



A network of development workers joining up support for community organisations - InformLeeds

Development workers in Leeds are leading the way in creating a joined-up system of support for small groups in the voluntary, community and faith sectors. The shared health check is a single, simple set of paperwork designed to be used by workers from different organisations in advising groups on important issues such as finance, governance, monitoring, evaluation and resourcing.

The health check will enable collection and recording of key information about groups, to avoid the same questions being asked repeatedly by different development workers. As well as avoiding duplication, it should ensure that nobody falls through the cracks as the health check includes a mechanism for referral onto other organisations where, for example, more specialist advice is required.

Who's involved?

InformLeeds, a network of around 40 development workers, is creating and implementing the new health check. Staff are primarily drawn from the membership of the Leeds Infrastructure Consortium (LIC), a consortium of 23 organisations launched with ChangeUp investment in 2004.

LIC is also providing some financial support to the project, to help fund events and the printing of the health check documents.

How did it start?

Faced with dwindling European funds for development work and a consequent loss of posts across the city, in the early summer of 2008 LIC initiated a pilot project in 'shared delivery'. The original project partnership was formed by Voluntary Action Leeds (the CVS) and West Yorkshire Community Accountancy Service (WYCAS), who share a building. They recognised that, for shared delivery to be effective, they had to reach groups which might not normally approach mainstream sources of support. So, they brought on board Leeds Connecting Communities - who worked with BME groups -

and Active Faith Communities, with whom they already had strong working relationships.

Just as things were looking promising, the pilot project ran aground. Leeds Connecting Communities was forced to close for financial reasons. Active Faith Communities reduced staffing and no longer had a development worker for Leeds - a further obstacle to progress.

Luckily, the frontline staff themselves could see the benefits of shared delivery and, when the pilot folded in October 2008, they took the helm. The steering group of InformLeeds - one of whom is the Operations Manager of the CVS - involved the whole network in turning the concept of joined-up working into reality.

How does the collaboration operate?

InformLeeds began two years ago as an electronic network of development workers but has evolved. Physical meetings, training and upskilling opportunities are now on offer, and the network has representation on some of the city's strategic partnerships. It is supported by LIC and has attracted some funding for training events from NAVCA's SKiLD project.

It was at one of these events, in October 2008, that members decided to review health check documents from around the country. They worked together to identify key components that everyone would find useful. The steering group of four then created the blueprint - a generic template for development workers across the city. The document was reviewed and a final draft agreed at a network meeting in February 2009.

InformLeeds still operates informally - funds are held by the Leeds Community Foundation and there is no separately constituted organisation - but it is increasingly recognised at strategic levels as an important mechanism for upskilling staff and demarcating responsibilities.

What are the benefits?

The new health check will provide a framework for discussions with a wide spectrum of VCFS groups, whether they are at an early stage in their development or further down the line.

Simply formatted and easy to use, the document will cut down on duplication - both in terms of questions asked and records held - and will allow staff to get to grips quickly with any relevant background information. It should also make life easier for groups

who have reporting requirements as they will be able to track how their organisation has progressed and improved.

The health check should mean that the support provided to groups is more coherent and effective. Built in is an enhanced referral system. Rather than leaving groups who need further support to follow up leads, development workers will make actual referrals to named contacts, ensuring that everyone gets the support they need.

John Wilson, who is Training Manager at Holistic Partnership and sits on InformLeeds' steering group, feels that the collaboration on the health check has been successful because it has not been driven by a single organisation, but by individual development staff:

“This one works because it's not 'owned' by one or another organisation - it's a bottom-up, not top-down collaboration. It's relatively informal. The collaboration is about getting work done in a better way. Sometimes top-down approaches can be appropriate, but sometimes they can be a bit overwhelming...”

... and the challenges?

So far, the collaboration has worked very well. John admits that, before this system was developed, there were already “a lot of health checks that lived in the cupboard!” He anticipates that the way the health check has been created - by and for frontline staff - means that it will be widely used.

Top tips for collaboration

- Think about why you want to collaborate - as John argues, collaborations need to be driven by “a sensible need”:

“InformLeeds came about as a support network to share expertise. It's important to have defined needs that everyone can get on board with - and leave politics at the door!”
- Assess whether a top-down or a bottom-up approach is most appropriate in the circumstances.
- Consider how the partnership will function: if activities are driven by one single organisation, will they get the buy-in needed from other partners?

Looking to the future...

The document is currently being piloted by a small number of development workers. Once any necessary revisions are made, it will be printed and distributed to all development staff. The network's long-term aim is to create a shared database of information about VCFS groups. For the moment, though, the important thing is to see shared delivery move from principle to practice.

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InformLeeds is continuing to flourish, despite the harsh economic climate. As the network's reputation for practical delivery grows, it is increasingly valued by strategic partnerships within the city. It recently for example took over responsibility from LIC for conducting a shared needs analysis for VCFS groups; response rates have improved as a result.

In fact, the economic crisis has made the need for collaboration even more acute than when the project first began. John Wilson explains: "Leeds has seen a 30-35% reduction in development workers over the last 18 months. The shared health check is now the only way to tackle the situation and ensure we can continue to offer support. The shortage of specialists is a particular problem - but the InformLeeds network allows people to share knowledge and allows better deployment of what scarce resources we have." A year after its launch, John reports that news of the health check has spread and the system has been taken up by organisations across the country.

Driven now more than ever by the need to safeguard key development services in the midst of funding cuts, the network is also looking at the job roles of Infrastructure Development Workers and Community Development Workers. Using the relevant National Occupational Standards, the network aims to analyse these areas of work and explore the potential for reducing duplication.

The main challenge is coping with uncertainty about the future. But John is convinced that this strong starting point of collaboration will help development workers and the groups they support to weather the storms ahead.

Interviewee: John Wilson (Training Manager at the Holistic partnership)

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

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Generic Health Check

