What does “community led” actually mean? From community-led to community-owned: putting co-operative principles into practice

Chris Mundy’s discussion of Australia’s neighbourhood centres raises a question relevant to Wales: what does “community led” actually mean? Consulting residents, employing local people or appointing local board members can contribute to participation. Whether communities exercise power depends on who sets priorities, controls resources and makes final decisions.

Drawing on Lisa Attygalle’s Tamarack Institute framework, Mundy identifies four approaches. Community-informed work retains organisational control while gathering community views. Community shaped work gives communities influence over the agenda, with organisations delivering. Community-driven work shares decisions and responsibility. Community owned work places the agenda, planning, resources and implementation under community control. The framework helps distinguish different degrees of power beneath the same community led label.

From a co-operative perspective, community leadership and community ownership should reinforce each other. Leadership concerns how people shape collective action; ownership establishes enduring rights over organisations and assets. Tamarack’s use of “community owned” concerns control of an initiative. In housing, the additional questions are who owns the land and homes, who elects those governing them, and whose interests determine their future.

Cwmpas’s support for community led housing in Wales offers an opportunity to connect these dimensions. Its proposals advocate expanding affordable community led housing, improving access to development finance and promoting community ownership of assets. These ambitions provide a foundation for strengthening both participation and lasting democratic control.

Community led arrangements have value where authorities or housing associations retain ownership. Residents can shape accessible homes, identify local needs, influence services and build relationships. Public partners can contribute finance, land and expertise. However, where those partners retain final discretion, community influence can remain vulnerable to changing budgets, leadership or organisational priorities.

The co-operative ambition should therefore be community ownership wherever communities choose it and the model is viable. Democratic collective ownership gives people continuing rights to elect representatives, scrutinise decisions and determine how resources serve shared needs. Co-operative principles expressly require member control and autonomy, including when organisations receive government support or external investment.

For example, residents might help design homes owned by a housing association. A housing co-operative owning its homes could additionally give resident members continuing control over management, maintenance priorities and reinvestment. A community land trust could hold land for lasting community benefit, with governance and affordability protections embedded in its rules.

Carmen Lahiff-Jenkins’s contribution adds an essential reminder: community value includes relationships, mutual support and the trust that helps neighbourhoods withstand crises. Funding should recognise this social infrastructure alongside measurable services. Co-operative enterprise can generate income while sustaining these purposes, provided commercial activity remains accountable to members and community benefit.

Ownership must also remain democratic in practice: open membership, accessible participation, transparent finances and accountable elections matter. Communities need resources and support alongside responsibility. Wales should back community leadership while enabling a clear progression towards ownership, where desired. The ultimate ambition is lasting community power: people collectively shaping, owning and sustaining the places on which their lives depend, with public authorities acting as enabling partners and maintaining their own responsibilities to residents.