

Workshop Summary Booklet



Workshop 1

Big Society or Big Con?

The 'Big Society or Big Con?' workshop tasked delegates into putting the Big Society into action. Taking control of a fantasy community group, they were put to work designing a community initiative – such as community food schemes or social befriending schemes – into action. This was done through a method devised by Walt Disney – the design process goes through three 'stages'. The first, 'The Dreamer' stage puts across the ideal situation, what could happen without any limits. The second stage, 'The Realist', took those ideas and looked upon how they could be realistically made to work in today's Trafford. Finally, the last stage was 'The critic' which tried to look at the system and methods used regarding the scheme in order to see how it might go wrong, whether it is physically possible, or what might happen if the team did not apply common sense, purpose and the ability to tear down barriers in their working.

The Results

'The Dreamer'

Delegates, during the 'Dreamer' stage came up with a list of common themes and ideas for their respective community scheme. The community schemes must ideally promote inclusion and common purpose as a priority. Not only do they fulfil their original purpose of the scheme, but they ultimately must promote a 'heart of a community' or limitless community spirit in a positive environment. With a concept of 'do unto others as you want done to yourself', the group would promote a strong, supportive environment where anyone can shine, improve their skills, or simply have a good time without barriers from people's egos or individual motives. The ideal community group would have full support from local authority – with no legal or 'red tape' barriers, with unlimited funding and building use with a great number of volunteers of all ages.

'The Realist'

The 'Realist' stage scrutinised all the ideas of the 'Dreamer' but putting them into an actual plan of action. The key method of doing this was to continuously review the group's progress and develop a system of feedback and research. This would be used to accurately target what needs to be done, or where the group's goals lie. For example, a befriending scheme could focus to target particular people or groups who are commonly left out, or the community food scheme could check what is in demand or season. This could also involve looking at other businesses or groups and basing the group's activity on their best practice. A clear target and goal spread throughout the organisation will also focus volunteers onto an achievable and tangible outcome and specific support could then be given so everyone can reach their potential in working towards it. This targeted support could be training – thereby fulfilling another 'dream' of skills education, but it could also simply be making an all inclusive and fun atmosphere – such as training people to speak in sign language so the hard of hearing can be included too. This lead on to another key point: – communication.

Each group agreed that good communication was crucial in many 'dreams'. Starting a community or group newsletter, for example, would not only promote a community spirit, but transfer news to others, increasing interest in volunteering for the group and ultimately increasing community inclusion even further. Alternatively, good communication with local businesses and authorities will allow the group to run smoother and with more support.

Finally, the group will have to consolidate their resources and abilities. They must have strong leadership, with a clear indication on who should be doing what throughout the group. They must also note what skills or training they can offer and put to use, see whether they can have spare land (for allotments for example) or rent out areas to work in. This would again involve working closely with the local authority to discuss legal and funding issues.

'The Critic'

'The Critic' stage looked at what barriers could arise in making the community group and Big Society work. Firstly, a major barrier agreed upon was volunteer apathy; there is always a chance that people feel that the community scheme in question 'has been done before', thereby promoting little interest, particularly if that example ended in failure. Other issues would be if volunteers simply don't have the time, or if the group does not progress and work well enough for people to retain positive attitudes. This would particularly be the case if the group or the system it uses is too complicated or gets tangled up in 'red tape' and legal issues. Another issue with volunteers is that there may be a 'generational' conflict, with younger volunteers growing bored or perhaps being unable to work with older people. Being unable to work with others may also be an issue if one is deaf, blind or from a very different culture; as it may take time to learn another language (for example). People with little interest in the community group, may not stay long enough to fully learn the language or relevant skills. As a result it is very important to keep a positive atmosphere with good communication and showcasing and celebrating the group's successes.

Another obvious issue would be that of funding: without adequate resources the group could simply wither away, or suffer gaps in skills and experiences as people are forced to leave. If the group is taking on a large or complex task, this problem could get even worse as the people left would not know where to go next. Without decent leadership or focused goals, the group could fall into getting very little done, which would not help matters.

Finally, there may be issues with the community itself – volunteers from all aspects of life might not come forward, coming only from 'the usual suspects' such as from the local student and school populations. The group may be unfortunate enough to run foul of crime and vandalism, no one listening to advice or concerns and perhaps even asking too much of the volunteers themselves. It is for these reasons why the group needs strong community support as well as an attentive leadership and the ability to act on feedback.

Workshop 2

Professionals and the Community

The 'Professionals and the Community' workshop discussed the roles and effects of working in a partnership. To begin with, delegates were organised into a tug-of-war, with community members on side and the statutory officers on the other. The clear result was that if both sides pull their own way, nobody gets anywhere. Following that was a brief discussion on defining a partnership, before leading on the main body of the workshop – the S.W.O.T. Delegates were put to work discussing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and targets present for effective and useful partnership working.

The Results

Strengths

The first stage was for delegates to examine the strengths of the community, the council and a partnership between the two. Delegates agreed that the community's main strength lay in its strong voluntary sector: it's passion for positive work, community groups who genuinely want to get involved and strong interaction between all aspects within the area. The community is essentially the 'driving force' behind the partnership. The Council on the other hand, being a large and diverse organisation can bring together a large number of resources and contacts throughout all areas of the borough.

As a result a partnership between the two would bring together 'the best of both worlds'. Bringing together a shared vision between both the Council and the community would mix the 'doers' and the 'thinkers' and any available resources – the result being a partnership that can actually make progress for the greater good. This is backed up historically, as there are already a number of successful partnerships within Trafford – such as the Sale West and Ashton Partnership.

Weaknesses

Delegates agreed on four main areas that could prove problematic. Firstly, communication is always an issue, particularly in larger partnerships. Either 'side' could easily misunderstand, not listen to, or even

fail to receive messages. Delegates pointed out that community groups in particular can find council jargon difficult to understand, and the council occasionally has problems with the data protection act prohibiting them from sending information. This can ultimately lead to questions to who exactly is in charge, or who is being accountable for the project; which in turn leads to a lack of trust between both sides.

Another weakness, particularly in the current economic climate is that of potential funding. The Big Society is reliant on voluntary and community groups but these require constant funding. Financial resources however, are becoming more limited. Community groups fear the loss of their funding and delegates claimed that this creates an unhealthy competition for resources and a 'begging bowl culture' where everyone *should* be working together instead.

Large partnerships themselves have organisational issues; the partnership can be slowed down with delays; with some issues or groups being sidelined. This can reduce the co-operation between everyone involved as people fail to understand what everyone can contribute – particularly if certain groups tend towards 'silo working' or perusing their own agendas. Ultimately, delegates agreed, this leads to a more reactive rather than proactive partnership; that lacks a clear focus which in turn leads to the loss of direction and momentum. Finally, members from the deaf support partnerships all claimed that they frequently did not see encouragement for them to participate, with insufficient access to information based around staff being unable to communicate.

Opportunities

In the next stage, delegates agreed that there were a number of opportunities in Trafford that could be brought forward.

First, delegates would like to see an increase in skills and access for all. Ideally, schools would be the hub of communities and provides creative solutions and skills opportunities to all, particularly to those who are deaf or hard of hearing and those of over accessibility needs. Secondly, an economic partnership would be a great potential for the community to involve itself. This could pool resources and use community creativity and spirit to open up new possibilities and support new businesses. This in turn will promote employment and volunteer opportunities. Trafford is an excellent location; being close to both Manchester city centre and the countryside, and with the Big Society being implemented, it is a good opportunity for new volunteer groups to step up to the mark.

Delegates also want to see the community and public sector work together in a more positive way – going beyond a standard partnership. Ideally, they would like to see every member of the partnership recognised for their skill and potential, particularly with vulnerable, isolated, disabled and faith groups. Sharing ideas and showcases across a larger number of groups would hopefully create more partnerships and with greater cohesion.

Finally, a few delegates mentioned they would like to see more leisure opportunities such as cycle routes. This would fit in with opportunities to re-model existing council services to fit the needs of the community.

Threats

The last stage of the SWOT discussed what could threaten the effective working of a partnership, and hopes to guide delegates into thinking about what they could pledge in order to overcome these difficulties.

The most obvious threat is the issue with resources. Cuts to personnel would erode good practice; remove valuable skills and lower morale in both sides. Funding issues leads to short term focus – which creates long term insecurity and little stability. As a result, only minor short term issues are overcome, while only the 'high profile' issues would ever get the resources to be solved.

Delegates also believed work culture had to be changed. Too many promises, they say, were never fulfilled; being 'all talk and no action', and discussing the same thing again and again but never actually getting anywhere. Furthermore, a lack of communication across the partnership often leads to 'silo working', and a risk averse, closed minded work ethic that is counterproductive.

The lack of communication issue can further make things difficult, especially if it fails to engage the community. This, along with the low funds, will create a lack of commitment on either side for the partnership. The resulting lack of ambition and trust may cause people to withdraw entirely to from the group to protect their own interests, especially if the more vocal or active groups overshadow the others.

The Pledge

The final part of the workshop asked delegates to pledge to solve an issue or to work towards an opportunity. Delegates generally pledged to improve communication, keep positive, and to improve cohesion and inclusiveness. Another major pledge was to work towards partnerships towards action and effective, physical tangible outcome rather than endless discussions and talks.

Workshop 3

Through my Eyes

The final workshop was a seminar and discussion hosted by the Chief Executive of Trafford council. This workshop focused on the individual and social communication sides of a partnership. In particular, it focused on the importance of listening, and understanding other's own viewpoints resulting from other's background – such as culture, occupation or living area. To help visual the themes, the Chief Executive introduced the 'Trafford Beach ball'. Delegates were asked to state what they see when they look at the presented traditional multicoloured beach ball – everyone saw the same beach ball, but could only see one colour, thereby showing that everyone can look for the same goal, but see it differently. The workshop encouraged active listening, and a friendly way to get one's own ideas across without interrupting or accidentally 'treading on the toes' of the other side. This would lead to a creative and positive approach to understanding from all individuals of a partnership.

The last section of the workshop got delegates to imagine their partnership won the 'Partnership of the Year' Award and they had to write a quick acceptance speech about the conditions of a good partnership and how they overcame the barriers.

The Results

Condition for Success

All groups of delegates agreed on similar conditions of success. Firstly, the group needs a 'starting point' – a common ground and base rules working towards a common good. This might involve a compromise, but this would create a good base for trust and understanding to develop, and ultimately overall equality for the partnership. Another condition agreed upon was the focus on outcome and success – constantly reviewing ones' partnership re-establishes the common purpose and highlights issues so they can be quickly taken care off. This leads to a steady stream of constant success and continual focus, keeping enthusiasm for the work high.

Finally, delegates agreed that contributions from everyone would be create not only a good atmosphere, but also drive forward ideas and outcomes. This would be done under the common ground established; meaning one could take risks with individual initiative without having issues regarding 'who is blaming who' for any problems that crop up. Having a strong structure of leadership and overall support based on learning and understanding in the partnership would further allow people to drive ideas forward without issue. These conditions would create an open and agreeable partnership where equality is ingrained into the structure of the group itself.

Overcoming the Barriers

Delegates agreed that in order to combat delays, getting stuck in meetings and 'Silo Working' one must always be flexible and go one step beyond, working outside of meetings to further meet the needs of everyone else before yourself. This would require synergy between public presence and individual members outside of partnership meetings, so communication would again be key. Secondly, a strong ordered structure and decent leadership would bring people closer together under a common focus, as mentioned above, thereby reducing 'power clashes' inside the partnership.

As a partnership can be so diverse, it is very important to recognise the contributions of everyone, and to bring together everyone into a singular group, rather than working exclusively by the individual. Having good relations between every group within a partnership would help identify issues early on and promote an atmosphere of understanding that promotes group cohesion and unity. This positive atmosphere would naturally promote is successes within the entire partnership; attracting more people along the way, combating apathy and keeping the work sustainable – as the results speak for

themselves! Furthermore, good group cohesion and communication would allow the partnership to share resources, skills and opportunities for mutual benefit.