From Cloud Cuckoo Land to reality in just five years

Former Chair and project adviser MEL WITHERDEN gives his personal perspective on the importance of telling ACE's story - and the impossible dream which became reality.

When I first came across ACE in early 2012, it seemed something of an oddity: a group funded under the Welsh Government's Communities First programme which less than a year earlier had formally registered a limited company to do the same job but without any funding.

ACE was just one of my many short-term assignments as a freelance consultant during the life of the programme to advise partnership groups on meeting government requirements, solving problems, and sometimes simply doing their jobs properly.

What was special about the new company, with its clever name ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely), was that it didn't just want to grab some of the generous government funding for itself, though that was part of the plan. Its ambition was to supersede, even exceed, Communities First.

Sardine-tin board room

My own aim as an adviser was to share what I'd learned, or failed to learn, earlier while running a small community business enterprise in Cwmbran, specifically about the seldom achieved goal of reaching independent, long-term financial sustainability. So ACE was interesting. The Board had already done some planning (quite a lot in fact). But typically this was mostly about "vision" and "values", not the practical stuff about building a resilient income-generating organisation that could survive the end of Communities First.

I met the trustees in the ACE "Board Room", a sardine tin of an office on the ground floor of the now demolished council Housing Office on Grand Avenue, where half of us had to stand up and shuffle round the table if someone wanted to leave the room. Its tight constraints were a telling metaphor for a group frustrated by the rigid tick-box targets of the Communities First initiative. They didn't question the programme's principles but they believed that more flexibility for their community development work and its funding could bring greater and permanent benefits to the people of Ely and Caerau.

A group with real potential

At my first planning session we mapped the conventional "where we want to be in five years time". Targets included recognition by the Welsh Government and the local authority, income generation from buildings, job creation and ongoing community

projects, and “a degree of sustainability”. The aspirations weren’t in themselves unusual. What was striking about ACE was they were thinking seriously about what could follow Communities First four or five years before it was due to end. Most partnerships, if they took any action at all, didn’t do so till the final 12 to 18 months, too late to ensure their survival.

By the end of our second planning session, though, I began to realise that I was working with a group with real potential. Despite a measly bank balance of well under £5000, they weren’t just serious about ACE achieving financial sustainability, they now had a stack of credible ideas to make it happen.
Still, anyone can have five-year plan. It doesn’t mean they’ve any hope of achieving it. I didn’t mention my private conviction that some early ACE ambitions were in cloud cuckoo land. For instance, whoever heard of a local community organisation building and running a “heritage centre” based on a forgotten iron-age hillfort?

Practical ideas, not opinions

Another rare feature of ACE which I became aware of early on was (and remains) its readiness to use advice and guidance. It’s slightly depressing to recognise that many of the younger community groups and charities which I was invited to help during a 25-year community development career either didn’t want to, or didn’t know how to, use advice. ACE Director John Hallett was different. He would listen to me, select the suggestions he thought would work, and then act on them. Unlike many other community leaders, he wanted practical ideas to realise his objective rather than possibilities and opinions.

John evidently thought I was useful to have around. He found ways over several years to fund me to work as an occasional “development advisor". I ended up working for well below my normal daily rate - a reflection on my eagerness to stick with ACE’s increasingly exciting evolution and John’s admirable financial prudence.

In five years we achieved everything

My invitation to join the Board when I retired as consultant in 2016 provided an irresistible transition from paid employment to productive and rewarding volunteering. It has been an absolute joy to work as a trustee ever since.
In 2017 I took over from Cassie Boddington when she stood down as Chair after her four-year stint. Then at the annual general meeting later that year I was able to report on ACE’s quite astonishing evolution from an agent delivering a government-funded programme to a financially independent freewheeling community development charity. In only five years we had achieved everything we’d listed as objectives at that first planning session. The pace had been breathtaking.

We had also just learned from the Heritage Lottery Fund that they were granting us £963,000 to realise the improbable dream of the Caer Heritage Centre. Dave Horton, a member of the original Communities First team and the visionary behind the CAER project, later suggested the possibility of writing a history of ACE to share the secrets of all this success with decision-makers and the wider community development world.

The latest challenge

The staff have always been far too busy delivering the services of their extraordinary organisation to be diverted into writing its history, and there was certainly no spare cash to pay someone to it. But I knew Dave's instincts were right, and I wouldn't let him forget the idea. In 2023 we took the plunge and started the planning with no money, a tiny team of volunteers, and a slither of Dave's time taken from his new role leading the ACE Way training venture.

Progress for the ACE History Group hasn't been easy or rapid. Sometimes it seemed that it was mostly the history of the ACE History Project which we were documenting. There is a huge amount of work ahead and we still don't quite know how far we'll get. But we're gradually bringing other staff members on board without imposing significantly on their time. We're on track and now we're online.

There's an important story to tell, and if the history of ACE so far has taught us anything it's that we're going to find a way somehow to meet this latest challenge.