



Communities Working Together - Annual Report 2025/26

**Building the relationships and shared capacity
needed for lasting change in Argyll and Bute.**



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Well**

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Executive Summary

Communities Working Together is a multi-agency programme working to build healthier, more connected communities across Argyll and Bute. Year two has delivered walking infrastructure, embedded self-sustaining participatory leadership approaches, and undertaken a deep dive into research frameworks and progressive methods for systems change. The year ahead will focus on completing practical outputs to create a sustainable legacy and conduct an evaluation to inform how this work continues and is governed beyond April 2027.

Introduction

Communities Working Together has emerged as a multi-agency, collaborative effort bringing together communities, community organisations, the Third Sector Interface, NHS/HSCP, Macmillan, and LiveArgyll across Argyll and Bute. Established in 2022, the programme aims to harness the collective energy of local people in building stronger, more vibrant communities where everyone can live well.

This work is based on a preventative approach to health, prioritising community-led action, accessible services, and stronger partnerships. The programme has evolved organically through partnership conversations and emergent needs, rather than being driven by a rigid pre-determined plan. This flexible, responsive way of working ensures that while we support local priorities, we maintain a strategic focus on fostering regional cohesion and driving collective action.

What we aim to do

- Create meaningful partnerships between communities and organisations
- Deliver collaborative working that reflects local strengths and priorities
- Build shared aspirations for health, wellbeing and sustainability
- Put communities at the heart of decision-making and service design
- Support community-led responses to local needs and challenges
- Ensure long-term sustainability of services through local innovation and ownership

This report covers year two (April 2025 - March 2026) and sets out plans for the final year (April 2026 - March 2027). With the Wellbeing Development Manager post funded until April 2027, the final year will focus on completing tangible deliverables, rigorously documenting learning, and providing the Living Well Board with evidence-based recommendations for the future.

This work is supported by funding from NHS Charities Together and Macmillan Cancer Support, whose investment has enabled the development of collaborative leadership and community-led approaches across Argyll and Bute.

The Context We're Working In

This year has been marked by significant financial pressure across health, social care, and third sector organisations. Proposed reductions to preventative community services have raised concerns that cutting prevention may increase costs elsewhere through more crisis presentations, delayed discharges, and expensive care packages.

This matters because Communities Working Together exists to address the problems these pressures might worsen: fragmented services, duplication, and insufficient prevention investment. There is a fundamental tension at the heart of this work. Prevention-focused collaborative approaches need sustained investment and relationship-building to succeed, yet partner organisations are managing significant resource constraints that limit their capacity to engage in exploratory work. When systems are under this kind of pressure, they often become more rigid rather than flexible, defaulting to familiar patterns rather than trying new approaches.

Understanding this context is essential to interpreting both the achievements and the challenges described in this report.

Learning from Theory and Practice

Year two has included significant focus on bringing academic frameworks and research to Argyll and Bute through the Winter Seminar Series. When you are deeply embedded in day-to-day work, it can be difficult to step back and understand the bigger patterns at play. These frameworks have acted as maps, helping us see the terrain we are working in more clearly. The speakers have served as guides, pointing out where others have travelled similar paths and what they encountered along the way.

This bird's-eye view has been valuable. It has helped the partnership understand that many of the difficulties we face are not unique to Argyll and Bute, nor are they failures of implementation. They are predictable consequences of trying to do systems-based, prevention-focused work within infrastructures designed for different purposes. This section explains the key frameworks that have shaped our understanding.

A consistent pattern emerged across the seminars: the gap between understanding ideas in theory and implementing them in practice. Gadsby and Wilding's (2024) work on 'the broader path' in public health helps explain why this gap exists. They distinguish between two approaches:

A narrow path—reducing disease risks through professional expertise, targeting individual behaviours

A broader path—reducing health inequalities by addressing social and structural conditions

Communities Working Together attempts to follow the broader path whilst working within systems largely set up for the narrow path. This mismatch between aspiration and infrastructure creates real constraints on what is achievable within current conditions.

Key insights from the Winter Seminar Series:

- Dr Frank Reilly: Co-production is fundamentally about relationships, not procedures. When organisations are stretched thin, maintaining relationships is often the first thing to be dropped.
- Prof. Katharine McGowan: Real systems change requires working at the level of structures and mental models, not just responding to visible events.
- Andrew Laird: Conventional responses to financial pressure—such as cuts, raised thresholds, and activity targets—often compound problems rather than resolve them.

These frameworks have helped the partnership make sense of its own experience. They explain why collaborative working has been harder than anticipated, and why even when people agree with the principles, translating this into sustained action has been challenging. Recognising that the theory-practice gap reflects structural conditions rather than implementation failures has helped partners understand that the difficulties are not unique to Argyll and Bute, nor are they signs of doing something wrong.

What We Have Delivered: Year Two

With these theoretical frameworks providing perspective, it becomes possible to see the year's achievements in context. The outputs described below represent tangible progress in specific workstreams. Some have developed further than anticipated, whilst others have faced the structural constraints described earlier. Each section shows what has been built, what foundations have been laid, and where momentum has been sustained despite difficult conditions.

The Walking Development work is particularly significant as a pilot for building regional cohesion across Argyll and Bute's diverse and dispersed geography. The approach of asset mapping, establishing networks, and supporting local initiatives could provide a model for developing other services across our challenging geographical setting.

Walking Development

- Walking Development Officer recruited and in post
- Comprehensive asset mapping completed, documenting walking initiatives across Argyll and Bute
- Partnership developing with We Are With You for walking prescriptions in Campbeltown and Lochgilphead
- GP practices being badged as walking practices to embed physical activity in primary care
- Social marketing toolkit developed for walking groups
- TSI membership with Walking Scotland secured (£5,000 seed funding plus eligibility for future grants)
- Funding application submitted to Lochgilphead wind turbine community fund to cover one-third of annual salary for the pilot Link Worker walking prescriptions project
- Plans developed to apply for similar funding from Campbeltown community fund for the second pilot location

Winter Seminar Series

- Five seminars delivered (autumn 2025 - early 2026) with strong attendance
- International and national speakers: Dr Frank Reilly (co-production), Prof. Katharine McGowan (systems thinking), Erica Gadsby and Helen Wilding (broader path in public health), Andrew Laird and Sophie Coles (radical place leadership), Neil McInroy (community wealth building)
- Established shared frameworks and common language across multiple areas including systems thinking, co-production, and place-based approaches
- All sessions recorded and available online
- Positive feedback on content quality and relevance

Participatory Leadership and Art of Hosting

- Art of Hosting training delivered, extending capacity to document learning and evaluate participatory processes
- Resources developed and now readily available, making the learning accessible beyond workshop participants
- Community of Practice now self-organising—people arrange sessions, share resources, and provide peer support independently
- £24,000 grant secured from Public Health team for collaborative leadership development
- Participatory approaches embedded beyond funded programme lifespan

Communications and Branding

- Living Well branding refreshed and in consistent use
- Communities Working Together information leaflet produced
- Web content developed for TSI website
- Communications strategy in development with Social Marketing Gateway for the whole Living Well Board

Strategic Partnerships

- Active contribution to Living Well Strategy refresh
- Active contribution to TSI Strategy development
- Contributing to Community Planning Partnership through representation and strategic input
- Delivered Communities Working Together podcast episode for CPP in early 2026
- Presented to CPP Management Committee in December 2025 TSI exploring Dumfries and Galloway strategic alliance model

Embedding Beyond the Programme: Partners Taking the Lead

One of the clearest signs that the Communities Working Together approach is taking root is seeing partners embed it independently into their own work.

In 2025/26, Argyll and Bute Council's Community Planning Team has:

- Undertaken enhanced Art of Hosting training for all its members
- Introduced Art of Hosting techniques to council employees within its Engagement Practitioners Group
- Used Art of Hosting techniques in the shaping and delivering of Community Participation and Engagement Training, available to all council employees
- Used Art of Hosting in building capacity within recovery communities, and within a Test of Change (Alcohol & Drugs Community Partners Project) in Oban, December 2024 – May 2026
- Continued to explore and use participative techniques, such as Appreciative Trios and World Café, in capacity building – for example with the MAKI Third Sector Network
- Used Art of Hosting and Harvesting techniques to involve over 50 partners in co-producing actions for the Community Planning Partnership



CASE STUDY 1: The Web of Connections

One of the clearest signs that Communities Working Together is working is not any single outcome, but the quiet web of connections and collaborations that have formed around it.

Frank Reilly, who spoke at the seminar series on co-production, now undertakes regular consultation work with the TSI and other organisations across Argyll and Bute. Andrew Laird, whose session on radical place leadership sparked significant discussion, is now working directly with the Integration Joint Board on transformation work. The Community Planning Partnership and Public Health team, brought closer together through the programme's convenings, are now collaborating on a research project on belonging. And within the Community of Practice, practitioners who first met through Art of Hosting training are now turning up for each other — supporting workshops, public engagement activities, and community events across the region, simply because they know and trust one another. None of these connections appear in a spreadsheet. They were not planned or contracted. They are the product of creating space for the right people to meet, think together, and act. This is what Communities Working Together is for.



CASE STUDY 2: Building Bridges with Clinical Practice

Embedding community-based, preventative approaches within clinical pathways — and bringing GP practices genuinely on board — has been one of the harder connections to make in years of partnership working.

In Campbeltown and Lochgilphead, that connection is starting to take shape. Local doctors are working alongside Link Workers to develop walking prescriptions as part of patient care — and their enthusiasm for the approach has been notable. It feels like evidence of something the Communities Working Together programme has been working towards: a genuinely systems-based approach, where clinical practice, community support and a focus on wellness and prevention start to work together rather than in parallel. This kind of cross-sector collaboration — where the health system looks outward towards community assets rather than inward towards clinical pathways alone — is precisely what a community approach to living well requires.



CASE STUDY 3: Climate, Community and the Value of Connection

Andy Macpherson, ACT/CPP Climate Action Manager, works across a wide range of contexts — from Scottish Government and senior management at public bodies through to community councils, school classes, small businesses and job seekers. Engagement with the Art of Hosting Community of Practice has directly shaped how he approaches this work.

"Participating in the Art of Hosting Community of Practice has been really valuable for me — helping me think about what I'm actually trying to get out of a discussion, what might be valuable for the other people in the conversation, and how best to approach it."

His work on the CPP's Climate Change Strategy has also drawn him towards the preventative, community-based approach at the heart of Living Well. Supporting local community resilience plans raises questions not just about funding and capacity, but about how to address burnout, help groups feel connected, and ensure people can access what they need — questions Communities Working Together exists to help answer.

What Has Been Difficult and Why

Whilst tangible outputs have been delivered, collaborative working has proved harder than anticipated. There is broad agreement about the value of prevention and partnership approaches, but translating this into sustained action has been challenging. The theoretical frameworks described earlier help explain why. The core difficulties may well be structural rather than attitudinal:

- Partner organisations facing tight budgets prioritise delivering existing services over developing new collaborative approaches
- When capacity is stretched, partners disengage—not because they disagree with the principles, but because they cannot sustain involvement
- When partners work in isolation rather than collaboratively, duplication increases—meaning we risk spending more money on overlapping services at precisely the time when resources are most constrained
- Widespread fatigue across the partnership, with people describing the feeling of working against the current rather than with it
- Unclear governance and decision-making processes create uncertainty about who holds responsibility for what
- Without clear structures, well-intentioned collaboration can generate frustration rather than progress

These challenges are not failures of implementation but manifestations of the systemic constraints described earlier. They raise important questions about what is realistic to achieve in the year ahead, what conditions would need to change for more ambitious collaborative work to become viable, and—critically—where governance and ownership of this work should sit beyond April 2027.

Year Ahead Plan 26/27

The final year focuses on completing tangible deliverables, evaluating what we have learned, and ensuring that what has been built can be sustained. The plan balances practical outputs with the analytical work needed to understand what has worked, what has been difficult, and why. This will provide the Living Well Board with clear recommendations about future direction and governance.

A key question for the final year is where governance and ownership of this work should sit beyond April 2027. The evaluation will help clarify which elements should continue, in what form, and under what governance arrangements. This ties directly into the broader question of how the Living Well Partnership itself is structured and sustained.

The year ahead will also include continued engagement with the Community Planning Partnership, to strengthen connections between Communities Working Together and wider strategic planning across Argyll and Bute.

Big Picture Thinking Seminars

Output	Timeline
2026-27 series planned with speakers confirmed	June -September 2026
Series delivered (autumn 2026 - early 2027)	October 2026 - February 2027
Coordination responsibility transitioned for sustainability	December 2026 -February 2027

Walking Development

Output	Timeline
Online asset mapping resource published on TSI website	April 2026
Walking prescription pilot operational with data collection	May-August 2026
Two GP practices badged as walking practices	September 2026
Social marketing toolkit distributed	April 2026
Digital trail maps published (Lochgilhead and Campbeltown)	April & May 2026
Regional walking network established if consensus to do so	May 2026
Maternity leave cover plan finalised	April 2026
Continuation funding applications submitted	April-June 2026
Comprehensive handover documentation before maternity leave	May 2026

Participatory Leadership

Output	Timeline
£24k grant allocation and define outcomes	April-May 2026
If grants model: develop criteria and outcome measures	May-June 2026
Coordinate Delivery of Participatory Leadership project	June 2026- March 2027
Community of Practice continues (self-sustaining)	Ongoing
Develop Theory of Change for Communities Working Together in collaboration with evaluation work	September-December 2026

Communications

Output	Timeline
Communications strategy finalised	June 2026
Regular blog posts documenting progress and learning	Monthly/bi-monthly

Evaluation and Documentation

Output	Timeline
Evaluation scoped and designed, including theory of change development	September-December 2026
Data collection through collaborative interviews with key partners	October-January 2026
Analysis and interpretation	January-March 2027
Final report with recommendations for Living Well Board, including governance proposals	March 2027

This plan represents a realistic and achievable workload for a full-time Wellbeing Development Manager post alongside the part-time Walking Development Officer (who will be on maternity leave from June 2026). This assumes maternity cover is secured; if not, the plan will need to be revised to reflect reduced capacity.

The balance between completing practical outputs and conducting thorough evaluation ensures that the year ahead delivers both tangible results and the analytical work needed to inform future direction.

End of Programme Evaluation

The year ahead offers an opportunity to document and analyse what we have learnt about doing systems-based, prevention-focused collaborative work across Argyll and Bute's diverse and dispersed geography during a period of significant financial constraint. This evaluation will help the Living Well Board understand what worked, what was difficult, and—crucially—why.

Purpose:

To provide evidence-based analysis that distinguishes between what succeeded, what was difficult, and the reasons behind both outcomes. This includes identifying which challenges resulted from implementation issues that could be addressed versus structural conditions that would require systemic change.

A key element will be developing a theory of change that articulates how the programme was intended to work, what has been learned about those assumptions, and how these insights can inform future direction.

This evaluation will provide evidence about the value of preventative, systems-based approaches in Argyll and Bute's context. The findings will help inform decisions about continued investment, demonstrating what is achievable and what conditions are needed for success.

Key Outcomes:

- Clear evidence about what has worked well and what has been challenging, with explanations of why
- Evidence-based recommendations for future direction
- Theory of change that explains the programme's intended pathways and what has been learned

- Recommendations for governance and ownership of this work beyond April 2027
- Evidence to support continued investment in preventative, systems-based approaches in Argyll and Bute

Conclusion

Communities Working Together has operated during a period of unprecedented pressure on public services and third sector organisations. Tangible outputs have been delivered: walking infrastructure developed, participatory leadership approaches embedded and self-sustaining, theoretical frameworks introduced that have shifted thinking. However, the broader ambition to fundamentally change how organisations work together has met substantial structural constraints.

The final year will focus on completing outputs that provide practical value, rigorously documenting learning about the conditions that enable or constrain collaborative systems-based work, and providing the Living Well Board with evidence-based recommendations for the future. This includes addressing the critical question of where governance and ownership of this work should sit beyond April 2027 and how it connects to the broader Living Well Partnership.

This will represent a realistic and valuable conclusion to the funded programme, creating foundations that others can build on when conditions allow for more fundamental transformation. The relationships built, shared language developed, and practical infrastructure created through this work will continue supporting more connected, empowered communities across Argyll and Bute beyond April 2027.

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