



CollaborationNI: Case Study Three: The Verve Healthy Living Network

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

Part One

Background

Partners

1. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust
2. Community Intercultural Programme
3. Drumcree Community Trust
4. Drumellan Community Association
5. Edgarstown Residents Association
6. Fitzone Foundation
7. North Lurgan Community Association
8. Shankill (Lurgan) Community Projects Limited
9. Taghnevan Community Development Association

Background

The Verve Healthy Living Network ('the Network') is a partnership between a range of community and voluntary organisations and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The organisations involved operate as a network of Healthy Living Centres based in the Craigavon Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) of Brownlow, Lurgan and North West Portadown. The collaboration is funded by the Department for Social Development (DSD) under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, and it aims to address health inequalities through targeted healthy lifestyle programmes. The work is overseen by the Neighbourhood Renewal Coordinator, employed by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

The overall aim has been to promote healthy communities and act as a conduit to allow the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to reach those most in need. It delivers services through the partner organisations using ten individuals from local communities trained to work as Health Trainers. They were the first in Northern Ireland to gain this qualification. Their role involves delivering healthy lifestyle programmes, signposting to specialist services and providing one-to-one motivational support.

Partners are now at the stage of developing action plans and becoming ready to submit funding bids through the Verve Network in order to sustain the network beyond the DSD funding.

CollaborationNI offered a range of support services to the Verve Network, including:

- Three in-house sessions
- One expert facilitation session
- Two coaching sessions
- Three draft Memoranda of Understanding (MoU).

Part Two

Summary of interviews¹

Drivers to collaborate

The Southern Trust wanted greater reach into deprived areas, and so set up the Network. There were clear health benefits as a result, and a desire to sustain the programme after the end of the DSD funding and continue the visible impact on local residents' health.

Hoped for benefits

Interviewees identified three main benefits to working in collaboration.

1. Improved community cohesion

Interviewees noted that by working together, the Centres felt more welcoming to different local communities. As a result, they are seeing members from diverse communities entering each other's spaces, often for the first time. The Health Trainers are from different parts of the community, and working together has helped break down barriers:

'When we started we didn't realise all the complexities of bringing together a range of organisations from segregated communities. But now we can see it's been good for community cohesion.'

'It's amazing that people will go into the different areas.'

2. Improved health outcomes

Interviewees explained that there were clear benefits to local residents' health as a result of the work. The Healthy Living Centres are able to run increased numbers of programmes, based on more diverse approaches. These are reaching a wider range of people, including those in more deprived areas. The Health Trainers offer flexible ways of delivering services, including to people unable to leave their homes. An independent evaluation of the Verve Network found that the proportion of programme participants saying that their physical health was excellent rose from six per cent to 34 per cent; whilst those describing their mental health as excellent rose from 11 per cent to 47 per cent:

'We wouldn't have the majority of our projects if it wasn't for [Verve].'

'We're getting people in through the doors of the Centres, and reaching out to people who have not been engaged before - the health trainers have really helped with this.'

'Some of the organisations had no previous experience of delivering on the health side, that is now embedded in.'

The Network also focuses upon wellbeing, and is seeing a reduction in isolation and loneliness as residents attend groups and start volunteering:

'Never underestimate the power of community. Getting local people to help each other, it's amazing - and no statutory body as a barrier.'

¹ Lisa McAliskey, Southern Health and Social Care Trust; Bernie Burns, Drumellan Community Association; Sharon Gallagher, Taghnevan Community Development Association; Pateea Long, Taghnevan Community Development Association.

3. Shared learning

Interviewees felt that the way the Health Trainers work together means they deliver more effective programmes: all the different areas benefit from sharing learning and ideas. The Centres also welcome the opportunity to share ideas and approaches between themselves, and feel this strengthens their work.

The Verve Network has been invited to become a member of the Healthy Living Alliance across Northern Ireland, and is now becoming involved in regional activities. This is opening up further opportunities to share the Health Trainer model with others, and, in turn, to learn from them.

Concerns and challenges

Interviewees identified two main challenges.

1. Uneven participation

Not all the centres participate to the same extent, and there is a risk tensions over access to funding could grow:

'There are different levels of engagement across the Network.'

'Some organisations are so young that people are doing this in a voluntary capacity, and it can be hard to attend meetings.'

Interviewees felt that relationships are currently good, but that this area needs to be monitored to ensure disagreements do not arise – particularly if new members are admitted into the Network.

2. Time-consuming nature of collaboration

Linked to this, interviewees noted that there is a heavy time commitment involved in making sure the collaboration works:

'You have to be dedicated, we didn't want it to fold.'

'It's so much work to do it, people don't realise.'

'Time is a big factor, this is not core business for many of the organisations.'

For small community organisations it is hard to give up the time and to ensure that people attending meetings have the resources they need to participate.

Views of collaboration support

Interviewees were extremely positive about the support received from CollaborationNI. They felt that CollaborationNI's impartiality and objectivity were vital elements of the support, so that all partners could buy into the process. This helped partners to think about the bigger picture and to keep focused on the overall vision:

'CNI have been great, they take on board what people say, they guide you and help you think outside the box. We need people like that.'

'Without them I'm not sure we could drive it forward, they helped us have very open and honest conversations and helped organisations look internally.'

'You need the external support to get it together.'

The staff members at CollaborationNI were seen as approachable, professional and highly knowledgeable, as well as willing to take their time and to explain any jargon:

'They're amazing, so good at their jobs and such a lovely way of being with people. They're not authoritarian, they're natural and skilful.'

'They were very down to earth and approachable.'

Interviewees saw the legal advice as having been critical in developing a strong MoU, and hence basis for collaboration. Alongside this, the facilitation was vital in allowing partners a chance to develop strong relationships based on a shared vision:

'The Trust wants to shift the balance of power so that the community bodies can lead; the facilitation was vital to this.'

Reflections on collaborative working

In thinking about the process of collaboration, interviewees emphasised the importance of being *'open and honest with everyone: communication is key'*. In particular, they felt that it was important to be able to have open and frank conversations about constraints and what is not possible, as well as focusing on a shared vision. They also highlighted how slow the process can be, but that this is worth it in order to have all the elements in place. Interviewees also discussed how important the role of the Coordinator has been in driving the collaboration forward and supporting organisations to develop relationships. They felt that without this central and dedicated role it would have been very difficult to find the momentum – or indeed the time – to become an effective and strong network.