



Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

CollaborationNI: The impact of collaboration on service users

April 2017

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Authorship and Acknowledgements

This report was written by Miranda Lewis and Ben Cairns. It is based on research carried out by the authors. We are grateful to all those who contributed their time and insights during the interviews and discussions.

Foreword

During 2010, Building Change Trust organised a series of engagement meetings with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations across Northern Ireland on a geographic and thematic basis.

The focus of our consultation was to engage with organisation representatives to consider:

‘What must my organisation do to ensure our community needs are better met now and into the future?’

At each of our events, the issue of organisations working together to better meet community needs and receiving support to do so was raised.

In response to this evidence of need and demand, and in the absence of any sustained and comprehensive support for collaboration elsewhere, we tendered for the development and delivery of a collaboration, mergers and partnership support programme. The contract was awarded to the CollaborationNI consortium, led by NICVA with CO3 and Stellar Leadership. Latterly, we augmented the support provided through CollaborationNI with our own Collaboration Enabling Fund which made some grant awards to enable organisations’ collaboration plans to be implemented.

From January 2011 until October 2016 and through two phases of development and delivery, the three partners in CollaborationNI delivered: 900 plus events to some 6,000 participants from more than 1000 organisations with more than 100 collaborations supported.

Thus, we have much evidence of the scale of the activity that our resources delivered and we are also aware from our evaluation of CollaborationNI, carried out by IVAR, of the impact that collaboration support has had on the individuals and organisations participating.

And it is worth restating and reemphasising a key finding of that evaluation from 2016:

‘Our observation here would be that organisations will always struggle to collaborate meaningfully and effectively if they do not have the time and space to fully understand the drivers, purpose and potential benefits of coming together. A mutually beneficial collaboration relies on shared vision, mutuality and strong interpersonal relationships as much as it does on operational logic. Invariably, that process requires and benefits from independent facilitation and expert guidance. So, in our view, the case for support for collaborative working is compelling.’

However, the motive behind our support for collaboration was not just to enable individuals and organisations to work better together with no wider end goal in sight. Our motive, particularly during Phase Two of the support programme, was to support collaboration for a purpose, where the interests of beneficiaries are privileged over those of organisations. There are surely no VCSE organisations operating in Northern Ireland who are not part in some way of an ‘impact network’ where their work and relationship with others is crucial to the benefits they bring to people and places. But given that, there are surely many organisations right across the diversity of place and theme within the sector where the power of collaboration to change the lives of people and places for the better is not fully realised.

Rather than make simple assumptions about the benefits of collaboration support for beneficiaries, we wished to explore that further and are pleased to have continued our relationship with IVAR to do so.

This report finds that collaboration, and support for it, does produce benefits for beneficiaries but that it’s a complex issue with significant time, effort and support required to get to a point where service users experience positive impact and organisations experience additional benefits.

Through Trust resources and leadership – and the work of the CollaborationNI partnership of NICVA, CO3 and Stellar Leadership – we were in a position to allocate that time, effort and support.

The lessons are clear – for statutory funders, independent funders and the sector itself. The evidence is that collaboration makes a difference and brings benefits to beneficiaries and organisations alike.

Those benefits won’t be realised unless the right support is in place. It is our view, as we conclude our own work on supporting collaboration, that the need for collaboration and support for it is more vital than ever as the sector – and indeed wider NI society – grapples with the financial challenges and uncertainty from both a failure of government and governance locally and the unknown implications of Brexit. At the core of dealing with the complex and evolving needs of people and places, no one organisation can achieve positive change on its own. Collaboration is more than an option to be considered, it’s a necessity to be embraced.

We encourage all those with responsibility for supporting the sector in the future to both reflect and act on these lessons.

Bill Osborne
Chairperson Building Change Trust
April 2017

PART ONE

*The impact of
collaboration
on service users*

1

Background

CollaborationNI (CNI) was a programme commissioned by the Building Change Trust (BCT), and run by a consortium of NICVA, Stellar Leadership and CO3. It ran between 2011 and 2016. The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) was commissioned by BCT to evaluate CNI, and completed its independent evaluation of Phase Two of the programme in April 2016. The evaluation concluded that the professional, knowledgeable, independent and dedicated work of the CNI team was of extremely high quality and delivered significant value to voluntary and community (VCSE) organisations in Northern Ireland. In particular, CNI's support and guidance made a real difference to organisations' ability to collaborate meaningfully and productively.

One of the key drivers for collaboration identified in the evaluation was *'delivering better outcomes for beneficiaries'* (described throughout as 'service users' unless we are quoting from elsewhere). In our earlier work with CNI, we had found a keen perception among staff that collaboration had a positive impact on service users. 86% of those taking part in our November 2015 survey agreed that *'beneficiaries receive better services'* as a result of the support they had received from CNI. Survey findings also showed that working in collaboration enabled many organisations to make improvements for service users in terms of *'their overall experience'* and the *'quality of the service provided'*. More specifically, there was widespread agreement that collaborative working can:

- Address problems relating to gaps in services
- Lead to a streamlining of services
- Improve service user choice
- Enhance advocacy and influence
- Enable the survival of key services.

However, service users themselves were not asked about their perceptions of how services had changed.

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Purpose

In order to address this gap, BCT commissioned IVAR to: *'further develop [your] previous evaluation work to focus on exploring what has been the impact of VCSE collaboration on beneficiaries'*.

3

Method

IVAR undertook three case studies between January-March 2017 to explore service users' perceptions of the effects of collaboration. Three case studies were selected to ensure a spread in terms of: subsector, geography, type of collaboration, service users and scale of service change (arising from collaboration). The common element to all three collaborations is a commitment to *'service enhancement'* for service users at the heart of the vision for collaboration, as well as:

- An aspiration to work across communities
- The intention to deliver a wider range of services more efficiently, and to a greater range and number of service users
- The intention of using cost savings associated with collaboration to drive improvements in services for service users.

In each case study, we reached service users and heard their voices via existing mechanisms and events, both in order to minimise the administrative burden on participating organisations and to increase the likelihood of engagement. This means we used mixed methodologies, adapting our approach to each context.

1. The Aspire Community Partnership: Coleraine

- Semi-structured interviews with six residents and service users
- Semi-structured interviews with three members of staff
- Qualitative surveys with six service users
- Drawing on the evaluation conducted of the first six months of the service.

2. Citizens Advice (CAB): Antrim and Newtownabbey

- Semi-structured interviews with two members of staff
- 200 surveys returned from service users. These went out in January 2017 for the CAB's annual client satisfaction survey and included additional questions from IVAR about the service provided following the merger.

3. Neighbourhood Health Improvement Project (NHIP): Derry/Londonderry¹

- Focus group with men's group service users (four participants) – Outer North Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA)
- Focus group with and observation of Galliagh Women's weight loss group (nine participants) – Outer North NRA
- Focus group with Bovalley Community Women's Group (14 participants) – Limavady NRA
- Semi-structured interview with one service user from the GP referral programme – Triax NRA
- Observation of GP referral programme gym session – Triax NRA
- Semi-structured interviews with three members of staff.

Across all three case studies, service users and residents were asked about:

- Their experiences of the services delivered
- Perceptions of any changes experienced (positive and negative)
- How the services have affected their lives and circumstances.

Staff and trustees were asked about:

- Their vision for the collaboration
- How the vision has been implemented
- Their perception of the impact on service users
- Their perception about collaborative working (challenges and benefits)
- Their views of the support available from CNI.

¹ IVAR had previously conducted a case study with NHIP in May 2016. This meant that we were also able to consider how the project was developing.

PART TWO

Case studies

In Part Two of this report we set out findings from each of the case studies in turn. We describe the background to the collaboration; views on the vision and challenges of collaborative working; views on the support available from CNI; and the perceptions of service users themselves about the services available and the impact these have had on their lives. Unattributed quotes are presented in italics.

Aspire Community Partnership: Cornfield Project²

Partners

1. Focus on Family
2. Millburn Community Association
3. Building Ballysally Together
4. Bushmills Residents & Environmental Forum

Project description

The Aspire Community Partnership began in 2013 with a series of meetings between local groups located or operating within the Ballysally and Millburn Neighbourhood Renewal areas in Coleraine. The initial aim was to develop closer working relationships between staff and volunteers, and then to plan and deliver joined-up programmes of work and events. This initial phase lasted longer than anticipated, as over time, various groups dropped out of the process. By late 2016, following facilitated discussions, the four partners listed above were being supported by CNI to set up as a Company Limited by Guarantee.

The Aspire Community Partnership is developing several projects. These include:

1. Social enterprise development

Working together to implement and run enterprises that generate income for the groups, as well as developing local employment and training opportunities. These include the Cornfield Project; an established childcare service; Ballysally Café; a new Millburn community café and beauty salon (both due to open in Spring 2017); and the prospect of developing local capacity to provide care to elderly residents.

2. Integrated service delivery

Rather than each of the settings delivering essential skills (Maths, English and ICT) as currently happens, the Partnership plans to undertake a needs assessment of local residents. This would then be used to deliver training to meet these needs in the most appropriate setting, rather than all four organisations trying to develop and deliver their own individual programmes.

3. The Cornfield Project

This is the most developed of the projects, and therefore the main focus of this case study. The Partnership applied to the Grow Wild Fund to develop a large area that links the Ballysally and Millburn estates. The Cornfield Project was shortlisted as one of the three Northern Irish Flagship finalists, and was confirmed as the winner following a national public vote.

The Cornfield Project is supported by key partners including The Woodland Trust (who have licensed the site to Focus on Family), The Conservation

Volunteers, Northern Health and Social Services Trust and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

The site has been designed by a local landscape architect. The key design feature is the 'Main Street' linking the two estates, and making it easier for residents to move between the two areas. There is an arch at either end to mark the entrances to the site, and the route is lined with wildflower planting. The site includes outdoor classrooms for local schools; walking trails; allotments; bird and bat boxes; a sensory garden and youth hang out areas. Plans for further development include resource packs for schools and residents; information about the step count of the various walking trails; and a community resource centre.

The site was launched in summer 2016, with an event attended by about 1000 people. This was followed up by a Santa's Grotto Christmas event.

Aspirations

The Cornfield Project aims to:

- Bring together people, who would not otherwise have mixed, through formal opportunities such as volunteering and events, and informal use of the space. Historically, there has been some tension between the two estates, and the Cornfield Project hopes to break this down.
- Improve the health of local residents through the opportunity to walk and work on the site.
- Provide volunteering and training opportunities to enhance local residents' skills and employability, in areas such as allotment development, wildflower sourcing and planting, and woodland maintenance.
- Become sustainable by developing income from school and nursery visits, events and physical activity programmes.

Reflections on collaborative working

The process of developing the Aspire Community Partnership was lengthy and, at times, fraught. Although the overall vision was appealing to potential partners:

'It was a difficult process – it was easy for people to buy into the ethos, but the nitty gritty was tricky.'

It became clear that some organisations had very different underlying values, which made deep collaboration difficult. Some interviewees identified tensions around ego and it seems that some organisations were more 'collaboration ready' than others. Collaboration was also acknowledged to be hard work, particularly in the early stages:

'If you want to make change and make things better you've got to do more. Some people don't want to do extra.'

² <https://en-gb.facebook.com/thecornfieldproject/>

Some organisations also felt left behind. In their view, the vision had already been developed and there was not necessarily space for them to contribute or influence. However, not everyone experienced this as a negative:

‘People need time to think and talk, and then to leave if it’s not for them.’

Now that the Partnership has completed the process of formation and formalisation, the remaining organisations work closely together and share a similar vision about the purpose of collaboration as being about the ‘impact upon service users’. Although, to some extent, the initial impetus was funding driven (in that the Department for Communities was talking about potential reductions in funding), the core beliefs of the main partners were always that collaboration brings strength and value to service users:

‘The catchphrase of Aspire is “what is better for the beneficiary?”’

‘I can provide more services working in collaboration than I can working on my own.’

The Aspire Community Partnership has also collaborated closely with other partners, particularly in relation to The Cornfield Project. For example, there was significant support from The Causeway Coast and Glens Council, including donating PR staff time for the national voting campaign. Winning the Cornfield funding opened other doors: the Housing Executive donated an extra two units to develop the community café and beauty salon.

Collaboration support

CNI’s support was important in moving the challenging early discussions along. While not all the facilitation was deemed to be a total success, much of it was ‘very helpful’ in supporting Aspire members to understand how to move their discussions about partnership forward.

Concerns and challenges

The difficulties experienced in setting up the Aspire Community Partnership mean that it has taken considerably longer to start work than had originally been anticipated. While the Cornfield Project has made remarkable progress, it ‘still has some way to go to realise its full potential’. Interviewees largely felt that there is significantly more that could be done to maximise the site, particularly focusing on a programme of regular events and the development of resources for schools. This should start to take shape now that a new Cornfield Officer is in post.

There is some legacy of distrust following the difficult inception of the partnership. This has led to some criticism of The Cornfield Project for being too associated with the interests of particular groups. However, others feel that the clear leadership and passion associated with those groups was a critical component in developing the project.

Impact on service users

The local residents and service users who were interviewed or surveyed were clear that The Cornfield Project has already produced significant benefits. Six ways in which it was making a difference were highlighted:

1. A greater sense of pride

The Cornfield Project has engendered community pride in the local area and what can be achieved. Winning the national competition was very significant for an area that has felt overlooked in the past. As a result, participants said that local residents were taking greater care of the site, and using it far more:

‘You would never have gone there, but now people walk through it – it’s changed.’

‘There’s lots of enthusiasm – it’s different, and changing the look of the area. Parents are taking babies there; they would’ve been scared before.’

‘It used just to be somewhere that local kids took their scrambler bikes.’

‘Something that was an eyesore can be turned into a valuable community asset.’

2. Sense of ownership

Along with the sense of pride outlined above, participants also felt that local residents had a sense of ownership about the site and wanted to look after it:

‘The kids feel that it’s their own.’

‘It’s like your own home, you want to look after it.’

‘People never cleared up the dog muck but now they do, and there’s no broken glass anymore.’

3. Environmental benefits

The Cornfield Project is seen to be an important local resource for teaching children about nature and the environment. It also means that people literally have a green space on their doorstep which can be accessed without transport:

‘The Cornfield is a good idea because it helps the environment and it gets everyone involved.’

‘It gives me the chance to walk my children through nature without having to drive them somewhere – better for the environment.’

‘It’s a nice place to take my daughter so she can learn about nature.’

2

Citizens Advice (CAB) Antrim and Newtownabbey³

4. Improved health

For several participants, the most significant benefit was in their improved mental and physical health. Being able to walk locally meant that they were more conscious of how much activity they were doing, and they also recognised the importance of this for relaxation and mood, as well as the wider positive impact on family life:

'It improves your mood to walk through it in the evening.'

'I never used to walk anywhere.'

'I like the way all the children could play outside in the fresh air in the sunshine.'

'I feel I have a reason to be outdoors and have an enjoyable experience while improving my health.'

5. Improved sense of community

Participants were clear that the Cornfield had already started to break down some of the historic divisions between the estates:

'People are mixing and talking about it.'

'It's not a football park or a swing park, it's there for everyone.'

'The party for the Queen's birthday was the first joint event between the two estates.'

'There's a sense of belonging and people coming together.'

'It's cross-community and brings people together.'

6. Developing skills

Some service users felt that the Cornfield and wider projects through Aspire had increased their skills through the greater volunteering opportunities available:

'I'm learning a lot through volunteering.'

It was hard for most service users to articulate the relationship between these benefits and collaborative working. Even those involved in one of the projects, or the Aspire partnership, tended to see The Cornfield Project as an *'exciting and innovative local development'* rather than the product of complex and painstaking collaborative working between multiple agencies. To some extent, this reflects the intention of the partnership:

'Many of the [local people] will probably not know about the community partnership or even have heard of Aspire. However, this is the approach we are taking – we want to make things better for our local community, and it's not about credit or kudos for individual groups.'

It also indicates that delivery mechanisms are – understandably – not necessarily uppermost in the minds of service users. What matters more is knowing who to contact if there is a problem; feeling involved if you want to be; and seeing (and experiencing) the project making a difference. As one local resident put it:

'It doesn't matter who runs it, it's just good to see the two estates coming together.'

Partners

1. CAB Antrim
2. CAB Newtownabbey

In July 2016 two independent and adjacent CABs formally merged to become Citizens Advice Antrim and Newtownabbey.

Aspirations

The two CABs first looked at working more closely together in 2014. This was when the Councils were initiating their own merger and it became clear that there would be one rather than two advice contracts. There was an explicit aspiration to provide better services to clients as a result of the merger, to be *'the best organisation that we could'* and a focus on *'how best to enhance services to clients'*. The merged organisation is also:

'Able to attract more funding – it has enhanced our ability to attract more funding, it seems that funders are more positive about supporting a merged organisation.'

Views on collaboration support

CNI's support was *'invaluable'* in supporting the merger. In particular, their impartial and expert facilitation was seen by interviewees as a critical factor in enabling the two organisations to merge and to overcome challenges. While one interviewee felt that the information provided about legal issues could have been more detailed, overall the support was acknowledged to be *'vital'* in ensuring the merger went ahead:

'They gave us impartial, professional support – after all, none of us had experience of dealing with mergers.'

Reflections on collaborative working

Since the merger, the two original organisations have been working together increasingly closely, both at staff and trustee level. A new phone system has been installed, which has been a significant investment of both financial resources and time; and working on this has brought staff closer, as has the increased provision of training across the two centres.

Even though the two organisations were very similar, there were cultural differences in the way they worked. Bringing them together has meant *'focusing on the middle ground between the teams'*, and finding joint projects

³ https://www.citizensadvice.co.uk/pages/citizens_advice_antrim_newtownabbey/

to work on. For example, the case recording systems were not completely standardised. Rather than adopting one existing system wholesale, attention had to be paid to what worked from each centre and then an agreement made as to what was best for the merged organisation. Even so *'it has taken a while to build up staff trust'*.

Impact on service users

The planned service changes have been implemented over several months, so initially little changed for service users. However, since late January 2017, there have been significant changes, including the new phone system and increased numbers of staff. In addition, work is well underway to provide a web-based advice service.

The new phone system and introduction of more Advisors has meant a significant increase in the hours of telephone advice to clients. In the week prior to the phone system being changed, an average of 60 callers a day were able to get through and receive advice. In the first week of the new system (despite initial inevitable teething problems), this increased to 100 a day. Depending on availability, Advisor time has increased from 21 to 60 hours per day. The new phone system will also enable the CAB to analyse how many calls are still not being answered, and to establish when peak times are, so that Advisor hours can be planned more effectively.

Similarly, there is now greater choice for face-to-face appointments with more outreach on offer and those living in between Antrim and Newtownabbey now have a choice of attending either centre, depending on which is more convenient.

The merger has also meant that Advisors are offered more training, and can learn from one another. Clients can be referred across if an Advisor in the other centre has specific expertise. For example, there are more Advisors trained to address the specific needs of ethnic minority communities in the Antrim centre, which means that minority communities in Newtownabbey can now also receive more tailored support. Newtownabbey clients can also now access the Macmillan Cancer project based at Antrim General Hospital. Antrim clients can now be represented to Tribunal level, which previously only happened in Newtownabbey: *'every level of expertise is now available to service users'*.

The survey shows a high level of satisfaction with the services on offer from the CAB:

92% of clients were *'very happy'* with the service they received
7% were *'happy'*
99% felt that the CAB *'couldn't have done more'* for them

The advice received has a direct impact on clients' lives. In answer to the question 'Has the Citizens Advice made any improvement to your situation or your health & wellbeing':

59% responded 'a lot'
34% responded 'some'

When rating the advice they received:

81% found it 'very useful'
17% as 'fairly useful'

When asked 'Are you clear about what you need to do next':

72% felt 'very clear'
27% were 'clear enough'

Service users were surveyed before the phone system changes had been implemented, so it is perhaps not surprising that:

67% had noticed no difference since the merger
12% had noticed 'a little bit of difference'
7% a 'big difference'

When asked 'what difference has there been in the services you use' and invited to tick any relevant answers the responses were:

13% said longer opening hours
17% said a better range of services
3% said better locations

Clients are also satisfied with the opening hours and location:

How happy are you about where you come to see us?

82% Very happy
17% Fairly happy
1% Unhappy
0% Very unhappy

How happy are you about the times we're open?

80% Very happy
19% Fairly happy
1% Unhappy
0% Very unhappy

Critically, when asked 'Is it easier/harder for you to access the service?' 92% said it was easier.

3

Neighbourhood Health Improvement Project (NHIP)⁴

Partners

1. Limavady Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
2. Outer North Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
3. Outer West Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
4. Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
5. Triax Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
6. Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
7. Western Health and Social Care Trust
8. Public Health Agency
9. Derry Healthy Cities
10. Department for Communities
11. Bogside Brandywell Health Forum
12. Strabane and District Caring Services
13. Waterside Health Forum
14. Ballymagroarty Hazelbank Community Partnership

Project description

The Neighbourhood Health Improvement Project (NHIP) aims to improve health across six Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs). It is a partnership between local voluntary and statutory agencies. Each NRA has a Health Development Worker working part-time who develops an action plan with the local health forum, based on the three priority areas identified by the NHIP Board: obesity, mental health and collaboration.

The Health Development Workers offer direct support and signposting, working with local communities to determine what their needs are and how these could best be met through direct projects and working with other groups in the area.

Projects run by the different areas include:

- Schools project – working with seven primary schools in the Triax⁵ area. This project offers a six-week programme tackling obesity in primary age children through healthy cooking activities, information about nutrition and physical activity.
- Men's Group – including a weekly group offering support through activities such as guitar lessons; talks on history; visits from a nurse to check blood pressures; talks on suicide awareness and machinery classes. The Men's Group now operates a social enterprise, making furniture to sell locally.
- Running club – taking people from walking to being able to run 5K.
- Weight loss club – supportive weekly weigh-ins and information about nutrition.

⁴ <http://www.westerstrust.hscni.net/livewell/NeighbourhoodRenewal.htm>

⁵ Triax is the Neighbourhood Partnership Board for the Bogside, Brandywell, Creggan, Fountain and Bishop Street area recognised by the North West Development Office of the Department for Social Development.

- Offering physical activities such as yoga and aqua aerobics through existing groups, such as the Bovally Community Centre.
- Grow Your Own project – community planting and growing fruit and vegetables.
- Cookery classes and swimming lessons.
- Organising 'vulnerable visits' to elderly people at risk.

NHIP evaluates its work annually using questionnaires at the beginning and end of programmes. Additionally, a questionnaire evaluates the NHIP management board and sub groups. The 2015/16 End of Year report was based on the analysis of 571 start and end questionnaires. Findings include:

- An increase from 60% to 70% of people saying their health is 'very good' or 'good'
- 68% of those on the weight loss programmes reduced their waist measurement
- 91 elderly people feeling safer and more secure in their homes
- 95% participants' mental wellbeing improved (Shortened Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale (SWEWBS)).

Reflections on collaborative working

Since the previous IVAR case study in March 2016, there has been progress in how the partnership works together. The planned Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has not yet been signed, but the Board has recently approved a new approach with statutory and voluntary bodies poised to sign different agreements. The opportunities for cross learning between Health Development Workers has '*meant [NHIP] delivers more creative, thoughtful projects*', as ideas, training, resources and expertise can be shared. The shared approach also means that participants can be referred between areas. This has been particularly pertinent for those accessing mental health support as '*you don't necessarily want everyone in your back yard to know*'.

Close collaboration and working through other local organisations and projects is also critical for NHIP to deliver outcomes on a limited budget:

'Our own collaboration depends upon collaboration in the communities.'

This approach also means that effort and programmes are not being duplicated.

Concerns and challenges

NHIP is currently funded by the Department for Communities on a year by year basis. This makes forward planning difficult and necessitates a focus on shorter term programmes, with inevitable waiting lists for some of the most popular services. The aspiration is to achieve more stable, longer-term funding, but, in the current climate, this is challenging. Balancing the need for overall strategic direction with local variability across six areas also presents a challenge.

When talking about benefits, it was notable that service users spoke extremely appreciatively about the staff (mostly the Health Development Workers) with whom they had had contact: *'She does a great job, we couldn't do it without her.'* However, there was little, if any, awareness of the wider NHIP brand.

Impact on service users

The service users IVAR met identified five key benefits from the services provided by NHIP.

1. Improved individual health

Service users confidently stated that the programmes they access have improved their physical and mental health:

'I feel healthier, better for taking part.'

'I feel better. You leave your worries behind.'

'It saved my life. I've stopped smoking now, and that's also saved me £800 since January.'

'It's made me a better person, and that's all to the credit of the people here.'

2. Improved family health and relationships

Service users felt that the gains were more than individual; their wider families also benefitted from their new knowledge and increased energy:

'It's not just me, it's my son too – I can play football with him. And my wife's sisters have joined the running club.'

'I don't give my grandchildren sugary food now.'

'I do totally different activities with my family now.'

3. Support networks

Service users also described the support they developed within groups as being hugely important in reducing isolation and increasing their sense of living in a community:

'We'd all be lost without it.'

'We all listen to each other's experiences. We've talked about some very difficult issues here.'

'You can't be lonely if you have a reason to come out here.'

'It stops you sitting in the house.'

'I think of them as all my family now.'

4. Meeting others from different backgrounds

Service users appreciated the opportunity to mix with people from different areas and backgrounds:

'There's people from different cultures here, it doesn't matter and it means the kids all meet one another.'

'We've been involved in cross community work for years.'

'We [Men's group] work with young people too, it's amazing how much we have in common.'

5. Improved skills

The chance to learn new skills through courses and volunteering is greatly appreciated:

'You can get some education here, I left school without much reading or writing.'

'I've learnt sewing and have just made myself some cushions.'

'I'm going to learn how to use the computers tomorrow.'

PART THREE

Discussion

In Part Three of this report we draw on the case study findings and our earlier research in this area to offer some reflections on the impact of VCSE collaboration on service users.

1

What matters is the service

Our first observation is that service users themselves are not necessarily concerned about the governance, structure or branding of voluntary organisations that they receive services from. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the contribution of collaboration. As one interviewee put it:

'I don't think service users care who delivers it. If they've had a good experience it doesn't matter. Local knowledge is so important though to make sure it meets their needs. I think locality, convenience and sometimes individual staff are more important.'

However, while the relative invisibility and irrelevance of collaborative working (at formal, structural level) in relation to the 'service user experience' may not be significant, it can matter when it comes to funding, where the articulation of 'value added' is critical. To that extent, it is important for organisations to develop a clear narrative about service enhancements and improvements that collaboration has made possible.

2

Collaboration appears to increase 'impact'

Second, when thinking about the services that they use, service users in our three case studies explained 'impact' (understood as the benefit(s) they derive and the difference that is made) in the following ways:

- Developing stronger support networks
- Developing new skills and knowledge
- Meeting others from different backgrounds
- Being able to access services
- Receiving appropriate and needed services.

These echo and enhance the benefits previously identified by organisations themselves when asked about the impact of their collaboration and subsequent service delivery on service users:

- Addressing problems relating to gaps in services
- Leading to a streamlining of services
- Improving service user choice
- Enhancing advocacy and influence
- Enabling the survival of key services.

3

Three ingredients of impact

Third, it is possible to identify three specific ingredients that enable collaboration to deliver responsive and well-received services.

1. Collaborative and productive learning

The process of facilitation (provided by CNI) that all three case study collaborations had experienced meant that differences had to be aired and common ground identified in advance of closer joint working. The experience of working together through the often complex process of formalising collaboration has made it possible for these organisations to develop high levels of trust, and knowledge and understanding of one another. This has fostered cultures in which there is an openness to learning about, and developing different approaches to, service improvement without undue anxiety about competition or brand dilution.

2. Connecting communities

Bringing different organisations together makes it more likely that the different groups of service users can be connected through shared services or events. Service users were clear that they valued the opportunities to meet people from different areas, backgrounds and communities. This critical work of building social and community cohesion was made possible through collaboration.

3. Greater reach

Shared costs and staff mean that the case study collaborations are able to reach new service users; extend services and opening hours; and refer between services more effectively.

4

Concluding remarks

Finally, all three case studies highlight the significant time, effort and support required to reach a point where service users experience positive impact and organisations experience additional benefits, for example, in terms of reduced costs and greater ability to apply for funding. In line with our earlier reports for BCT, the findings set out here offer further confirmation that clarifying the benefits to service users and putting them at the centre of an aspiration to collaborate is likely to keep organisations focused on the end vision.

Reaching this point involves overcoming substantial challenges related to working across organisational boundaries. These include:

- Dealing with difference
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities
- Developing a shared vision
- Designing appropriate structures.

Our earlier work in this area has highlighted how this process (essential for achieving productive and meaningful outcomes from collaborative working) is exceptionally difficult for organisations without adequate time, resources and bespoke support.

IVAR's January 2016 evaluation report concluded '*that the case for support for collaborative working is compelling.*'⁶ Organisations in receipt of support and guidance from CNI were more knowledgeable, willing and able to collaborate, and demonstrated more confident and trusting behaviours. The impartial and professional support provided by CNI has been a critical element to enable the organisations involved in the three case studies discussed in this report (along with many other VCSE organisations) to collaborate and ultimately to benefit service users. It is our assessment that the material gains highlighted here would have been, at best, unlikely and, at worst, impossible without meaningful, formal collaboration.

The staff we interviewed for these case studies were acutely aware of working in the context of fragile funding, cut backs to statutory services and being asked to deliver more for less. In such a climate of uncertainty and upheaval, many VCSE organisations are trapped in short-term survival mode and may struggle to find the time and space to even contemplate joint working. While this perhaps makes the case for collaboration even more compelling, it also presents additional challenges.

A top-down push for collaboration that does not take into account the practical difficulties and resource pressures of working across organisational boundaries is unlikely to reap benefits for service users. At the same time, from the perspective of VCSE organisations and their role in serving and supporting local communities, promoting and developing '*collaboration for purpose*' – rather than funding alone – feels important and necessary. Yet, in an era of

tightening funding and growing demand for services, finding the time, resources and energy to develop effective collaboration may be out of the reach of many organisations. Support for collaboration may therefore need to be seen in the context of broader discussions about how to protect and enhance the vitality of VCSE organisations and their ability to achieve positive outcomes for their service users.

⁶ IVAR (2016) *Evaluation of CollaborationNI Phase Two: Findings and reflections*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research <http://www.buildingchangetrust.org/download/files/CNIIVarEvalPhaseTwo%2Epdf>

Please see Appendix II for the commentary from this report.

Appendices

Interviewees

Aspire/The Cornfield Project

Murray Bell	Resident and Architect for the Cornfield site
Sam Cobban	Resident, service user and volunteer (Millburn)
John Donaghy	Resident, service user and volunteer (Focus on Family) and Trustee of The Cornfield Project
Elaine Donnelly	Programme Manager Coleraine Sure Start Partnership (operating out of Focus for Family)
George Duddy	Resident and local councillor
Adrian Eakin	Resident, service user and Treasurer of Building Ballysally
Billy Ellis	Resident and Community Development Worker (Millburn)
Alison Fee	Resident, service user and volunteer (Focus on Family)
Brendan Patterson	Director, Focus on Family

CAB Antrim and Newtownabbey

Lorraine Adamson	Director
Jaclyn Glover	Deputy Director

NHIP

Elaine Doherty	Health Development Worker (Triax NRA)
Natalie Logue	Health Development Worker (Outer North NRA)
Marie McLaughlin	NHIP Coordinator
Benny Tajeda	Service user, GP Referral Project

Commentary from the 2016 Evaluation Report of Phase Two of CollaborationNI

Reflections

Our observations here are based on our work as advisers and evaluators to CollaborationNI (CNI) in the period April 2014 to December 2015. We also draw on our accumulated insights into the challenges and critical success factors of collaborative working (both within the VCSE sector and between VCSE organisations and public agencies) from a series of research studies and support programmes carried out across the UK over the last 15 years.

The shortcomings of top-down collaboration

One of the dangers of discussions about collaboration is that they often start mid or downstream, and can be based on untested assumptions. So, for example, policy makers have traditionally alighted on mergers as a solution to their view that there is too much duplication and inefficiency within the sector. And yet such a view has often been found to be flawed. First, if there is duplication, it is either, in the case of organisations that operate outside of the reach of public funding, none of government's business; or, it has often come about as a direct result of governmental funding and, in some cases, active promotion of diversity. One of the consequences of policy encouragement for community-based provision, localism, social entrepreneurship and social innovation has been more organisations. So, if the sector does look bloated in certain areas, public agencies have had a hand in that. More specifically, policy makers and funders in Northern Ireland (through both the peace process and the influx of European money) were happy to encourage the development of organisations often serving one community or the other – with little thought given to the longer term sustainability and/or what to do when the funding began to dry up. Second, what little evidence we do have about mergers suggests that they are likely to be expensive to achieve and, furthermore, that it requires significant investment and time to bring about cost savings. Mergers are an inexact science that rely more for success on human emotions and leaps of faith than they do on the work of accountants or lawyers.⁷

Little good is likely, therefore, to come from a top-down approach – we only have to look at governmental agencies and their ongoing struggles locally, regionally and nationally, to integrate and join up to appreciate that working across organisational or sectoral boundaries can be challenging. And if we consider the trend in England of issuing fewer, bigger contracts for health and social services, and the expectation or requirement that voluntary organisations will collaborate over bids, what do we find? Smaller organisations being squeezed out, or tacked on as afterthoughts. And forced marriages between incompatible partners, leading, inevitably, to problems with delivery. The drive towards competition is no guarantee of meaningful and productive collaboration.

⁷ IVAR (2012) *Thinking about Merger*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Furthermore, despite the unprecedented levels of policy-driven interest in collaborative working involving voluntary organisations, we know from our work that individuals and organisations can experience practical difficulties when trying to work collaboratively with others. Policy assumptions about collaborative capacity are not always matched by the reality on the ground. There is what we might call a policy implementation gap – the situation in Fermanagh doesn't necessarily match the view from Parliament Buildings. However much sense collaboration might make, and however compelling the case, we are talking here about independent organisations; organisations whose decision-making powers are their own; whose destinies are in their own hands. As one of our interviewees noted:

'The worry about a funder-driven collaboration is that it can look sensible and rational from a distance, but once you get into the detail, and exposed to the context and each organisation's history and ways of working, it gets messier and harder to reconcile differences.'

The importance and value of collaboration for purpose

If our first observation is, in essence, about the importance of governmental bodies becoming more aware and sensitive to the practical realities of collaboration for voluntary organisations, and perhaps taking a less directive approach to how the sector organises itself, what about voluntary and community organisations themselves? We have noted before that, in an operating environment characterised by complexity and change, there is both a need and an opportunity to promote the benefits and opportunities of collaboration. Complexity here can be understood as a situation in which how to achieve desired results is not known, so there is high uncertainty; key stakeholders disagree about what to do and how to do it; and many factors are interacting in a dynamic environment that undermine efforts at control. This makes static, narrow models – the single agency solution – problematic.

So, complex situations challenge traditional practices. To quote one of our interviewees:

'Work in complex areas cannot really be effectively tackled by one organisation on its own and therefore there is a need for collaboration.'

And, in an elaboration of that point, a similar perspective:

'People need help to shift mindsets from inward-looking parochialism to a more outward-looking approach. The focus needs to be on practical, meaningful changes to the way in which organisations can interact with each other and that needs to be prefaced by identifying shared issues and goals.'

This shift in language and tone, to talking about the benefits and various models of collaborating for a purpose (in which the interests of service users are privileged over those of organisations) has been at the heart of Phase

Two of CNI. As much as there has been an emphasis on a reality check for governmental agencies and officials, there has also been a sustained effort to issue a wake-up call for the sector itself. But with the critical caveat that the focus is on creating a more sustainable, effective, vibrant sector, not undermining it or diminishing it. And so collaboration has been promoted as an opportunity rather than a budget cutting measure for funders.

The contribution of CollaborationNI

Two thirds of the way through Phase Two of CNI, we have two observations in our role as independent evaluators. First, the volume and quality of activity is impressive, across all elements of the support and influencing offer. While there can never be room for complacency, the feedback from individuals and organisations in meaningful contact with CNI confirm that the service is, both directly and indirectly, contributing to positive outcomes, from raised awareness, through to service improvement and innovations. We have written elsewhere about 'collaboration champions' being a critical ingredient of effective and productive inter-organisational working.⁸ The work of CNI, and in particular its focus on supporting and enabling 'collaboration with purpose', can be seen as an act of championing; our evaluation findings confirm that it is an act that produces real impact on the ground. This is in marked contrast to previous efforts at organising collaboration support in England where there tended to be a greater emphasis on more technical and generalist support at the expense of the more bespoke and sustained interventions provided by CNI.

Second, we note the sustained reluctance on the part of public agencies to move beyond embracing the rhetoric of collaboration to invest directly in support for collaborative working. It would appear that, while voluntary organisations continue to be, at best, encouraged and, at worst, cajoled into collaborative working, policy rhetoric is not matched by any investment for support. This is despite the findings highlighted in this report, and elsewhere, that working across organisational boundaries can be difficult and complex, and invariably requires significant time and resource.⁹ We were struck by this comment from one of our interviewees:

'It requires a different mindset and a wider rethinking of the space that we occupy. For collaboration to really yield benefits, it will take time and effort and trust: look at the NI Executive if you want an example of how difficult it is and how long it can take.'

Our observation here would be that organisations will always struggle to collaborate meaningfully and effectively if they do not have the time and space to fully understand the drivers, purpose and potential benefits of coming together. A mutually beneficial collaboration relies on shared vision, mutuality and strong interpersonal relationships as much as it does on operational logic. Invariably, that process requires and benefits from independent facilitation and expert guidance. So, in our view, the case for support for collaborative working is compelling.

⁸ IVAR (2011) *Thinking about Collaboration*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

⁹ IVAR (2013) *Building Health Partnerships*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Looking forward

In a series of independent studies with both VCSE organisations and public agencies in England, we have highlighted an increasing demand on health and social welfare services and growing inequality affecting service users and beneficiaries. We have also noted that the challenges which many organisations are dealing with are more varied and complex than those relating to the availability of funding alone. For example, an increase in client referrals due to changes in service thresholds and welfare provision or as a result of other organisations in the area closing.¹⁰ While some of these changes are not new, it seems to us that the scale and uncertainty of change is qualitatively different because of its pace and unpredictability. And for the organisations currently being served by CNI, we can add reforms to local government and heightened expectations around the integration of health and social care services

We've observed that economic uncertainty and social upheaval has exerted two kinds of pressure on organisations.¹¹ First they are experiencing pressure to define their mission – who they are and why they exist. Second, they are having to renegotiate and renew external relationships (with key interest groups, collaborators and competitors). In thinking about these pressures of transition, for these organisations to flourish and thrive, we would suggest that the need for specialist and bespoke support with collaborative working (across both organisational and sectoral boundaries) won't disappear in a hurry.

¹⁰ IVAR (2012) *Duty of Care: the role of trusts and foundations in supporting voluntary organisations through difficult times*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

¹¹ IVAR (2013) *Turning a Corner: transition in the voluntary sector 2012-13*, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

