
Lessons in Inter-agency Working:

The Story of ACET

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1. Introduction: Inter-Agency Working in Partnership

'Partnership' is the latest management buzzword. Among those responsible for the provision of public services it has become a highly fashionable concept. In many areas of public policy there is now a statutory duty of partnership, and the Government is committed to working in partnership with the voluntary sector. Consequently, most statutory and voluntary agencies providing public services are now engaging in partnerships.

There are many kinds of partnership, ranging from two organisations working together on a single time limited project, to the multi-member legally constituted consortium. Long before the present partnership friendly climate - in 1992 - three agencies in Belfast came together to form a partnership of the consortium variety: Agencies in Consortium for Education & Training (ACET).

Eight years on, ACET is now an established consortium, constituted as a company limited by guarantee, with a diverse membership of 15 agencies - large and small - from the statutory and voluntary sectors. ACET's purpose is to promote opportunities for people with disability in South & East Belfast to access high quality education, training and employment.

Since all agencies in ACET are committed to planning services around the needs of people, rather than the needs of organisations, partnership is an imperative. By working in partnership, the combined resources of ACET's members can be better utilised and consumers better served - by coordinated services. Co-operation replaces competition; expertise, information and experience are shared rather than guarded; and the interests of the consumer are paramount.

ACET is an example of a successful partnership in practice. This success was recognised by Government in 1998 when it awarded ACET a franchise for its New Deal programme for people with disability. As such, ACET has a story to tell.

The intention of this publication is for ACET to share its experience by examining the benefits that ACET has brought to its member agencies and individual consumers; and by offering advice to would-be or novice partnerships by identifying the lessons learned.

1.1. The Members of ACET

Belfast Institute of Further & Higher Education

Statutory further and higher education provider serving students from Belfast and beyond.

Castlereagh College of Further & Higher Education

Statutory further and higher education provider serving students from Belfast and beyond.

Department for Regional Development

Government department responsible for - among other matters - transport, serving Northern Ireland.

Fleming Fulton School

School for children and young people with physical disability serving students from Belfast and beyond.

Glenveagh School

School for children and young people with learning difficulties serving students from Belfast.

Mitchell House School

School for children and young people with physical disability serving students from Belfast and beyond.

The Cedar Foundation

Voluntary agency providing training services to people with disability in Northern Ireland.

The Orchardville Society

Voluntary agency providing training services to people with learning disability in South & East Belfast.

The Queen's University of Belfast

Higher education institution represented on ACET as an employer of people with disability.

Royal National Institute for Deaf People

UK wide voluntary Organisation representing the interests of deaf and hard of hearing people.

Shadow Trust

Voluntary agency providing training services to people with mental health problems in South & East Belfast.

Skill: The National Bureau of Students with Disabilities

UK wide voluntary agency representing the interests of disabled students.

South & East Belfast Health & Social Services Trust

Statutory agency providing community health and social services; responsible for - among other matters - the health and wellbeing of people with disability.

Tor Bank School

School for children and young people with learning difficulties serving students from Belfast.

Training & Employment Agency

Statutory agency of the Department of Economic Development, providing training and employment services to people in Northern Ireland, including people with disability.

1.2. Benefits

ACET has brought many benefits to its member agencies, enabling them to provide even better services to their consumers. These benefits are summarised below.

1.2.1. Resources

ACET has brought access to resources that would not otherwise have been available to agencies on an individual basis.

Financial resources have been acquired to run successful training programmes and research projects. Some of these have brought with them additional human resources and ACET itself has attracted funding to employ its own full-time Administrator. Physical resources have been opened up for shared use by member agencies and consumers.

ACET's projects and programmes include:

- **The Work & Life Skills Programme** - preparing adults with learning disability for employment.
- **Project Career** - job sampling aimed at school leavers and young adults with learning disability.
- **Independent Travel** - research resulting in the development of a travel training pack for people with learning disability.
- **The Community Inclusion Project** - research identifying barriers to inclusion for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- **New Deal** - training and sustainable employment for people with disability.

A consortium is more attractive to funders - be they European, central government or National Lottery - because it demonstrates genuine partnership. In ACET, partners have an agreed strategy with clearly identified and prioritised objectives. Funders can be satisfied that their money will be spent on a well thought out programme which meets real need. They can be confident that they will not be funding duplication, because agencies in the consortium are co-operating, not competing.

Moreover, statutory organisations are often ineligible for certain funding but membership of ACET, an independent Organisation recognised as a charity, provides access to such funding for work additional to core statutory functions.

ACET's projects have enabled members to develop good practice that can be mainstreamed into other services. For example, Project Career is now a mainstream service provided by the Orchardville Society in partnership with Glenveagh and Tor Bank schools and South & East Belfast Trust.

1.2.2. Added Value

The sharing of knowledge, experience, skills and expertise which is part and parcel of the ACET consortium brings to its members added value to their own work as

individual agencies. Partners learn from each other and from the inter-agency work done through ACET. Increased knowledge and a broader understanding of issues can then be applied to the development of member agencies' own services.

Sharing is done explicitly and deliberately, but informal networking and the building of relationships also bring benefits. Agencies become more confident in service development because they are not working in isolation. Exposure to inter-agency work broadens staff horizons and enables managers to better appreciate their own agencies' strengths and weaknesses.

Confidence facilitates the changing and improving of services because ACET enables partners to support risk: the fear of failure is less for an organisation in a partnership than one working alone.

For South & East Belfast Trust, membership of ACET enables a more holistic approach to providing services and opportunities for people with disability. The Trust's ability to improve the health and wellbeing of people with disability is largely dependent on its ability to affect change in areas outside its statutory responsibilities. Independent Travel therefore, is an example of an ACET project bringing added value to the Trust.

The very experience of helping to shape ACET's development as a consortium has led the Trust to involve itself in other initiatives like the recently launched guidelines for domestic violence, in partnership with the RUC, the Probation Board and Belfast City Hospital.

The Training & Employment Agency, which provides training and employment opportunities for people with disability, has gained from ACET projects such as Project Career and Independent Travel - projects that seek to improve the quality of preparation of (mostly) young people for employment. The T&EA has been able to help shape these projects so that they meet its standards and requirements.

Through relationships with its ACET partners, Belfast Institute has been able to increase the number of places on offer to students with disability. While the Institute - particularly through the former Rupert Stanley College - had a history of offering education to students with learning disability, numbers have increased since ACET's Work & Life Skills Programme began, as has the number of those attaining accredited qualifications.

Other examples of added value for the Institute have been Project Enhance - a programme to provide support to students with physical disability - which was made possible because of relationships developed in ACET with the Cedar Foundation; and the introduction of a Diploma in Supported Employment, offering a professional qualification to those supporting disabled people in training and employment.

Voluntary agencies have also gained from ACET., the Cedar Foundation for example, in addition to Project Enhance, has been able to build on ACET's work to develop its own action research project looking at the transport needs of people with physical disability.

People with disability need high quality services from all the agencies from which they receive services. In ACET, partners have been more able to improve their services so that they complement each other for the ultimate benefit of the consumer.

1.2.3. Relationships

Through shared membership of ACET, a framework has been created in which agencies can work together for the benefit of consumers. Barriers have been broken down between agencies with a view to breaking down the barriers that affect people with disability accessing education and training opportunities.

An example of this is the relationship that exists in South & East Belfast between special schools, Social Services and the voluntary sector, particularly demonstrated by Project Career. South & East Belfast Trust and Orchardville Society staff enjoy access to teachers, pupils and parents of Glenveagh and Tor Bank schools for children with learning difficulties.

Such has been the success of these relationships that Fleming Fulton and Mitchell House schools for children with physical disability, encouraged by the Cedar Foundation, have recently become members of ACET.

Trust built up through solid relationships can enable tensions between agencies to be satisfactorily managed. Tension between partners is inevitable, but when a partnership is well enough established, issues can be addressed in an atmosphere of trust and openness. Outside a partnership, tensions between agencies can spiral out of control and result in the breakdown of relationships.

Furthermore, those tensions are less likely to occur in the first place because in ACET agencies are collectively working together with a shared ethos. Members are all agreed on the strategic objectives and their contribution to achieving them.

One of ACET's biggest achievements has been to break down the barriers between the statutory and voluntary sectors. Organisations are now working in an atmosphere of shared responsibility and ownership towards shared goals as equal partners. For voluntary agencies, the difference between being inside ACET and outside ACET is the difference between being equal partners with the statutory agencies and operating on the basis of a merely contractual purchaser-provider relationship.

1.2.4. Influence

Agencies can collectively increase their influence on policy makers and decision makers through membership of a consortium. When ACET speaks, it speaks with the weight of 15 members; each committed to a common agenda.

Within large organisations, those sections interfacing with ACET can also increase their influence internally on behalf of people with disability.

The issue of independent travel has demonstrated how a social services agency – South & East Belfast Trust - and partners in education - two special schools and Belfast Institute - have been able to work with a Government department outside their normal sphere of influence - the Department of Regional Development - to forward their agenda in relation to better transport services for people with disability. In return, the Department of Regional Development has learned new concepts of signage, which help it to achieve its task of providing quality transport.

Ultimately, ACET hopes to influence policy development at Government level in relation to independent travel. The very fact that partnership funding was obtained from DENI, Department of Regional Development, T&EA and South & East Belfast Trust for the Independent Travel research project, is an indication of ACET's potential influence.

For those voluntary agencies such as the Cedar Foundation, the Orchardville Society and Shadow Trust that work with employers, there is credibility to be gained by membership of ACET. Established formal links to partners, and consequent access to a comprehensive range of expertise, means that employers will be confident that they are dealing with professional quality organisations, enabling the scope and quality of work placements to be enhanced.

The nature of ACET as a cross-disability consortium is regarded as a strength by its members because it creates a stronger united voice. From the perspective of Government at a macro level, there is little differentiation between disabilities. Policy making and implementation is therefore made easier if Departments and agencies can deal with disability organisations together articulating a coherent and united message.

The award of the New Deal franchise to ACET is an example of how organisations with different client groups working together on a common theme - while recognising different operational practices - can bear fruit.

2. Lessons

As a well established, successful inter-agency partnership, ACET has a number of lessons to share.

2.1. Lesson 1: Attitude

Working in a consortium is not easy. If a partnership is to succeed, members must be under no illusions. They must come with the right attitude and a desire to succeed and be prepared to learn and to help. They must be prepared to invest considerable time and energy, particularly at the start when core values, mission, aims and objectives need to be agreed. They must be patient.

The reward, however, is well worth the investment, because the results are better. It may often be expedient to pursue an idea within one organisation, but the same idea pursued in partnership with other stakeholders will produce a much better outcome in terms of quality, ownership and versatility. There is a discipline involved in being able to wait to take people with you.

Partners must be prepared to contribute. They must be prepared to share their ideas, their opinions, and their experience. There is no place for passengers in a successful partnership.

Partners must be prepared to surrender autonomy in some areas. They must be prepared to be challenged and criticised, and for the pain which that might bring. Equally, they must be ready to challenge and criticise others.

It is difficult to keep a disparate range of organisations together and partners have to work hard at it. But the very fact of working hard at it builds rapport and trust.

2.2. Lesson 2: The Right Partners

A consortium is only as good as its members and so there must be a clear rationale for membership - one that makes the identification of partners easy.

Agreement on core values, mission and aims will inform the criteria for membership to which all members must sign up. Commitment must come from senior management within each member organisation. If there is no senior endorsement of the consortium, members will soon find themselves unable to deliver their commitment to the partnership.

Top level commitment also serves to add weight and authority to the consortium. People will take it seriously.

Individual people matter. Members need to provide the right individual representatives - people with vision who are committed to the concept of inter-agency working; people with an open attitude, prepared for change and able to deliver it. Importantly, they must be people who can develop relationships and quickly strike up rapport.

The ideal representative will combine these qualities with processes within their organisation that enable upward communication from staff of issues and ideas. A difficult issue is the size of the consortium. A balance has to be struck between being as inclusive as possible and not becoming so big that the consortium becomes unwieldy, unmanageable and unfocused.

To maintain dynamism, a consortium must always be looking to broaden its perspective and this means seeking wide representation. Growth is manageable as long as the agenda remains exciting and focused so that every partner is kept interested and is able to make a contribution.

A particular issue for ACET over time has been the representation of consumers: what is the best way to ensure consumer involvement while avoiding tokenism? Consumer involvement and consultation are part of the ACET ethos to which every member agency is committed in its own right. To date, representation has been indirectly through member agencies with consultation and involvement at project and sub-group level, but this has meant that there has been no direct representation on the Board. After much debate, however, ACET has now approved a consumer involvement policy that creates a directorship for someone with personal experience of disability. This will bring an invaluable new perspective to decision making.

2.3. Lesson 3: Clarity and Focus

Members of a consortium need to know why they are members. They need to know what the consortium is trying to achieve; outputs as well as inputs. Only through clarity of purpose and focus on objectives can this be ensured.

During its infancy ACET invested a lot of time discussing and agreeing its core values, vision and mission. There was great debate about membership criteria and geographic boundaries. Once agreed, these fundamental decisions provided a firm basis for agencies to begin working together. Later they would ensure that the right partners joined as the consortium grew.

ACET's experience has taught that it is important to make clear the boundaries between inter-agency work and work that is the responsibility of individual agencies. Otherwise confusion can lead to conflict if a member agency decides to pursue an idea on its own which other agencies feel is a consortium matter.

Focusing exclusively on education and training, rather than other issues pertinent to disability such as care, was an important early decision by ACET. A broader agenda would undoubtedly have weakened ACET's impact.

As a means of maintaining focus, a clear strategic planning process has also evolved in ACET. An annual Framework Document is produced setting out three or four key areas of work for the forthcoming year. Each area includes clear objectives with time scales and success indicators. This has become an essential management tool for ACET.

The Framework Document becomes ACET's reference point for the year's work and prevents the consortium from involving itself in too many issues. Although, given its diversity of membership, the potential scope of ACET is enormous, the consortium must discipline itself to concentrate on a small number of projects that can succeed.

The Framework Document has provided ACET with a business rigour, enabling progress to be tracked and performance measured.

2.4. Lesson 4: Action

The binding together of members through a shared vision, clear purpose and focused objectives, is an essential part of inter-agency working. Reaching agreement on these is not easy, is time consuming and requires hard work and patience. Having done so, it can be tempting to sit back and enjoy the sense of satisfaction and

achievement. However, that visions, missions and strategies are means to an end, and the end can only be achieved through action.

Action also serves to cement the partnership as agencies share in the successes - and frustrations - of practical work; and to involve a wide range of staff in inter-agency work. Projects are a visible, tangible and measurable manifestation of partnership. As time bound pieces of work they offer opportunity for innovation and thorough evaluation.

It is important to go for early success. Success will create a shared 'feel good factor', and makes all the hard work and time invested seem worthwhile. People will be convinced that partnership can produce results, and that the consortium is not simply a talking shop for senior managers. Success will whet the appetite for continued collaboration.

As well as projects, ACET has organised a number of conferences and seminars. These have been important in bringing together operational staff and management from across the full spectrum of ACET's member agencies to generate ideas and to convey a sense of real partnership. A landmark international conference hosted by ACET in 1994 was perhaps the key event in cementing the consortium and communicating the vision.

2.5. Lesson 5: Organisation

Managing a consortium of 15 member agencies is a demanding task. Effective organisation is essential if time and resources are not to be wasted.

On a consortium's Board of Directors made up of senior managers, time is a precious resource. Once the consortium starts working on projects, if the Board finds itself time dealing with operational issues, it will soon become difficult to maintain vision, and the overall picture will be lost. Furthermore, directors will soon lose interest, particularly if their agency is not involved in a particular project under discussion.

ACET has overcome this problem by managing its work through sub-groups, usually made up of operational staff from the agencies involved in the projects. The Board of Directors' role remains a strategic one.

As well as removing a lot of time consuming issues from the Board's agenda, operating through sub-groups has provided development opportunities for operational staff and enabled the concept of inter-agency working to filter down through organisations.

Two examples of ACET's sub-groups are the Work & Life Skills Programme Management Group which, following a review of the programme in 1998, was given almost full autonomy to manage the programme, and the sub-group looking after the production of the Independent Travel Training Pack.

As ACET has grown, particularly since becoming a company, the necessary administration involved in servicing the Board of Directors and co-ordinating the working groups and sub-groups has also grown. As a consequence, ACET has employed a full-time Administrator since 1996.

Without a full-time Administrator dedicated to ACET, the consortium would not be able to function as it does. The Administrator co-ordinates the flow of information

within the consortium and to external persons and organisations, and maintains minutes and financial records.

The Administrator is a conduit between the Board and the sub-groups and also the only person with an overview of the totality of ACET's work, and can be a useful resource in this regard.

Apart from the obvious time constraints which make it impossible for an employee from one of the member agencies to fulfil this role, a full-time Administrator is useful as a 'neutral' person with no axe to grind on behalf of any one member agency, engendering trust.

2.6. Lesson 6: Equality and Independence

A consortium by its nature will consist of many different types of Organisation. In ACET there are statutory and voluntary agencies; large and small; national, regional and local.

Since trust is one of the key ingredients of a successful partnership, it is essential that agencies join on a basis of equality. The consortium should not be perceived - either internally or externally - as being driven by one particular agency's agenda, otherwise it will lose its impact and its credibility.

Managing the consortium as an organisation genuinely independent of its members brings a number of immediate benefits. In particular it -

- creates clear water between the consortium and each member agency
- enables it to apply for funds in its own right
- enables the consortium to develop its own identity
- facilitates the creation of an independent agenda.

In 1997 ACET was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. The members of the company are corporate bodies (i.e. the member organisations) rather than individuals, and the constitution provides for the election of one director per member. Therefore, each agency - regardless of size - has an equal say in decision making.

In the same year ACET introduced membership fees. Each agency - as a condition of membership - is now required to pay an annual subscription. The purpose of fees is twofold: (1) it promotes the independence of the consortium by precluding a total dependence on grant aid, and (2) it promotes an 'equality of commitment' whereby each agency makes a contribution proportionate to its size and status.

As an innovation the introduction of membership fees has not been without its difficulties, but an agreed rationale for their determination is now established. The most simple of practices are often the most effective. ACET has found that rotating office bearers and rotating the venues for meetings - for sub-groups as well as the Board - go a long way to engendering an egalitarian environment.

3. The Future

The story of ACET so far is one of hard work, learning, growth and success. Looking to the future, it is certain that hard work and learning will continue; a period of consolidation is likely to follow recent growth; and success is sure to continue for as long as ACET's members hold on to their collective vision for people with disability.

The potential of ACET - and of inter-agency work - is huge, but there is still a considerable way to go before agencies will truly be able to work in a synchronised, harmonious partnership.

Some issues must be addressed by Government. Funding arrangements need to be better co-ordinated, more flexible and more strategic; geographic boundaries need to be harmonised; and Government itself needs to make bigger strides towards 'joined-up' planning and policy making.

For ACET, there are three imminent issues to be addressed. The first is the organisational issue that will be presented by the proposed mergers of Health & Social Services Trusts in Belfast. This will be a challenging transition for the Trusts, but represents an excellent opportunity for ACET to expand its operation Belfast-wide for the benefit of more consumers.

The second issue is consumer representation. Finding the most effective way to engage with consumers at decision making level, while avoiding tokenism, has been the subject of ongoing debate, resulting in the adoption in 1999 of a consumer involvement policy. A seat at the Board is now reserved for a director with personal experience of disability, and the challenge to ACET is to make the most of this new asset.

The final issue for ACET is dissemination. ACET has been at the forefront of the development of inter-agency work. It has overseen pioneering changes to services and has created a forward looking and exciting working environment for agencies in South & East Belfast. As such, ACET has a duty to share its experiences far and beyond, for the universal benefit of people with disability. It also has a duty to demonstrate to Government that it is a model of partnership, so that Government might encourage similar partnerships elsewhere.

With limited resources, ACET has hitherto not made dissemination a priority. It is hoped, however, that this publication is the first step in communicating the ACET story.

4. Appendix

4.1. Contact Details

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