

Joining together to enable effective support for community anchors - the Community Alliance

The Community Alliance is a partnership of 3 membership organisations which exist to support communities and community anchor organisations: *bassac*, Community Matters and the Development Trusts Association. It pulls together a very wide range of services to champion and support community anchors at various stages in their life cycle.

The Community Alliance had many goals from the outset. Some of the original motivations were action learning and mutual support amongst the staff of the different organisations; national policy advocacy on focussed issues; pooling of resources and knowledge; sharing of back-office functions; and the support programme delivery.

The partnership resulted in a unique combination of hundreds of staff, associates, support services and above all around 2,000 community anchors at the grassroots, hoping to achieve a much more effective way of working.

How did it start?

As a concept, it dates back to 2004 when discussions started to take place at chief officer level about the benefits of increased collaboration and focus on partnership working. The chief executives came together from a desire to share knowledge and skills across the organisations, alongside an expectation of cost savings and access to funding streams.

The 3 organisations recognised that they had similar objectives and, most importantly, the chief executives knew and respected each other. Their strong personal relationships meant that a basic level of trust was already in place which has grown over the lifetime of the collaboration.

In 2005, the organisations prepared a bid for set up costs for their collaborative vision. This bid was successful and the partnership was funded for a 5 year period by Early Spend from the Home Office to set up the Community Alliance. This included some core costs for the operational aspects of the alliance, in particular for dedicated staff, partnership development and communications work.

How does the collaboration operate?

During the first 3 and a half years the Community Alliance had a programme director, Bec Clarkson, to oversee the running of the partnership and facilitate meetings and decision making between the organisations. In addition, administration and policy work capacity have been key components of the Community Alliance team. This structure is changing and has been heavily informed by the first phase and real time evaluation of the partnership. Now that the building blocks have been put in place there's a desire for less emphasis on the need for a central team and more operational input to come from within the partner organisations.

The Community Alliance is not a separate legal entity. Technically the staff are employed by one partner (the Development Trusts Association). Staff have to be employed by a legal body and this was offered to all 3 partners at the outset. Only the DTA were interested in becoming the accountable body for this and they subsequently underwent a process to show that they had the appropriate systems and structures in place to take on the role. This set up has worked well for the Community Alliance, with transparency (from the accountable body) noted as a key factor for success.

What are the benefits?

The mission of the Community Alliance *to champion, support and develop current and emerging community anchor organisations* has resulted in extensively raising the profile of community anchors at local, regional and national levels.

There are huge gains for partner staff located around the country. Bec explains that, although it takes time to successfully embed regional collaborative working, through working together regional staff can gain access to other expertise and hopefully feel less isolated as a direct result of the Community Alliance.

Alongside this the member organisations of the 3 partners benefit by receiving enhanced support through the Community Alliance pooling together a range of products, information and services.

External feedback does indicate that the alliance can make the organisations more attractive to funders having already done the groundwork of setting up the partnership.

... and the challenges?

While voice and advocacy work is a key role of the Community Alliance it can certainly be tricky to get it right. As Bec points out:

“It's simply not always possible to have a unified stance when speaking on behalf of 3 organisations who will inevitably have different views on certain policy areas.”

It's helpful to acknowledge that this will be the case from the beginning, there will be tensions in this area and these need talking through. It's important to be clear who is saying what and to whom as all of the chief officers and the Community Alliance programme director will speak on behalf of the partnership about different issues at different meetings and events. Awareness from the 3 chief officers has helped tremendously.

There is also a challenge to be met in managing external perceptions of the future of the Community Alliance and partner organisations, linked to desires or pressures on the 3 organisations to merge. The partnership needed to establish a rigid fairness and equality from the start. It was always deemed important to have 3 organisations that serve different communities, each with their own unique membership, which should be celebrated. Preserving the unique identity of the individual organisations was a key component from the beginning, and making it clear to the external world that the alliance is not a precursor to merger.

Top tips for collaboration

- Try to take your time, as far as is possible, and not be pressured into doing delivery from day 1. The challenge, and all too often the harsh reality, is when we're being funded for quick delivery.
- Think carefully about how you might manage any staff recruited to oversee or facilitate the partnership development process. It's important to be aware of the range of different approaches that are possible and weigh up the pros and cons of these. For example, staff supervision doesn't have to come from the accountable body.
- Building up internal partnership goodwill is crucial (early internal and external mini successes help!). Set aside time for people to get to know each other, e.g. organising residentials, bringing together the trustees, the staff. If you don't have the support at the top level then you might as well give up and go home. Recognise that building a good partnership is extra work, saying thank you is important.
- Listen carefully to voices outside the partnership too. There's a lot of benefit to be gained from hearing how other people perceive you. Spend time with your key stakeholders to ensure they understand the full depth and vision of the partnership.
- Try not to get too bogged down in governing documentation, although it can build partnership direction giving everyone something to work on together in the early days (as well as providing a good reference in times of crisis!).

Looking to the future...

Three and a half years later the Community Alliance is moving into a second phase. There's a desire to place less emphasis on the central role of partnership facilitation and for a greater focus on policy. This core policy function will operate from within the partner organisations, so each partner is employing a policy post that will be split half organisation half alliance. Keeping the strong links across organisations in the policy roles will ensure that the alliance builds upon the foundations already in place. As Bec highlights:

“It's important for the alliance to be light on it's feet and to able to adapt quickly and dramatically. It's an exciting time and the tone is set by changes in the partner organisations themselves which in turn is set by the pace of the alliance and the external environment.”

Further links and information:

- **Community Alliance Memorandum of Understanding, 2006.** This is the latest version with a focus on the delivery and vision of the Community Alliance Regional Programme: <http://www.bassac.org.uk/dms/documents/8/community-alliance-memorandum-of-understanding>
- **Community Alliance website:** <http://www.comm-alliance.org/>

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This case study was collected by bassac as part of the Collaboration Benefits programme, <http://www.bassac.org.uk/our-programmes/collaboration/collaboration-benefits>

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transformation through community anchors