

Collaboration Workshop 26th May 2011

Introduction

On discussion of individual outcomes of the day the following objectives were highlighted:

- Better idea of collaboration opportunities
- Feeling enthused – fresh approaches
- Clarity of next steps and action
- Barriers to collaboration
- Advantages

Early Issues identified:

- People are at different stages of the process – be aware that they are not ready/sceptical etc
- When do you make things happen? Do you wait on everyone or go ahead and leave some people behind?
- Sector is very diverse – need to be aware of this and the potential to develop and recognise links
- Is there a difference between collaboration and partnership? Understanding of the spectrum/continuum of forms of collaboration.

Speaker: Koulla Yiasouma, Director of Include Youth

Include Youth work specifically with young people and are highly involved in policy advocacy. The partners in this collaboration are VOYPIC and MACS.

Characteristics of the case study:

- Each do similar work with different **specialism** (they don't compete for 'business')
- Client, ethos and values are shared
- Natural alliance between their operations – complimentary
- Good natural relationship between individuals
- Based on need within capacity (not crisis as is often the case)

Key stages / development of collaboration:

- Identified **weaknesses** as well as strengths
- Most of the weaknesses (areas of improvement) were practicalities, such as competition with national organisations that had huge admin teams to deliver support
- Needed to spend more time looking outside
- Recognition that too much was being asked from people – ie Include Youth doubled in size but admin team didn't change
- In dealing with government departments, there wasn't a clear understanding between groups – ie departments understood this was a merger process

- Need to be very clear on what the 'bottom line' is
- Partners must all benefit from the arrangements

Where are they now?

- Completed integrated vision/strategy
- Financial systems will be made compatible across the three organisations (in line with shared administrative functions)
- A good level of trust has been established – honesty is important (any doubts/issues have been discussed)
- Has only happened as people were ready and willing
- Developing Social Enterprise idea – 4th organisation will be established and commissioned by the 3 partners (VIM)

Questions:

- This has worked with 3 organisations – could it work with 7 or 8?
3 is a comfortable number, with more an independent facilitator is needed. In this case if 2 people were to disagree the third could mediate and this was a very manageable arrangement
- Would you welcome a further group to join?
Not now. They would be 3 years behind in this process. We would also need to firm corporate services etc before we could consider anyone else joining.

On Discussion of the guest presentation key Lessons/Questions/Points of Interest:

- Early engagement (purpose, scope, bottom line etc)
- Trust & relationship (also personalities)
- Outward looking (leaders)
- Proactive (before they were forced)
- Prepared to take risk? Clear assessment before any decisions were made
- 'Safe area' (admin/efficiency/share services)
- Levels within the organisation – engagement and transparency
- Time taken – long process of this case (3 years in)
- Strength of retaining organisation's independence (also helps funding)

Discussion:

What makes collaboration work?

- Trust
- Agreement
- 'Getting on with the partner(s)' – strengthens the process
- Spirit of generosity – allow people to have and express ideas that do not necessarily match what you are used to
- Recognise skills/specialisms, and weaknesses
- Needs leadership of **process** as well as organisation's interests

What can the sector do to work better?

- Better understanding of what other organisations do; develop a directory as a resource?
- Taskforces provide a good model but can we improve?
 - Is there opportunity to include government?
 - Coordinate evidence
 - Commitment and buy-in from sector
 - Some individuals are more active than others?
- Cohesive message
- Recognition that there is a lead/voice – therefore an opinion maker
- Need for a common platform (eg Age NI top 5 agenda; CBI's 'job plan' which focuses on an agenda to reduce corporation tax)
- Cross-department funding
- Media champion/campaign – 'the right one; utilise opportunity
- Use professional bodies to support a wider think-tank
- Having competencies in the right place

Closing Comments for morning session:

- Need to work on these issues
- When people were asked they were in agreement that NIEL would seek feedback from wider membership on these issues
- Encourage member involvement and participation in this process
- Overall feeling that the Taskforces need re-energised - they provide great model for refinement
- 'Lift ideas and run with them'

Speaker: Maire Gratton, Age NI

Two key elements to this case study – merger of Age Concern/Help the Aged and networking/collaboration programme across NI

Networking Programme

- Identified need to modernise the process to tackle the fragmentation in age sector across NI (12,000 groups are involved with older people across the province)
- 3 year programme funded by Atlantic Philanthropies
- 11 sub-regional networks identified across NI (in-line with RPA)
- Overall aim to establish more cohesive function, coordinated service requirement and identify activities needed in areas.
- 1st phase engaged with each area to develop social assets approach and identify/build relationships in the area
- 2nd phase was a process of linking groups, support bonding opportunities between groups
- Provided facilitative approach (not leading people) and presented back to groups to help form working clusters

- Established stage each area were at (eg Omagh & Fermangh were very advanced whilst others had not networks and lots of duplication)
- 5 key themes – sustainability, voice, governance, skills to engage and joint working
- Has promoted engagement with health trusts, councils etc
- There has been cumulative effect and knock-on opportunity from networks

Issues

- Personalities – process can be excellent but difficulties are caused by individual personalities
- Some people ‘go along with’ the collaborative venture because they think they should or because others are doing it but aren’t actually ready or don’t necessarily fit into the specific project/strategy
- Can tend to be process driven but essential to deliver – clear action plan to create effective balance between process and delivery

Merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged

- Third attempt to achieve success (difficult/time consuming process)
- Additional due diligence across 4 countries (national organisations)
- Structures within organisations were very different (centralised and decentralised models)
- Lots of preparation to gain shared ‘values’
- Brand change/identity – and associated concerns
- Still some uncertainty – some aspects of former operations have been dropped, responsibilities have shifted etc
- Transparency and communication across the organisation was crucial to success
- 3 types of leadership involved in process – CEO from Help the Aged facilitate/mediate the process but would resign following merge; CEO from Age Concern would bring people along the process to the new organisation and Chair of the Board could provide overall vision. (Again 3 key players as in first case study)

On Discussion of the guest presentation key Lessons/Questions/Points of Interest:

- Groups intent on ‘this is what we do’ and not interested in joining something they are not normally involved in – this case shows benefit of working together
- Late adapters – on seeing successful ventures other groups join the process later (as and when they are ready)
- Events to promote discussion for collaboration on sharing services/efficiencies helps to raise sights
- Allow space for clarity to move forward and deliver
- Strength in the message of collaboration to raise funds (eg Derry & Strabane network of 14 members have submitted lottery bid with 1 lead and propose to submit another with a different lead)
- Importance of identifying need
- Engagement to work together rather than competing against each other for the same money

Discussion/Lessons for the sector:

- Information should be readily available – as you go through the process information is there and accessible at all levels
- Geographical break-down – knowledge of groups right across the sector; can something be done to develop this?
- Is there a need to break down sectors? Integration of approach to also include govt, health trusts etc
- Using the right tactics to get priorities onto the programme for government
- Shared values and culture to underpin the process
- Importance of leadership – vision, bring people along, identify bottom line (recognition that strong individual leaders have to become team members)
- Can NIEL help to identify key leaders?
- What needs to be done to take leadership action?
- If 48 are in favour, do you wait on the remaining members or go ahead without them?

Practical Areas for collaboration in admin/operation/services?

- Equipment pool
- BITC is a good model – creates hub for shared facility; social economy enterprise
- Skills match pro-forma (give-get facility)
- Shared training opportunities
- Shared procurement – cost savings, economies of scale from bigger group
- Exploit opportunity for short term space renting
- Explore opportunities for sector to negotiate relevant discounts eg BMC – Translink deal
- UWT have a practice to share guides/volunteers/educational resources – can others use this outside their organisation?
- Core organisation to deliver human resource expertise/recruitment and/or governance etc
- Joint funding bids in consortium
- Expertise – efficiency – effectiveness (lead organisation could match skills)
- Use networks of information flow effectively – small ideas are easily overlooked (eg communication to coordinate car-pooling for events etc)
- ‘Pro-Help’ (BITC) – NIEL could be point of contact to source expert to come in when required.
- Synergise eNGO skillset – can refer to database

Concluding session – what are the top suggestions to bring to the sector

- Joint Funding Bids
 - Pool skills and services
 - Coordinate through NIEL and also government (NIEA steering group)
- ‘Pro-Help’ model – bank of professional skills (BITC/NIEL) – use this to incentivise organisations to work together
- Central Procurement
- Skills register/directory (physical/financial/volunteers etc)