

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

Chichester Community Alliance

Context for the Field Trial Site

Chichester Community Alliance has at its heart a nursery school, a children's centre and two primary schools which together serve around 800 families in central Chichester. The schools' catchment areas are mixed and include pockets of deprivation amongst relatively affluent areas. Most of the local population are of white British heritage, although recently a small number of migrant families from Eastern Europe have joined the community.

The Alliance extends beyond education to include health, social services, the police and voluntary organisations. The schools are:

- Chichester Nursery School and Children's Centre;
- Portfield Primary; and
- Tangmere Primary.

In its 2006 inspections of all three schools, Ofsted deemed the two primary schools satisfactory and the nursery school was found to be outstanding.

The Community Alliance was conceived as a way of providing strategic direction for the integration of children's services in the area and grew from a project that had its roots in Sure Start. Colleagues involved in Sure Start were persuaded of the need for multi-agency working in order to improve outcomes for children and their families. But they had no models for, or experience of, how to do that and felt that they risked dissipating their energy rather than channelling it into their development work.

The Local Authority in Chichester was meanwhile overhauling its structures and working arrangements to respond to the new challenges of Every Child Matters. Moving to a Children's Services structure and provision signalled that the time was right to look for new configurations of services in the locality, but at the same time introduced a period of uncertainty about which services would survive. The Community Alliance was also seen therefore a way of safeguarding budgets, securing services and providing for alternative sources of funding.

The purpose of the Community Alliance is to explore models of leadership and governance that will provide a fit for purpose vehicle for providing efficient and effective services to families in a multi agency setting.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

The Community Alliance operates as a sub committee of the governing body of Chichester Nursery School and Children's Centre and it is envisaged that it will also be endorsed as a sub committee of the two primary schools governing bodies shortly.

The Alliance has its own Terms of Reference, a strategic plan and meets formally once a month. These meetings provide a forum for consultation and collaborative planning and development, through well designed activities and presentations.

Representatives from children's services other than education attend regularly. Invitations will in future be extended to headteachers outside the Alliance in order to ensure that plans and decisions made meet the needs of all families in the area.

Candy Daffern, Headteacher, and Val Hughes, Chair of Governors, both of whom are based in Chichester Nursery School and Children's Centre, provide strategic and operational leadership to the Alliance.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

The co leaders take great care to ensure that any structures and processes that are grown in and around the Alliance are ones that are flexible, robust and inclusive, so that they can accommodate what can sometimes be very different contributions from colleagues across the range of agencies involved.

For example, the Alliance has been developing collaboratively, prototype job descriptions for three leadership roles that do not currently exist in the system. These roles are ones that have been identified by the Alliance as providing the necessary capacity to successfully lead and manage in a multi-agency setting.

The first, the Alliance describe as a 'hybrid' role; someone who is somewhere between a teacher (education) and an outreach worker (social services) who has some knowledge of mental health issues and the needs of children in early years education and their families.

The second is a business manager; a 'super bursar', who's job is to navigate the complexities and politics of delegated funds from multiple budgets, and who could also spot and act upon opportunities to raise funds for the Alliance.

The third is an information and communication worker, who would take responsibility for gathering data that is relevant to and required by the Alliance leadership for planning and decision making.

The prospect of introducing new roles that exist outside of recognised hierarchies throws up issues relating to line management and accountability structures. The co leaders are both creative in their thinking and realistic in their expectations of what is possible here. The absence of any formal, legal entity makes it impossible for The Alliance to appoint outside of the organisations that comprise it. So current suggestions include the identification of a 'home' organisation where line management would reside and therefore compliance with associated professional regulations would be required.

In principle this is felt to be unproblematic, however there is recognition that there would be some work to do in developing explicit protocols that make sense of lines of accountability that have the potential to conflict, and to align processes such as performance management.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

The Community Alliance has made progress in building the collaborative capacity to:

- agree strategic priorities for service delivery to improve outcomes for children and their families;
- agree actions collectively; and
- hold key partners to account for the effective delivery of agreed priorities and actions.

In doing so they hope to achieve:

- effective co-operation between and integration of services;
- transparent processes for securing financial accountability;
- the development of quality assurance criteria and protocols; and

- enhanced provision of services.

Emerging issues

Leading serious and meaningful development work in a multi agency setting is highly challenging. Each of the agencies has discrete and distinctive professional beliefs and culture, hierarchy and set of protocols that govern how they think and act in collaborative working arrangements with each other.

For example the power to make decisions is located differently in the various organisations, so it is not always obvious who needs to be involved in or consulted about what. Social workers are empowered to make decisions that individual teachers are not, and in the PCT, decision-making happens only at the very highest level in the organisation. To build the confidence and the capacity of the Alliance there needs to be an assumption that representatives at Alliance meetings are delegated by their organisation and empowered to speak and act on its behalf. This may not always be the case and leaves the co leaders with a balancing act to perform in securing both ownership amongst participants, and sponsorship at the appropriate level, for plans and decisions made.

Because the Community Alliance originated, is based in and is led by the Chichester Nursery School and Children's Centre, the co leaders have to work very hard to counter the perception that the Alliance is education centred, and therefore peripheral to the concerns of the other agencies involved. Regular presentations by colleagues from other agencies go some way to dealing with this, but it can sometimes be difficult to offer a balanced agenda when one part of the Alliance is the focus and location of much of the activity.

Leadership of the Alliance relies heavily on the skills of and contributions from a very few people. Additionally, although much of its business is formalised through well designed and internalised protocols and explicit plans and terms of reference, the Alliance has no separate identity or existence outside of the people who are currently active in it. Together these factors place a considerable burden on the co leaders, and in particular on the headteacher, to sustain and to further develop the Alliance. They may also leave the Alliance vulnerable to sudden changes in circumstances, for example policy developments that lead to a refocusing of priorities for participating organisations or if the co leaders decide or need to move on.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that leaders of multi agency collaboration could usefully consider the following questions:

What intelligence is needed to ensure that the right people are involved in the right configurations for the right purposes? What role might the local authority play in helping to 'map' the terrain?

How, and how quickly, can groups of professionals learn about each other's beliefs, cultures and priorities sufficient to work together effectively?

What benefits and what disadvantages are associated with the existence and/or the perception of a lead organisation within a collaborative? How can you encourage other schools or organisations to lead development?

When is the right time to begin succession planning in a collaborative?

What criteria should be used to decide the appropriate level of formality for a collaborative? Are fragile early relationships the deciding factor or long-term sustainability? Is it possible to balance the two?