Grow your own partnership – an organic approach

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Some background information about Dumfries and Galloway

Dumfries and Galloway occupies 6,425 sq km in the South West of Scotland. In terms of geographical area, it is the third largest of Scotland's 32 local authorities. The region has a population of 147,756 (2001), projected to fall to around 146,000 over the next 5 years. The density of population is 60 people per square mile compared with a Scottish average of 168 people. Apart from Dumfries (32,136), Stranraer (11,348) and Annan (8,930) there is no settlement of more than 5,000 people. This pattern affects both the ability of people to gain access to services and the ability of agencies to deliver them.

Total employment is 58,000 (1996) and in August 2000 5.1% or 3,509 people were unemployed. Population trends reflect the national picture with the proportion of children decreasing and those above retirement age increasing.

Agriculture and forestry together with related industries (such as food processing) are the most important economic activities in Dumfries and Galloway. They are followed by tourism, with around 800,000 visitors recorded each year. Dumfries and Galloway Council, National Health Service (NHS) Dumfries and Galloway, firms such as Dupont Teijin Film UK, Stenaline, British Nuclear Fuels Limited and Gates Rubber Company are major employers in the region.

Employment opportunities are not spread evenly across the region. Centres of population, and employment, include Dumfries and Stranraer.

The area has many advantages, such as an outstanding natural environment, good transport links and a strong and active voluntary sector. It also faces a number of challenges, for example the ageing population decline in population numbers; low wage levels, increasing losses of jobs and income resulting from the restructuring of key industries, and concentrations of economic and social deprivation.

Why the learning partnership was formed

Edinburgh City Council published 'Literacies in the Community' in July 2000 on behalf of the Scottish Executive. This was designed as a good practice framework for the organisation, management and delivery of literacy and numeracy provision. It had at its heart seven guiding principles for what the Executive intended literacy and numeracy to be.
Principles for designing and delivering the learning programme:
  Promoting Self-determination
  Developing an Understanding of Literacies
  Recognising and Respecting Difference and Diversity

Principles for developing the organisation:
  Promoting Participation

Developing Equitable, Inclusive and Anti-discriminatory Practice
Developing Informed Practice
Drawing on Partnerships

In response to this publication Dumfries and Galloway Lifelong Learning Partnership, at its meeting in July of 2000 agreed to establish an Adult Literacy and Numeracy Sub Group, hereafter referred to as the ALNSG, in order to explore partnership working in the area of adult literacy and numeracy. This was in the knowledge of a forthcoming national initiative, originating from the National Development Project, to explore a way forward in tackling the issue across Scotland. It was felt that it would be beneficial for partners in Dumfries and Galloway to explore the needs of the region prior to the announcement of the new national strategy and funding arrangements. The partners met for the first time on 22nd August 2000.

The group first met to consider how to co-ordinate the way we could deal with a complex issue, how we would ensure economies of scale were maximised and how potential learners could have a one-door access to provision. The ALNSG members were also interested in getting ahead of emerging government policy and in seeking our own solutions. This quickly moved on to looking at what we could do whatever the forthcoming report said – actions that we could incorporate or adapt to fit the Executive's requirements but that would meet needs, and take advantage of opportunities that we had identified, in our region.

The report 'Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland' was published by the Scottish Executive in July 2001 by which time the Dumfries and Galloway ALNSG had begun to piece together a strategic plan to establish an infrastructure for adult literacy provision and an action plan outlining specific programme areas to be undertaken. The ALNSG had been meeting for almost one year.

Scottish Executive Circular ELLD 1/01 was issued on 17th July 2001 and required that an action Plan for Literacy and Numeracy be submitted to the Executive by December 2001. The ALNSG draft action plan was adapted to fit with the requirements of the Executive.

The local context and history of partnership working

Partnership working was relatively new territory for this particular combination of partners. Where two, or more, of the constituent organisations had come together for particular pieces of work in the past this was one of the first times that this number of organisations from across the region had united, on the basis of an equal partnership, to strategically tackle an issue that was of importance to them and their clients.

The Lifelong Learning Partnership (LLP), when it formed the ALNSG, was itself a relatively young organisation and was just beginning to explore the potential for partnership working within the region. In many ways the ALNSG, because of the focus on action within a (relatively) narrow field of work and where all of the partners could see benefits for their organisations and for their clients, had an advantage when it came to development of partnership working itself. Where the LLP was exploring potential partnership projects the ALNSG was looking at structures and delivery mechanisms for a clearly defined client group and to achieve specific outcomes. Where the LLP met approximately every two months and defined its own pace of work the ALNSG had project parameters and time scales defined for it. Where the LLP saw partnership working as having the potential to draw down additional funding the ALNSG had considerable (for Dumfries

and Galloway) additional funding to allocate to partners for the delivery of provision and also as potential European match funding.

The long lead in period from the formation of the ALNSG in August 2000 until the Executive's report was published in July 2001 allowed plenty of "air time" for partners to get to know each other and to respect each other's cultural and organisation differences.

It was also agreed and made clear from when the organisation came together that decisions on the allocation of any funding that became available, through whatever route, would be partnership decisions. This approach was subsequently reinforced by the Executive's Circular ELLD 1/01 that confirmed that the new resources should be available to all partners. This was put to the test in Dumfries and Galloway fairly soon after the funding was confirmed, partnership decisions prevailed and the beginnings of a relationship based on trust began to emerge.

Where the international research on which the national Literacy and Numeracy project was based suggested that 23% of adult Scots had low levels of literacy it was not clear where, within Dumfries and Galloway, this client group was to be found and how the individuals concerned could be identified and engaged in provision. The partners had an immediate problem to tackle with the identification and engagement of new learners within this programme that was to be locally designed and implemented.

Literacy and numeracy provision in the region was relatively scarce, with the Community Learning (Adult Education) Service and Dumfries and Galloway College (DAGCOL) being the only two significant providers identified in the baseline information submitted to the Executive within the Action Plan.

The ALNSG was effectively a new partnership coming together to tackle an issue of mutual interest with resources available on an open accessible and transparent basis to all partners. The Adult Literacy and Numeracy Sub Group (ALNSG) will hereafter be referred to as the 'Partnership'.

The things that hindered our working

Lack of templates
For many projects involving a change of working, there are clear 'ways of doing' already in existence. Whilst we could have, and maybe should have, taken the time to seek such guidance, we didn't. This may have been because many of the 'rough guides' to working together are written in the language of management or organisational development, which would not have suited this group. It may also have been the case that we actually needed to spend time thrashing through our own 'growing pains' to be ultimately effective.

Cultural differences
The importance of culture is a common theme in working in new formations and across boundaries. In our project we found evidence of culture at various levels.

Firstly there was a cultural divide within the public sector organisations. The two major bodies involved were the Dumfries and Galloway Council and the National Health Service (NHS). The Council appeared to be accountable to numerous committee procedures, all of which took time whilst the NHS was more inclined to press ahead by giving delegated powers to its representative on the Partnership.

Secondly, there appeared differences of culture between the public sector and our voluntary partners. The notable distinction was that the voluntary sector organisations presented on an issue from a fairly narrow perspective-for example the core aim of the voluntary organisation. After starting from such a point only then would they expand their thinking to encompass the wider ramifications involved in the debate. For others, it appeared easier to work with the big issue.

Thirdly, the voluntary sector partners brought different styles to the table-often speaking from a personal experience perspective.

Timescales imposed
The development of effective working relationships can either be helped or hindered by the imposition of timescales. In Dumfries and Galloway there is a feeling that the regular demand for reports placed us under strain. This was most evident when it is realised that by far the majority of those in the Partnership felt that they were attending in addition to their day job.

The things that helped our working

Signing up to a common aim
This was not a difficult aspect of our working, because of the nature of the project we were all involved with was quite explicit. If the project had had a more abstract nature this may not have proved so straightforward.

Shared identification of the problem to be tackled
Beyond the commonality of aim, we had to take time to be sure we were agreed on the priority of problem to be tackled first. Possibly, because were we starting from scratch, this became largely a planning exercise.

Willingness to give and take
Each person brought an agenda either derived from the organisation they worked within or from the values within them. But because of the ability to see an overarching aim and more practically, the problems faced, we were willing to subordinate these agendas and hear each person's contribution

Common respect
This builds on the previous point, in that a contribution from any member of the group was listened to in its own right and respected as a genuine contribution made in good faith.

Sense of moving forward
Because the members of the group were always involved in deciding and planning this helped develop an attitude of progress. This was still the case when, rather than delivering the core activity of learning support, we spent quite some time debating the relative merits of how to create the appropriate infrastructure

Willingness to put the client's needs above the organisations needs.
At all stages the focal points of the groups concerns was improving the opportunities for the learners and potential learners.

Reflections on the development of the Partnership

The Partnership grew and developed 'organically' i.e. without an organisational or developmental plan, without explicit or implicit partnership building activities or any vision of what the organisational structure would look like or how it would operate.

The Partnership utilised people who believed in the cause – partners signed up by appearing at initial meeting(s) and by recognising that the subject matter was of concern to some or all of the client group they were dealing with, could add value to the service they were delivering and that partnership working could meet immediate needs and spawn other ideas and approaches. Partners accepted that there would be a difficulty in getting individuals to "sign up" for literacy and numeracy tuition if it was promoted as such and decided to start where organisations had developed trusting relationships with potential learners. Partners recognised the unique contributions that partner organisations could bring to the project and that a one size fits all solution would be unlikely with the diverse range of target groups, the social practice model of delivery and the geographical variance between the more urban and the more rural parts of the region.

Two key decisions were made, early in the life of the Partnership, that helped to generate a level of trust between partners and a commitment to joint working:

> It was agreed and recorded that the use of Partnership monies would be Partnership decisions. This was discussed and agreed before it was clear how or through which partner or partners the resources would be distributed – 'it doesn't matter where the money comes in to as long as we agree how it will be used'. Early in the life of the Partnership *all* financial decisions were taken either at Partnership meetings or by e-mailing around all partners.

> The appointment of the project Development Officer was open, accessible to all partners. It transpired that the individual appointed *by the Partnership* was the same individual originally seconded by the local authority to help draw up the Action Plan that had been required by the Scottish Executive. This was only approved after a full and open consultation process.

Of the seven principles in the Literacies in the Community publication the first three were set out as principles for designing and delivering learning programmes and the other four for developing the organisation. If we look at the development of the Partnership through the framework of these principles it is evident that all of the principles have been applied in the development of the Partnership. Looking at the principles for developing learning *programmes* in particular it can be seen that the partners were involve in developing a common understanding of Literacies as a social practice and that was removed from the deficit model of diagnosis and provision that largely prevailed hitherto. The partners took the time and made the effort to find out how they could contribute to the achievement of the aims of the project and also how their clients, and their organisations, could benefit from momentum of this national initiative and the resources that were available. This was done openly and honestly with the focus on the delivery of benefits to learners. This process cultivated the acceptance of, and respect for, the different and diverse approaches to support and learning programmes, organisational cultures and delivery methods while adhering to putting the learner's real life practices at the heart of *their* learning. The partners accept that they operate in different organisational contexts, that their organisations have

different needs and targets and that they will do things differently but that the learner's needs are paramount and that everyone is working to the same quality framework. The partnership is a *real* partnership in the sense that there is no compulsion to participate as a partner, nor could there be. Partners determine for themselves the commitment that they will give to the partnership and to the project for the benefit of the learners, and potential learners, that they come in to contact with.

Working together as a cross boundary partnership is not easy. It helps if you are working on an issue that unambiguous, you have people that bring good group working skills to the table and you have a group who can welcome and integrate new members. The Partnership has grown, and continues to grow as new partners are identified and new approaches are tried.

If you look at the development of the Partnership through the framework described by Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen in the article 'Doing things collaboratively, realising the advantage or succumbing to inertia?' it is possible to see how the Partnership identified the '*collaborative advantage'* - that which could be achieved that could not have been attained by any of the organisations acting alone – and acted on it! The Partnership realised at an early stage that there were two main categories in to which the partners could, in general terms, be allocated, those who are providers of learning and those who had contact with groups and individuals in need of such provision. Neither could deliver without developing an understanding of what the others could offer or a commitment to work with them. The range of activities undertaken by different groupings of partners has delivered the additional *collaborative advantage* of the development of productive and trusting relationships that spill over in to other areas of work.

Pedagogy

Prior to the formation of this Partnership in response to emerging national priorities, literacy and numeracy provision in Dumfries and Galloway operated largely on the basis of self- referral and was delivered on a one-to-one basis by trained volunteers. The national agenda dictated a move away from a deficit model of provision towards a learner centred, social practice model that delivered learning in groups.

ICT

A major barrier to participation in rural areas is easy access to a learning centre. The learners in the seven categories identified in the Scottish Executive funding for the Adult Literacy Partnership could be considered to have additional barriers to our traditional learners. One way to overcome this issue is to provide an ICT option; although it is acknowledged this is not a suitable solution for all as some face-to-face contact is always necessary and desirable. ICT solutions can be delivered through all partner institutions with the advantage of using a common software product together with the synergy of staff development and training. Our Partnership uses a PLATO software product, which is available through the ICT hardware of each partner but can be made accessible through the Internet from learner's homes or via laptops pre-loaded with software. In this way, learners with financial, health, disability, low income or time availability restrictions can access a learning resource at their convenience backed up through occasional visits to learning centres, e-mail and telephone support. The software incorporates a levelling diagnostic to ensure learners are not discouraged by outcomes that are too challenging. The software also adapts to learner responses so that topics that the learner finds easier are progressed through quickly. Tutors can monitor learner performance remotely at all times and offer support if required in addition to that requested.

Diversity

Diversity is reflected in the Partnership through the variety of partners engaged from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors and through the range of priority groups targeted.

The workshop

The workshop will look more closely at the contents of this paper, who the partners are, what they are contributing individually to the project, some of the achievements to date and what is planned for the future.

References

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