & South Cumbria Integrated Care Board
- Lizzie Holmes, Practice Nurse, Lancaster Medical Practice
- Yak Patel, Chief Officer, Lancaster District CVS