



CollaborationNI: Case Study One: Mid Ulster Advice Service (MIDAS)

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

Part One

Background

Partners

1. South Tyrone Environment Programme (STEP NI)
2. Magherafelt Advice Services (MIAC).

Project description

Mid Ulster Advice Service (MIDAS) was launched on 16 September 2015. It brings together STEP NI, based in Dungannon, and Magherafelt Advice Services (MIAC), based in Magherafelt.

Community development underpins all STEP NI's activities. It was established in 1997 to help build local community capacity in the South Tyrone area, and has assisted in the set-up and development of a number of local organisations. STEP NI offers training services, support to migrants (including translation services) and undertakes policy, research work and advocacy. The organisation has seen an increased number of people seeking advice, and wanted to develop its ability to offer advice services.

MIAC offers free, confidential and impartial advice to all sectors of the community. It is housed in the Council offices in Magherafelt, and has specialist and experienced advice workers across a range of areas.

The partners met initially at an event hosted by CollaborationNI and Advice NI in 2012, and had felt that there could be potential for working together. They explored these ideas, and developed the concept of MIDAS. They invited another key local provider to be part of the collaboration, but this offer was declined. The partners then contacted CollaborationNI directly and were offered support in formalising some of the issues that had already been discussed.

CollaborationNI has subsequently offered ongoing support to MIDAS, working with them to develop a MoU and supporting the collaboration through the launch. Support has included facilitation and legal advice, as well as advice about how to build capacity through restructuring some roles.

Part Two

Summary of interviews

Drivers to collaborate

Interviewees identified four key drivers to their collaboration:

1. 'Gap' in services

Dungannon and Magherafelt are separated by the Cookstown area, where another advice provider operates. Feedback from their services users had led both organisations to understand that there was a gap in services around Cookstown, which could be filled effectively by them working together.

2. Complementary skills

MIAC has specialised in advice services, whereas STEP NI comes from a community development ethos. The partners recognised that these complementary skill sets would bring benefits to the individual organisations as well as to their beneficiaries.

3. Geography

Both STEP NI and MIAC operate in geographically distinct areas, offering services only within those areas. This meant there was no sense of competition between them, and a clear vision of how working together would benefit their own service users.

4. Funding

Partners recognised that new funding opportunities meant that working in collaboration would be an advantage – however, they were firmly of the view that this was not the key driver for the collaboration.

Hoped for benefits

MIDAS's mission is:

'To provide free, confidential, independent and impartial advice to all sectors of the community, whereby assisting and helping to raise awareness, ensuring individuals do not suffer because of a lack of knowledge of their rights and/or responsibilities, or of the network of services available to them. We aim to influence the development of social policies and services, both locally and regionally.'

Services include outreach clinics; migrant worker clinics; telephone advice; drop-in facilities and home visits. The aspiration is for a more holistic and integrated flow of services where people are not bounced from one organisation to another if they have complex cases: *'people aren't loyal to a brand, they'll go where their needs are met'*. One interviewee gave the example of a client who had been sent to five different organisations before coming to MIDAS.

Interviewees described how working together is already benefiting service users through:

- **Increased quality of advice** – through higher advice standards and training, and the rollout of the AdvicePro software system across both organisations. AdvicePro is also critical for funding bids.
- **Greater geographic spread**, particularly in the Cookstown area, which now has more services on offer: *'Working together provides a more seamless service, and allows service users from the central area to access services'*.
- **Greater flexibility and responsiveness in service provision** through shared front line staff. For example, one town was showing a peak in demand for debt advice services, so MIDAS have set up a time limited debt advice service targeted at that area.
- **A community development approach** now being used more extensively in Magherafelt.
- **Greater flexibility in developing partnerships**, for example with Women's Aid.
- **Greater ability to conduct robust policy and advocacy work**, with strength in numbers: *'The battle about insufficient resources can only be done in collaboration'*.

MIDAS has received very positive feedback from the local MLA's office, which is already referring service users directly.

Concerns and challenges

The key internal challenge was bringing front line workers from both organisations on board with the changes. In part, this is an issue of geography – Magherafelt and Dungannon are seen as a long way away, and people were concerned about having to travel for work. Some staff also had concerns about whether there would be job losses. However, these concerns were fairly quickly allayed, and staff feel the benefits in developing their own skills through training and sharing expertise.

Interviewees' main concerns relate to the challenges of operating in a context of political and sectoral change:

'This is against the background of sector changes, there's a very high uptake of advice services at the moment, as the system is changing so rapidly.'

'A lot of NGOs are currently unwilling to raise their voices in case of losing funding, it makes doing this more challenging. You have to work within the system, but cogniscent that it is a flawed system.'

Views of collaboration support

Interviewees were hugely positive about the support offered by CollaborationNI. In particular they valued the external facilitation and objective view provided by CollaborationNI staff: *'This made it much easier – we had someone on the outside, which was important – particularly with the Board. Having external facilitation was critical'*.

External input also gave the partners momentum as they were accountable to someone else, which helped them to keep things going: *'CNI really pushed for the launch, it would have been very tricky without them'*.

Interviewees welcomed the expertise brought by CollaborationNI, and also the way in which this was delivered:

'They brought expertise we didn't have around collaboration, and a wider perspective on issues of collaboration in advice.'

'They brought expertise to the table but didn't make us feel we didn't have it.'

'They answered practical questions about governance and took the fear out of it.'

Reflections on collaborative working

Interviewees were clear that the complementary skills and experiences of the people and organisations involved meant that they worked well together. They identified their strong relationships as key to the collaboration. This was aided by the fact that MIDAS is focused upon advice, and MIAC had more expertise in the advice sector – so it was clear who should be the lead partner. There was no competition for power, or any sense that one organisation or individual had to give up something of value: *'There was no sense of competition, and clear recognition of where the value added would be'.*

Interviewees felt that they are learning from each other, and that both organisations – as well as MIDAS – gain from this deepening expertise. Previously both had unsuccessfully tried to work with another provider, so being able to work together came as a relief.

In terms of the process, all interviewees felt that having had a long lead-in time, and a good deal of discussion about their vision meant that there was plenty of time for issues to come out into the open. Both organisations were supported by their Boards, which took a strategic view of the need to collaborate.